

# **THE WHITE SKULLS**

Maxwell Grant

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# THE WHITE SKULLS

Maxwell Grant

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## CHAPTER I

SARK'S picture glowered up from the desk and Jud Mayhew glowered down at it.

There was a difference, though, in those glowers, as Philo Brenz studied them from across the desk.

The photograph of Alban Sark wore a fixed expression. The face was dark and sinister, with a straight-lipped smile that had a creepy effect when closely scrutinized.

As for Jud Mayhew, he was going through the usual reactions that accompanied a survey of Sark's portrait. Finding the features difficult to distinguish, Jud had begun to frown, first in an annoyed fashion; then angrily.

Maybe Sark's looks had suffered from the enlargement of the photograph, which had originally been a small snapshot. The present background, a light gray, helped etch it. Sark's face belonged in shadows, had probably been lurking there when the camera had caught it. Maybe Sark had scowled because his picture was being taken, but at any rate his expression fitted him.

Chief of Sark's features were his bulging forehead; his hard, square chin. Bad lighting couldn't distort them

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because they were fixed feature. A forward tilt of his head, habitual probably, would account for that bulging forehead. An outward shove of the lower jaw, another customary mannerism, could explain the heavy chin.

What the camera had really caught were Sark's eyes, his teeth, and a patch of nose between. From his own knowledge of photography, Jud decided that a light must have been glowing down upon Sark's face when the picture was shot. The eyes were white and glisteny, their pupils no more than black dots. The nose, projecting into the light, had caught a whiteness too. The teeth gleamed from the widened lips that formed what could be called a cold smile.

In any event, Sark's face was the sort that would be remembered from this picture. Such was Jud's opinion. He looked up from the desk and stared at the wall beyond the chair from which Philo Brenz watched placidly.

Jud's long stare at the photograph bothered his eyes. He blinked, slowly at first, then rapidly, to finish with a wide, amazed gaze.

Philo Brenz spoke quietly.

"You see it?" he queried. "The White Skull?"

There was a nod from Jud. He gave it without moving his eyes.

"I noticed it myself," remarked Brenz. "It rather startled me. An optical illusion of course, but very appropriate."

Brenz's tone seemed distant to Jud, as remote as the submerged traffic noises of the street, half a hundred stories below. Everything was subordinated by that image on the wall, the white shape of a death's head, projected in huge size as the after-image of Jud's long look at Sark's picture.

Forehead, chin and cheeks. All the darkish features of the picture now were white, while the eyes, nose and teeth had become blackened hollows, completing the leering physiognomy of an ugly skull.

Closing his eyes, Jud brushed away the illusion, brought himself back to reality by opening his eyes again and looking straight at Brenz.

"What about Sark?" inquired Jud. "Have you ever met him, Mr. Brenz?"

"Only formally," replied Brenz. "At luncheons, conventions, and affairs of that sort."

"He looks like his photograph?"

"Exactly, except that it accentuates features that would not be noticed normally. Poor though the picture is, the camera seems to have gotten something that the eye missed."

"You mean something accurate?"

"I would say very accurate. If my suspicions are correct, it probed to Sark's heart, if he has one."

Jud sat back in his chair to listen further. It was strange to be happening in America. Jud had been accustomed to hearing reports about insidious characters while he had been trekking through the heart of Nazidom, helping to block off war criminals from flight to what they called their National Redoubt.

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But right now, Jud wasn't gazing from a peak among the Bavarian mountains, where gorges and winding roads lay below. He was staring from a man-made altitude, the top floor of a New York skyscraper. In place of crags, he saw other buildings; instead of gorges, the canyons of downtown Manhattan, where there were paved streets in plenty, instead of a few dirt roads.

Yet Sark's picture, the after-image of the White Skull, were factors that brought back the past with sudden, stark realism.

"I have told you about the construction contracts," spoke Brenz. "The ones that our companies lost to lower bidders."

Still looking from the window, Jud nodded to show that he was listening. He preferred to gaze out at the cloudy sky, rather than bothering his eyes with a repetition of that skull which still haunted the office wall, every time Jud looked at it.

"As you know," continued Brenz, "the construction of highways, factories, and the conversion of plants to wartime production was a staggering undertaking. It took a firm like Brenz, Incorporated to handle such projects at low profit, along with the necessary financing."

"Of course," agreed Jud. "I wasn't surprised when I heard you'd absorbed my old company. Tristate Engineering was an efficient outfit, but small. I might say very small."

"And you might add very good," complimented Brenz. "The records of its technical men who joined the armed services were proof of that. I hope that more men like yourself will soon be back with us, as the real assets that we acquired from the Tristate Engineering Company. I only wish that you could have returned to us sooner."

Brenz emphasized that final statement with a thud of his fist upon the desk top. Jud swung his gaze from the window to see that Brenz's broad face, usually mild, had become very grim. That fist of his was planted squarely on a sheaf of papers.

"There was something wrong with these," announced Brenz. "When a commission crowd like Universal Contractors, run by an old fossil like Townsend North, could underbid us all along the line, I simply don't understand it. How they managed it I don't know" – Brenz was leaning forward on the desk – "unless Alban Sark was the answer."

Jud's eyes opened again. He pushed Sark's picture further away, so it wouldn't start clouding him with another skull image.

"You mean Sark was in with North?"

"I don't know," returned Brenz, slowly. "It would be hard to prove, since North's jobs always went to subcontractors. With rush jobs on war plants, sudden shortages on essential materials that would allow the use of substitutes, a lot of very questionable deals could have been arranged."

Brenz's fingers were strumming the desk. His broad face was as serious as the distant stare that had come to the gray eyes which strikingly matched his hair. In a sense, the contrast was not great between Philo Brenz and Jud Mayhew, for the younger man showed an equally sober expression.

In Jud's features though, there was a drive that Brenz now lacked. Jud's youthful face was more than firm; it was rugged, weather-beaten. It should be, considering how he had accompanied airborne troops to

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accomplish engineering missions. In only a few such exciting months, Jud had gained experience that would cost another man years.

Centering on Jud, Brenz's eyes saw that fact. His ears could almost hear the unspoken word "Go" from Jud's motionless lips. Jud's steady, dark-eyed stare brought a steely flash from Brenz's gray gaze. The older man spoke with the authority that belonged to the president of Brenz, Incorporated, with the weight of millions of dollars behind it.

"It is your task, Mayhew," announced Brenz, solemnly. "As important to future progress as was the work you did abroad. Already" – Brenz gestured again to the papers – "we have received inquiries from Washington asking why our bids for post-war construction should be so high in proportion to prices established by Universal Contractors."

Jud nodded, showing he'd expected comment of that sort.

"It reflects on our integrity," added Brenz, "and if we demand an investigation of Universal, it will tip our hand to either North or Sark, more specifically the latter."

That made still more sense to Jud. He pictured Sark as a man who would be awaiting investigation and prepared for it. Folding his hands, Brenz rested his chin on them as he propped his elbows on the desk. Then:

"Sark has an uncanny faculty for spotting private detectives," Brenz declared. "He disappears like an earthworm, the moment they begin to track him. Here are some of their reports." Reaching to a desk drawer, Brenz pulled out a stack of papers bigger than the pile that lay in front of him. "Every man we have hired has failed.

"Besides, what if they did gain a look into Sark's business affairs? None of them have the technical knowledge needed to bring in a proper report. That's why I want you to take over the case, Mayhew. If you can gain access to any of Sark's records – in the right way of course – so much the better."

The idea appealed to Jud. He asked:

"Where can I find Sark now?"

"In the town of Stanwich," replied Brenz, referring to his notes. "Fortunately we have just gained another lucky lead to him. As a stranger, decidedly not of the detective type, you are not likely to arouse his suspicions."

"Where is Sark stopping?"

"At the Stanwich Arms, the one good hotel in the town. Incidentally, Stanwich is a place where North's company handled quite a variety of contracts and may be planning to do more business. The sooner you get there, the better."

Jud Mayhew thought the same. Rising from the desk, he gave a short nod to Philo Brenz. Then, emphatically, Jud reached for Sark's photograph, took another steady look at it and tossed it back among Brenz's papers. With that, Jud strode from the president's office.

Eyes glittering their approval, Philo Brenz watched the technical man's departure, then gathered the photo with the papers and put them back in their proper drawer. For the work that he wanted done, Brenz could not have picked a better confidential agent than Jud Mayhew.

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One thing was certain: Jud would recognize Sark once he saw him. Such at least was Brenz's impression.

It was Jud's impression too, but in a reverse way. Riding down from the fiftieth floor, Jud was staring at the blank wall of the elevator and seeing things again.

Etched before Jud's eyes was the visual reflex that looked like the negative print of Sark's photograph, enlarged to more than human size. It was a sinister visage, that thing of imagination brought to realism, the White Skull that leered an ominous welcome to this man who was seeking Alban Sark!

## CHAPTER II

IT wasn't a long trip to Stanwich, but by the time Jud Mayhew arrived there, his plans were fully made. That was easy enough because the plans practically made themselves. When a stranger arrived in Stanwich, there was only one place where he would normally go and that was to the Stanwich Arms.

The question was whether he'd find a room at that hotel and the chances were about a hundred to one that he wouldn't. Nevertheless there was no harm in trying, and it fitted with Jud's role as a casual stranger in the town.

At least visitors were scarce this afternoon, as Jud learned when he took a cab from the station. There were only three cabs waiting there and this one alone had a driver; the others were shooting pool across from the depot, apparently just waiting in reserve.

The cab had a conspicuous local license bearing a facsimile picture of the driver and giving his name as Leo Trobin. So Jud tossed a few queries to Leo as they rode to the Stanwich Arms.

"What's happened to Stanwich?" queried Jud. "Looks to me as though the town were dead."

"Yup," returned Leo from a chew of tobacco. "Looks that way, only 't'aint. Stanwich is a live burg."

"You mean was."

"Don't fool yourself mister. It's only the holiday that makes things look asleep."

Jud couldn't remember that today was a holiday and said so. Leo obligingly supplied the information that the holiday ruled locally in Stanwich and nowhere else.

"They're dedicating the monument to Mayor Fitzler," explained Leo the cabby. "Did a lot for Stanwich, the old mayor did. Fine monument too, and it ain't costing the town a penny."

Jud asked why.

"Public subscriptions," Leo told him. "An outfit called Universal Contractors supplied the material and labor. They're planning to do a lot of post-war building here. Got to take care of housing when Stanwich converts to peace time industry."

Leo was darting quick looks across his shoulder to note the effect of this on Jud. The cabby's shifty eyes matched those of his picture and Jud could guess that the fellow knew a lot that was going on in Stanwich. After all, a man who hacked visitors to and from the station ought to learn a lot, and Leo Trobin was the garrulous sort.

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Just to prove that he could turn his talkative ability to smart use, the cabby suddenly inquired:

"What's your line, mister?"

"Manufacturer's representative," returned Jud promptly. "Looking for good factories that might be vacant. I heard there were some in Stanwich."

Leo chuckled.

"I'll show you just your ticket, mister. It's kind of out of the way, but we got to make a detour anyhow, considering that the main street is roped off on account of the parade."

The cab swung around through side streets that had once been pleasant but no longer were. All along these streets were old-fashioned houses that either should have been kept in their pristine state or torn down and replaced by modern homes. Instead, they had been turned into rooming houses and the owners, anxious to capitalize on the rental boom, hadn't wasted a cent on decorative improvements. Whatever paint jobs had been done were cheap, while all visible construction was in the form of wings or extensions that made the houses look grotesque.

"Used to be pretty, this neighborhood," commented Leo. "Guess maybe it will again when they get to fixing it. These streets feed right into the superhighway which will be getting a lot of traffic once there's a lot of new cars with enough gas to run them."

Swinging into the superhighway, Leo turned the cab across a broad concrete bridge that excited Jud's immediate attention. The bridge was of pre-war mold and it crossed an underpass which must have been completed at the same time, for Jud could tell by the contour of the ground that the lower road had been built over a creek bed.

Further proof of the creek's existence was evidenced by an old brick building, its foundations reinforced with concrete, that jutted from a steep rise of ground close to the far end of the bridge.

"There she is," announced Leo, with a wave of his hand. "T'ain't a big factory, but it's a good one. Trucks can come in from either level and there's a railroad siding out to the back."

Jud's practiced eye was studying the structure, but more from the engineer's standpoint than that of a manufacturer's representative. However, he spoke in the latter terms.

"It hasn't been used as a factory."

"Not unless you count when it was an old paper mill," admitted Leo. "They rigged it for a war plant though, only it wasn't big enough. So it got used as a warehouse. Has a lot of confiscated enemy goods in it, they tell me, including Jap fireworks."

Jud was looking back to complete his appraisal of the brick building while he wondered if Universal had done the construction work. Then Leo was swinging the cab from the highway, down toward the lower road in order to avoid the main part of town. As they joined the other road, Jud saw where the creek emerged from a huge culvert, trickling through mushy ground that served as an automobile junkyard.

Those old graveyards had been rather depleted of late, but this one had a stock of fairly complete junkers. Probably the factory hands had run some of their old cars so ragged that they weren't good enough to repair. Then, swinging through a stretch of rocky, wooded land, the cab crossed a bridge below a bend where the



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creek formed a prettier stream, and pulled up at the Stanwich Arms.

Outside the hotel, Leo handed Jud a card, giving an appropriate smirk.

"If you're pulling out of town tonight, call the Apex Cab Service," suggested Leo. "There's our garage number on the car. We'll get you to your train in time."

What Leo meant was plain, when Jud went into the hotel. Though commodious in relation to a normal town the size of Stanwich, the Arms just couldn't hold its present applicants. The sizable lobby was stacked with dozens of suitcases, their owners seated on them, awaiting their assignment to rooms.

Promptly Jud decided that he wouldn't have to stay all night. His job would be to locate Sark first. The easiest and most impersonal way was to go to the cashier's window and make an inquiry, so Jud did. Casually Jud asked the man behind the window:

"Has Mr. Sark checked out?"

The name didn't register with the cashier.

"Mr. Alban Sark," specified Jud. "He's been here the past few days."

Apparently Sark hadn't registered either, for the cashier couldn't uncover a bit of data that concerned him. He kept repeating the name though, which didn't please Jud because other persons were crowding up to the window to pay their bills, and Jud was afraid that somebody might overhear. Jud turned away abruptly to stare across the lobby.

There was a man standing several feet away. If he had shifted, Jud would have noticed him, but the man did not budge. Close enough to hear what passed between Jud and the cashier, this witness made it his business to remain indifferent. His only reaction was to tilt his head slightly forward so that his heavy brow dominated his appearance, except for the challenging thrust of his chin.

His eyes however were sharp and whitish; his teeth gleamed from a fixed, hard smile as Jud looked his way. The man was avoiding argument, but ready for it if it came. The result was that Jud stared right past the man, conscious of his presence without defining him. Jud's gaze was focused further across the lobby, watching the people who were passing there.

Then, with a shrug, Jud stepped in another direction only to stop in his tracks.

Against the pastel shade of the blank lobby wall, Jud was seeing something too fresh to be an after-image of the past, something that cold logic told him must have come from a recent observation.

Growing uncannily, a huge, vague skull impressed itself upon that wall!

The answer flashed home. Jud remembered a man whose face he had hardly noticed in the semi-gloom along past the cashier's window. Only one face could have produced that reflex effect of a White Skull as vivid as if alive. It belonged to Alban Sark!

Acting on impulse, Jud wheeled to look for the man again. Sark was gone, and he could only have turned the corner leading to the elevators. Starting in that direction, Jud was ready to discard discretion and openly challenge Sark, except that he couldn't find the fellow.

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The immediate clue to Sark's disappearance was an elevator with its dial pointing to the figure one. The door was closed but if Sark had boarded the car, there would still be a chance to overtake him. Springing forward, Jud pounded the door, hoping to add himself to the passenger list.

The door clanged open but before Jud could board the car, he realized that it had just come down. Passengers were getting off it and the first that Jud encountered was a girl with reddish hair who was only momentarily taken aback by Jud's precipitous advent. Then, with an arm that had considerable drive, the girl brushed Jud aside.

Too intent even to mutter apologies, Jud stared into the elevator. Sark wasn't there. The girl, in her turn, paused to watch the pantomime with eyes that were as keen as they were narrowed. She was more than just aggressive, this redhead, she was smart, for she recognized the intensity of Jud's hurried man-hunt.

Coolly, the girl opened a hand-bag that was dangling from her arm and reached within to draw out something that would have glittered in the light if she hadn't kept it artfully from view. That object was a compact revolver that the girl trained in Jud's direction.

Then Jud had wheeled around again, giving the girl no more than a passing glance. He didn't see what her eyes had noticed; the dial of another elevator stopping at the seventh floor. Instead, Jud was more interested in a door at the end of the short corridor, an exit that Sark might have used.

Abruptly, Jud headed through that door and found himself out in the street, amid the gathering dusk. The girl let the revolver drop back into the bag and turned away serenely. From somewhere in the distance came the fanfare of trumpets, announcing the assemblage of the parade that was to open this evening's events in Stanwich.

Much was due tonight and it had only just begun!

### CHAPTER III

As the crowd in the lobby thinned itself, partly because rooms had finally been assigned to prospective guests and also because people were starting out to see the parade, a young man came into sight, largely because the throng had cleared itself from around him.

He was standing beside a marble pillar, and it had given him a peculiar vantage point. A few paces in any direction not only enabled him to see all parts of the lobby; such procedure could also put him out of sight from any angle that he chose.

Not that he needed to keep out of sight. He was of a keen yet easy mannered type, the sort who could efface himself by simply minding his own business. This was quite important, considering the nature of his business.

This man was Harry Vincent, star performer in a continuous show produced by a certain person styled The Shadow. Harry was the ace among the agents who served a mysterious chief whose main purpose was to combat crime.

It wouldn't have taken a second guess to cover the fact that Harry's business here in some way concerned Sark, except that no guessers were bothering about Harry. In turn this proved that no one knew how many others might be in town on similar business; at least no one except The Shadow and those who served him.

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In watching for somebody, Harry hadn't long to wait. As an elevator reached the ground floor, Harry's expectant eye saw a tall figure step from it, that of a man in immaculate evening attire. It was as if by coincidence that both Harry and the new arrival reached the cigar stand at about the same moment. Coincidental, too, that the clerk had to leave the counter to find the particular cigars that the tall customer wanted.

That gave Harry Vincent a chance for a few quiet words with Lamont Cranston, the tall man in evening clothes.

As an important visitor to Stanwich, Cranston was to help occupy the reviewing stand when the parade went by and later make a speech at the banquet to be held in honor of the late mayor. Cranston was a man of many parts; a noted traveler, a wealthy art collector, a New York clubman in the spare time of which he seemingly had plenty.

All that, however, was quite deceptive. Much of the time Cranston was very busy in a totally different identity, that of The Shadow.

Right now, Cranston was thinking definitely in The Shadow's terms as his calm voice gave the order:

"Report."

"Sark went up to his room five minutes ago," stated Harry. "There was a chap looking for him."

"As Sark?"

"As Sark. He evidently didn't know that Sark is registered here as Hubert Rudland. He knows Sark by sight though, because he recognized him."

Cranston's keen eyes put a query that Harry understood, but could only answer in part. It concerned the man who had been looking for Sark.

"A young chap," expressed Harry, describing Jud Mayhew. "Looks older than he is and is probably an ex-service man. I don't know his name though."

"Neither does Sark," returned Cranston in his even tone. "He's still trying to find out."

It startled Harry for the moment; then he remembered having seen the elevator dial stop at number seven, which wasn't Cranston's floor. Quite obviously Cranston had looked in on Sark after the latter returned upstairs. In fact, right now Cranston was carrying a brief case, probably containing testimonials to be presented at the banquet, but Harry knew from long experience that it could also hold the regalia of The Shadow.

"Sark phoned the desk and the bell Captain," Cranston commented. "He asked if there had been any inquiries for him."

"By his own name?" Harry exclaimed.

"Of course," returned Cranston. "Since he is known here as Rudland, he might be looking for Sark too. But he was more interested in finding out who else was, which he didn't. I take it that Gail North didn't know the stranger either."

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Mention of Gail North brought a puzzled stare from Harry. Gail was the daughter of Townsend North, the contractor, and she happened also to be the red-head who had bumped into Jud Mayhew when coming from the elevator. How Cranston already knew about that encounter was a puzzle.

Nor did Cranston's expression answer the riddle. His features merely increased the enigma as they always did. Calm, impassive, definitely masklike when a certain light struck it, Cranston's face remained constantly unchanged, except when he purposely molded it into someone else's. Among other arts, that of skillful disguise was often used by this man whose other self was The Shadow.

How Cranston could have spotted Gail and still kept tabs on Sark was the thing that baffled Harry until his chief gave the slightest of gestures.

"Look over toward the lounge," suggested Cranston, "and you will see Margo Lane doing everything but wigwag a message."

Looking, Harry saw an attractive but anxious brunette peering from just within the door of the cafe lounge. Cranston was right; it was Margo and she was trying to catch his eye.

"Gail went into the lounge," called Harry, "but I don't see her now."

"Margo does," explained Cranston. "That's what she is trying to tell us. But your report is sufficient, Vincent. I can check with Margo later. Meanwhile, this chap you saw –"

Cranston's break-off was a cue for a quick response, so Harry gave it.

"He went out through the door past the elevators. Maybe he's still looking for Sark" – Harry paused, not quite sure – "but perhaps he just went to see the parade."

"You should certainly see the parade." Cranston's voice rose from the undertone that he had automatically adopted earlier, yet it lost none of its even tenor. "It is to be a fine affair I understand. Tanks and other military vehicles will be among the local floats. This is a great night for Stanwich. Ah!" Cranston's eyes were turning as he spoke. "My panatelas. I knew you would have my brand."

This last comment was to the cigar clerk, who had just returned without Harry realizing it. Buying himself a quota of thin cigars, Cranston turned and gave Harry a nod as if to emphasize that the parade should not be missed.

That was something with which Harry quite agreed, since it offered another chance of running into Jud, whose name Harry didn't yet know. So Harry left by the door beyond the elevators while Cranston went out through the main door, the shortest route to the reviewing stand.

One thing was certain: Alban Sark wouldn't leave the hotel unnoticed.

As he passed the lounge, Harry saw Margo relax dejectedly at her table and a glance beyond showed him Gail. Though at a distant table, the red-haired girl had a perfect view of the elevators and the stairway near them.

Finding Jud might prove difficult, but the procedure was quite definite. Harry's plan was to take a short-cut up to the broad bridge and meet the parade when it came across. By keeping ahead of it all along the route, he would stand a fair chance of discovering Jud somewhere along the way.

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What Harry didn't expect were the rapid results he got. Cutting through a narrow street to the near end of the bridge, Harry picked his man right out of the crowd. The main street was brilliantly lighted, even at this end, and Jud had picked himself a rather conspicuous observation spot behind the ropes that held back the crowd.

Oddly though, Jud wasn't interested in the approach of the brass band that was marching across the bridge. He was studying a building on the other side, a red brick structure that was a white elephant. Harry knew about the old mill and its history; how plenty of money had been spent to convert it into a war plant that was never used as such.

Why it interested Jud was the question and Harry pushed close to see if he could guess the reason. His shoulder brushed Jud's and the young man turned suddenly only to see Harry staring blandly toward the oncoming parade. In turn, Jud forgot the brick building briefly and looked toward the bridge too.

Blaring full blast, the band came down the ramp with the feature attraction, the big army tanks, creeping along just in back of it. The rumble of the mechanized armor drowned the martial music and the bridge seemed to vibrate like the eager crowd.

Then, as though such sights were commonplace to him, Jud let his eyes rove from the roaring tanks. His gaze went back to the brick building that now served as a warehouse.

Harry kept watching Jud's expression, but not for long.

Jud's face froze suddenly. Instinctively, Harry looked for the reason, but by then, Jud was over the ropes, lunging through the marching band, flinging musicians aside as he waved his arms in wild warning to people on the far side of the street.

They must have caught Jud's meaning for they turned and looked above them; then scrambled out into the street as if their lives depended on it.

Their lives did.

Looking up, Harry Vincent found his own eyes frozen upon the thing that had launched Jud Mayhew into that frenzied warning.

Like a dying monster sagging under its own sheer weight, the massed red brick of the bulky warehouse was beginning to tumble forward as though hoping to engulf the pygmy figures that were racing madly to escape the crash of its plunging hulk!

## CHAPTER IV

IN stupendous, slow-motion fashion, the toppling building literally fell apart. The crowd was running madly. Jud's timely warning was the factor. Like a music maestro he was taking over with signals that people instinctively understood, literally guiding them away from the flood of debris that was coming hard their way.

Now Harry was beyond the rope, seizing stragglers, flinging them away from harm. A few of the brightly garbed musicians were doing the same, all in those scant seconds while the cornice of the collapsing building was still descending like the crest of a mighty, crashing wave.

A sweep of Jud's arm, his own long leap away from that breaker formed of masonry, marked the last instant of safety. Then, into the fringe of the space where frantic people had stampeded moments before, came the

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heavy tanks, sweeping to the very curb, ready to receive the brick bombardment.

The wave smashed and the bricks hurtled everywhere, like chunks of a solidified surf. The tanks were swallowed by the flood, but they came slashing out of it undaunted. Their veteran crews had thrown them in as a buffer to protect the fleeing citizenry. A few bricks, bouncing from the steel monsters, flayed the remnants of the crowd, but few persons were badly hurt.

To Jud Mayhew belonged first credit; to the tank-men next, but Harry Vincent had by no means been dilatory. The man who recognized it was Jud and rather than be congratulated as a hero at a time he wanted to remain anonymous, Jud looked around for Harry, hoping to talk that other stranger into accepting the public acclaim.

To Jud's amazement, he saw Harry breaking through the crowd more madly than some of the excited persons he had helped to rescue!

Thoughts snapped fast through Jud's brain.

Maybe this stranger just didn't want to be thanked; if so, he was taking a good way out, an excellent course for Jud to follow. On the contrary, the complete and untimely collapse of the old brick mill was something that smacked of the mysterious.

Having no notion of Harry's real purpose here, Jud was struck by its insidious aspect. An innocent bystander wouldn't have good reason to flee the scene so swiftly. Where Harry was going and why, were two things that intrigued Jud, so he broke through the crowd, intent upon pursuit.

Jud Mayhew was getting himself in for more than he supposed.

What Harry had seen was a beckoning arm from above the heads of the crowd. The man who was waving the signal was at the top of some house steps, well down the street. He had a good reason to be there, for he was a reporter from New York, assigned to cover the big events in the town of Stanwich.

The reporter's name was Clyde Burke and in his spare time, of which he had plenty, he was an agent of The Shadow. What Clyde was doing right now, was calling all agents, also with good reason.

By the time Harry neared those house steps another man was shouldering through the crowd from the opposite direction. He was Cliff Marsland, also a capable member of The Shadow's corps. Together Harry and Cliff followed Clyde as he sprang from the steps and headed down the slant that led toward the old junkyard that Jud had seen that afternoon.

There, the guiding influence was a little man named Hawkeye, who hadn't been bothering about the parade. It was Hawkeye's business to spot uncouth happenings in vicinities like Stanwich and he'd been doing it. The junkyard had incited Hawkeye's suspicions because too many of its relics looked too good.

Right now, some of those old wrecked cars were coming to life. Into them were piling men who had arrived with large and weighty bundles, appearing from – of all places – that ample culvert that accommodated the old creek bed. A dozen unknown men were beginning a getaway in half as many vehicles, among them trucks, bearing a quantity of goods that represented merely the last load.

The entire shipment, whatever it was, had been rifled from the old brick building which had served as a warehouse until its very recent collapse!

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Hardly had The Shadow's agents joined Hawkeye before two cars wheeled up to receive them. Each was driven by a speed king in his own right: one, Miles Crofton, formerly a member of a flying circus; the other, Chance Lebrue, whose pre-war hobby had been to wreck himself, car and all, as a free attraction at county fairs.

Crofton's car took in Harry and Clyde; Lebrue's gathered up Cliff and Hawkeye. It was impolite of course, but Jud Mayhew tried to add himself to the latter crew, hoping to argue the question later. Only Jud didn't manage it, because Jericho Druke was around.

Jericho Druke was a huge African whose proportions, large though they were, gave but a slight intimation of the strength that went with them. Jericho was very amiable, even when he took Jud by the back of the neck and lifted him about four feet off the ground.

It was rather difficult for Jericho to take people by the back of the neck, because his hand was big enough to go all the way around. Therefore Jericho made it a policy to drop people very promptly and gently.

Four feet being the height of the concrete rail that lined the sloping roadway, Jericho simply dropped Jud across the rail. It was a very easy landing for Jud because the ground was soft and sandy on the other side. Of course the ground sloped downward too, so it was Jud's fault as much as Jericho's that the landing didn't mark a stopping place.

What Jud did was coast about eighty feet down into the junkyard, kicking up plenty of dust ahead of him, which helped slacken his slide. But by the time Jud arrived there, the men in the old cars were gone and The Shadow's agents were speeding to the chase along the road that led through the woods on the other side of the ravine.

Back at the reviewing stand, all this made an interesting panorama for a gentleman named Lamont Cranston who was hemmed between a congressman and a county judge and therefore couldn't leave. Everybody was excited about the strange catastrophe that had occurred up by the concrete bridge; that was, everybody except Cranston.

With the calculating eye that was The Shadow's, Cranston was giving his agents about four miles in which to overtake the junkyard fugitives and usually The Shadow's calculations were correct.

This time they weren't.

The caravan had taken a twisty route through those oddly arranged back streets of Stanwich. The drivers knew the route by rote and were making the most of it. Apparently they expected pursuit and were acting accordingly. They had gained ground when they reached the superhighway and headed away from the town.

Those battered looking trucks and cars were anything but junkers. Their tires had no treads, but they were stout enough to stand the gaff. The caravan opened up to a speed that was really high, but it couldn't outdistance its pursuers. The Shadow's agents were riding in cars that were really geared to speed and the drivers were the sort who were inclined to bash their accelerator pedals right through the floorboards.

Only by dint of a considerable head-start did the fugitive caravan manage to reach the only goal within a dozen miles, a place where the big superhighway converged with another in an elaborate clover-leaf pattern involving underpasses, ramps, circles, bridges and all the other nightmares that confront the modern motorist.

Apparently the fugitives had some artful plan of dodging all around these runways to shake off pursuers, for they went up an incline, veered the wrong direction, cut across a bridge and down the other side. Crofton and

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Labrue kept right after them until it became obvious that this game of hide-and-seek wasn't leading anywhere. Coming to a fork in the clover-leaf fashion, The Shadow's drivers split their paths and took different directions.

The passengers in The Shadow's cars were ready with drawn guns for the climax that seemed sure to come. Around one of these bends, perhaps down in an underpass, the caravan was going to find itself boxed. Then would come quick battle that should result in a solid mop-up.

The moment arrived. Two pairs of powerful headlights gleamed eye to eye as they swung in from the curve of an incline. One car was whipping down from a fork, the other scooting up from beneath an underpass. Then, as suddenly as they had met, the drivers gave the brakes.

Screeches accompanied swerves as two cars literally twisted alongside each other. From those two cars stepped men who eyed one another in what could only be termed stolid astonishment. Separate courses had led to a reunion of The Shadow's own agents.

The missing caravan had vanished as though its vehicles were composed of thin air. Somehow, somewhere in the maze of the elaborate clover-leaf, the fugitive cars had sped away in some fresh direction, leaving the pursuers nonplused.

A strange singular ending to that mad chase from the town of Stanwich.

Something that even The Shadow might doubt when it was told him!

## CHAPTER V

COMMOTION had quieted in Stanwich. The parade had gone its way and completed its appointed route with the ruins of the old brick warehouse far in its wake. Along with other dignitaries, Lamont Cranston had reviewed the affair and heard talk of the near catastrophe that had almost marked its progress. However, that hadn't spoiled the revelry in Stanwich.

There would be investigations and all that, but the loss of the old warehouse didn't matter, considering that its contents were all confiscated goods that might have been junked anyway. Nobody had been seriously hurt and already a theory was being voiced to explain the occurrence. It was the old business of rhythmic vibration. Probably the rumble of the tanks had been timed to the old building's sway and was therefore responsible for its crash.

They were talking about it, though, in Stanwich, after the parade was over. One man who was voluble on the subject was Leo Trobin, the cab driver who had brought Jud Mayhew from the station.

Leo was working the night shift and was therefore on hand at the Apex garage, talking to a couple of other cabbies and a few odd loungers.

"Funny thing," opined Leo. "I drove a guy up from the depot just tonight and he was talking about buying over that old building. Came here special just to look at it. Kind of funny too that there weren't any explosions after the thing caved. There was supposed to be a lot of fireworks stored there. Guess they just got smothered."

A stolid-faced foreman was answering a phone call for a cab. He turned toward the group and Leo moved out of sight behind a pillar, beckoning a drab-faced loungeur to follow him.



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"Stick here, Jeff," Leo told the lounge. "I don't want Kromer to shove me out on a job – not yet. He goes off duty in about ten minutes, Kromer does. It won't matter after that."

Another cabby was anxious enough for the job that Kromer, the foreman offered. Staring stolidly, Kromer seemed to be wondering where Leo was; then, with a shrug, he went back to his regular duties.

Watching this, Jeff gave a short nod in Leo's direction, meaning that Kromer was none the wiser. Nobody else counted with Leo and Jeff, which was why they didn't notice a little man standing nearby.

To all appearances, this fellow was just one of the local hangers-on, but he happened to be an out-of-towner. He was Hawkeye, the keen-eyed spotter who had put The Shadow's agents on the track of the cars that fled the junkyard. Having accompanied his comrades on their futile chase, Hawkeye was back in Stanwich hoping to make amends.

Hawkeye was looking for someone who might be conversant with the junkyard situation and Jeff filled the bill. The drab-faced lounge didn't spend much of his time at the Apex Garage. Hawkeye had seen him driving to and from the junkyard in a ramshackle car, on several occasions.

This liaison between Jeff and Leo was all the more pointed, considering Leo's mention of a fare who had looked over the old brick warehouse. Having checked facts with Harry Vincent, Hawkeye had an idea that Leo's passenger was the very man who had inquired for Sark and had later encountered Jericho; namely, Jud Mayhew.

Five minutes and another cab call again found Leo lacking when Kromer gave a brief look for him. The stolid foreman was beginning to show annoyance on his chunky face; in fact, he was so annoyed that he stayed on duty after the next five minutes were gone. Then came another cab call and this time Leo promptly stepped into sight.

"Guess it's my turn, Kromer," spoke Leo, cheerily. "How come you were passing me up?"

Glowering, Kromer said gruffly:

"Didn't see you anywhere around."

"Yeah?" Leo's tone was sarcastic. "I've been here all along. Ask Jeff if I haven't."

Jeff supplied a corroborating nod.

"What's it for?" queried Jeff. "Somebody taking the last train out?"

"What else would it be?" Kromer demanded. "Hop over to the hotel right away; the guy says he's got a lot of luggage. Only the next time stay in sight. Then I can go out and eat when I'm supposed to."

Without waiting for apologies, Kromer stalked out, which was exactly what Leo wanted. Jumping to the wheel, Leo backed his cab out through a door where Jeff's jalopy was waiting. Kromer not being around to witness that procedure, Hawkeye was the only observer. Keeping neatly behind the doorway, Hawkeye saw Leo and Jeff empty the contents of a five gallon can into the cab's gas tank.

"That's good for seventy-five miles that Kromer won't know about," chuckled Leo. "He's too dumb to know that I've rigged the meter."

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"Don't forget my cut," reminded Jeff, "or there won't be any more coming from where that came from."

Piker stuff, this, but Hawkeye decided to report it to The Shadow. The fact that Jeff was bootlegging gasoline that came into the junkyard might have some slight bearing on larger matters.

More important, though, was the call that Leo was answering. Over at the Stanwich Arms, Alban Sark was standing in his seventh floor room, staring out across the lighted town toward the blackened vacancy that marked the site of the missing warehouse.

On a table beside Sark was an ash-tray filled with smoldering cigarette butts. Sark could have rigged them as an alibi, but he hadn't. The man with the heavy forehead had not been at large when the warehouse crashed. Sark had stayed in his room all evening.

Right now, Sark's face, white against the darkened window pane, looked like a death's head in its own right. How worried Sark might be, he alone knew; but his pallor was to some degree artificial, for his lips, when they moved, simply phrased a scornful sneer. Bulging forehead, jutting chin, eyes that looked as hollow as his grin, gave Sark an expression that resembled a mask, which it was so far as any human sentiments were concerned.

When Sark's mind worked, it was in an inhuman way, as his cold, hard stare revealed. Then, suddenly those features darkened with a pained look that was partial evidence of some hidden fear, for Sark himself wheeled quickly around.

Sark didn't like the way his expression clouded. It was as if some other figure had approached behind him to block off the room lights that caused the reflection in the window.

For the moment, Sark saw blackness, like that of a fading figure. Perhaps his own eyes, with their whitish glister, were subject to peculiar optical effects like those of persons who studied his picture too long. Sark's hand went to his pocket; the flex of his wrist muscles told that his fist was gripping a gun. But before Sark could draw the weapon and aim it toward the gloom near the doorway, the door itself flung open.

In contrast to blackness, Sark saw green, the uniform of a bell-boy. Letting his hand relax, Sark drew it from his pocket and gestured toward a stack of suitcases near the door.

"Take them down to the lobby," ordered Sark, in a short-clipped tone. "Have them ready when the cab comes. Page me as soon as it arrives."

The bell-boy nodded. then asked:

"What name?"

Sark's lips straightened, which was their method of forming a smile. Squarely in the light, his cold face revealed its peculiar contours. His forehead bulged as he tilted his head forward; then came the thrust of his chin, to match it.

Instead of giving the name of Hubert Rudland, this man of devious ways announced his own:

"Alban Sark."

As he pronounced the name, Sark ushered the bell-hop from the room, bags and all, tucking a dollar bill into the pocket of the green uniform. Sark added a smile, free of charge, but the bell-boy didn't see it. The smile

## THE WHITE SKULLS

was not at all a nice one.

In his turn, Sark didn't see what happened in the room behind him. From the space behind the open door emerged a figure cloaked in black, the living embodiment of the shape that Sark had half attributed to his own imagination.

That figure was The Shadow.

Silently, swiftly, The Shadow moved across the room and reached a connecting door. When Sark turned from the hallway, there wasn't a visible trace of his cloaked visitor. That didn't entirely satisfy Sark; hand to gun pocket, he closed the door to the hall, as though expecting to find someone lurking behind it.

All Sark found was vacancy, which proved the wisdom of The Shadow's opportune shift.

Satisfied that he was quite alone, Sark was in no hurry to leave. Looking at his watch, he saw that there was ample time before the cab arrived, so he took a chair beside the telephone table. Sark's eyes now were on the telephone as though he expected it to ring, which it did, quite suddenly.

Sark made a quick pounce for the instrument, but when he answered the call, his tone was steady.

"Ah, Ludar," spoke Sark, reprovingly, "you are calling a trifle late... Yes, I should have left by this time... What? You have just found out? That is singular. You should have known all along that they would do it..."

There was a pause, while Ludar's voice came earnestly across the wire, though it was heard by Sark alone. Then:

"I stayed here to watch," Sark informed, "and I saw what happened... Yes, exactly as I expected it... Of course they are fools. What else could I do but agree?"

Another pause, with Ludar doing the talking, after which, Sark gave a short, hard laugh.

"You are telling me my turn is next," declared Sark. "That is funny, Ludar, very funny... Of course I guessed. Why not?... Yes, I have made the proper arrangements. I have a suitable substitute... No, Ludar, do not worry. I am safe and so are all my documents..."

Two doors were doing tricks behind Sark's back. One was the door to the connecting room, which Sark did not suspect at all. It was closing, proof that The Shadow was leaving on some other mission. The door to the hallway, however, was doing just the opposite. Sark hadn't locked it when he closed it; now that door was coming open.

"Later, Ludar, I shall call you," Sark was saying. "Yes, when I am back in New York... Of course you can reach me if you come there at the right time... But now, time is short. Good-bye, Ludar..."

The hallway door went shut and its click was drowned by the clatter of the telephone as Sark replaced it. All that Sark gave the door was a slight glance, along with a shrug. He moved in that direction, but only to press the light switch, enveloping the room in darkness. Then Sark returned to his post beside the window.

Outside Sark's door, a figure was moving away rapidly, headed toward the elevators. But it wasn't the figure of The Shadow. This listener who had caught the closing moments of Sark's conversation with Ludar, was the trim red-haired girl who answered to the name of Gail North!

## CHAPTER VI

"PAGING Mr. Sark!"

Gail North heard the call as she stepped from the elevator and immediately she was alert. When Gail went alert, she was reminiscent of a cocker spaniel of the reddish variety.

At least such was the opinion of Margo Lane, whether it was flattering or not. All evening, Margo had been watching Gail go quivery whenever anyone faintly resembling Sark appeared from the elevator. Now as before, Gail suddenly relaxed.

Of course Margo didn't know why. Since leaving his listening post at Sark's, Cranston had been quite too busy to inform Margo regarding details that he himself could handle as The Shadow. So Margo was not only puzzled, but due to be more so.

"Mr. Alban Sark!" bellowed the bell-hop. "Cab is ready for Mr. Alban Sark!"

Rather than lose more time, the bell-boy picked up Sark's bags and started out to the street. Gail strolled nonchalantly across the lobby and took an obscure chair, thus puzzling Margo all the further. Along with being puzzled, Margo was bothered by the fact that neither Harry nor any of The Shadow's other agents was anywhere around.

But if Harry Vincent wasn't handy, Jud Mayhew was. All nicely brushed, Jud showed no signs of the slide that Jericho had given him. Popping to his feet, he looked like any other guest at the Stanwich Arms.

Jud was thinking very swiftly, not just in terms of Sark, but of those bags that were going out.

Sark wasn't any more important than the contents of those bags, if as important. Jud was wondering just what Sark would do if those bags disappeared in their entirety. More than that, he was wondering what Sark could do, which certainly could not be very much, particularly if he missed the train on which the bags went.

So Jud strode straight out through the lobby, following the route of the bags. Finding the bell-boy out front, Jud gave him an imperious gesture; then, recognizing the cab as Leo's, Jud added loudly:

"Get those bags into that cab! One of us will take the train. In any case, we want the bags to be there."

It sounded logical enough to the bell-hop and spurred him into putting the bags into the cab. Jud waited on the deserted hotel steps, watch in hand, and gestured for Leo to pull further ahead, in order not to interfere with any other cabs that might arrive.

This was hardly necessary but it proved good showmanship. Leo responded and the bell-boy went back into the hotel, thinking that Jud, whoever he was, had been invested with full authority by Alban Sark.

Immediately Jud decided to take advantage of that usurped authority. He came down the steps, intending to enter the cab. To do so, he had to stride through a plot of darkness. That was as far as Jud went.

Out of blackness came a solid figure that whisked Jud off his feet and half precipitated him through the air into the waiting clutches of a pair of men who sidled in from darkness to receive him. That pair consisted of Harry Vincent and Cliff Marsland. They rushed Jud clear across the street and into the powerful paws of Jericho who dumped him into a car that had Chance Lebrue at the wheel.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

It was all so swift that Jud hardly knew what happened, while Leo in his cab knew nothing at all about it. The man who took in the most of that fast moving picture was Alban Sark.

From his seventh floor window, Sark was staring straight down to the sidewalk. He saw Jud step into the darkness beside the waiting cab; then witnessed his flying recoil, the way he was snagged by a pair who hustled him across the way to the darkness that obscured another car.

This was something that Sark had expected, for his chuckle came in a lowered basso. Leaving the window, Sark strolled from the room, out to the elevator.

Downstairs, Gail North had captured a considerable eyeload of the disaster that had overwhelmed Jud. Meddling into business that didn't entirely concern her seemed to be one of Gail's specialties, for she came full tilt from the lobby door, intent upon tracking down Jud's captors. Dashing around the corner, Gail watched the car turn a corner further down the street, but she hadn't any car of her own in which to follow.

After running a block or more, Gail turned back dejectedly, realizing how silly she had been. Whoever Jud was, he hadn't gone away with those precious bags belonging to Sark; they were still in the waiting cab outside of the hotel.

Except that the cab was no longer waiting when Gail arrived back. Its driver had instructions to get to the station at a certain time and he was following those orders. All Gail saw was the side of the cab as it swung the corner. By the street lamp she read the name "Apex Cab Company" and nothing more.

It wasn't much, but it was all that Gail could use, so she made the most of it. Spying another cab that was returning from a trip, Gail saw that it bore the same name, "Apex", so she hailed it.

"Take me to your garage," Gail ordered. "I left something in a cab – something very important. I'd like to speak to the manager about it."

The Apex Garage was quite deserted when Gail arrived there. Outside was an old night watchman, who looked too lazy and decrepit to make his rounds. Gail alighted to talk to him while her cabby was putting his cab up for the night.

"I dropped a cigarette case in the cushions of a cab," Gail told the old watchman. "I don't know which cab it was. Maybe it hasn't come in for the night."

The watchman removed a corn-cob pipe from his lips and spoke through a trickle of smoke.

"Go inside and look, lady," he suggested. "If it ain't in one of them cabs, it will be in Leo's. He's t'only one who hadn't checked in yet."

Gail's cabby was leaving the garage, which made the situation perfect. All the girl had to do was go into the garage, fake a search among the cabs that were already there and say she couldn't find the cigarette case. That would give her an excuse to question Leo when he arrived. That way, she might learn something about those bags that Sark had sent away.

It would mean stalling for time, though, since by Gail's calculation, Leo couldn't have reached the station yet, since it was much further from the hotel than was this garage. So Gail entered the garage and started looking in the cabs.

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In the very first, Gail received a startling surprise. In the rear seat, bound and gagged, was a young man whose face Gail recognized despite the way it was muffled. The prisoner was Jud Mayhew!

There was an appealing look in Jud's eyes and from the direction in which they turned, Gail saw what was in his mind. This particular cab had its keys dangling from the ignition lock, so there was nothing to stop Jud from driving away in it, except that he was bound.

That didn't apply to Gail, though, as Jud's eyes plainly told. True to the form she'd shown so far, Gail didn't hesitate. Getting into the front seat of the cab, the girl turned on the ignition, pressed the starter, and shot the cab right out through the garage door.

All that the watchman got was a whiff of gas from the exhaust as he sprang to his feet shouting after Gail. Then the cab was around the corner and Gail was speeding it off toward the superhighway.

From somewhere came a whistle blast, announcing the train that Jud wasn't going to take. Leo's cab was probably nearing the station now, but Gail was no longer worrying about Sark's bags and whatever they contained. Other people could concern themselves with that proposition. Gail's business was to get away from Stanwich with the cab she had just borrowed and then find out what Jud had to tell her.

Others definitely were concerning themselves with Leo's cab. A speedy car, cleaving in from a rough street that formed a short-cut to the station, swerved to begin a burst of speed that would enable it to overhaul that cab that Sark had summoned. This cab was piloted by Miles Crofton and in the back seat was The Shadow. His agents were giving him special service, as amends for letting the caravan slip them earlier.

Leo's cab wasn't going to do the same. Ahead were the lights of the depot and there wasn't any avenue of escape for the cab. Right now another car, driven by Chance Lebrue, was coming in to block off any trick stuff if Leo tried it. Quick work on Chance's part, swinging around by the Apex Garage, so that Jud could be deposited there; then he continued on to the station to help round up Leo's cab.

Perhaps it was Chance's sudden appearance in the picture that caused The Shadow to intone an order to Crofton, an order which called for slackened speed. Logical enough that since both The Shadow's cars were present, they should converge at once. Again, it might be that The Shadow wanted Leo to unload at the station before the cars closed in.

There could be still another reason, fantastic though it seemed. In a vicinity where solid buildings could crumple at a moment's notice, where an entire caravan of cars and trucks could disappear within a dozen seconds, anything might happen.

Possibly The Shadow just wanted to convince himself regarding the status of Leo's cab and any tricks it might perform. If so, he called the proper turn.

The thing happened as the cab came to a stop at a traffic light just outside the parking plaza beside the station. It was Leo's first stop since leaving the hotel and also his last. Fortunately The Shadow's cars were far enough away to have the vantage point of witnesses, not of victims. For Leo's cab vanished itself in a style far more spectacular than anything previous.

There was just a sudden cough, a burst of flame as brilliant as a magnesium light. The air snapped together with an explosive "Pow!" that sounded like four tires blowing simultaneously. With that flash, there wasn't a fragment left of the cab nor any of its contents.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

The great searchlight of the Midnight Limited, drilling from the locomotive that was veering from a switch, showed charred and blackened cobblestones at the entrance to the parking yard.

That was all!

### CHAPTER VII

NOON in Manhattan.

In a quiet side–street cafe in the Greenwich Village area, Jud Mayhew and Gail North were reading over the newspaper accounts that related but a fragment of their adventures.

"It looks like I'm two people," commented Jud. "The unknown hero who warned the crowd about the warehouse collapse, and the unidentified man who left the hotel to take a fatal cab ride. Luckily they haven't linked one with the other yet – or should I say luckily?"

Gail shook her head. She didn't know. Then, brushing back some of her stray red tresses, Gail faced Jud seriously.

"I'm the one who ought to worry," Gail argued. "If they find out I was the mystery girl who stole that cab out of the Apex Garage, what will happen next?"

"Nothing," returned Jud. "I'll take the blame for it."

"Then we'll both be arrested."

"Hardly." Jud tapped the newspaper. "There is still some doubt as to which cab exploded. It might have been ours, not Leo's."

"But when they don't find Leo?"

"Then they may think he scampered on his own. Things are very mixed up in Stanwich. For one thing, that half–blind watchman at the garage didn't know you had red hair."

Gail's eyes widened.

"He didn't?"

"Nope." Jud exhibited the newspaper as proof. "I wonder why he didn't. I should think it was something always to be remembered, that lovely hair of yours."

It was lovely, all right, as Jud now viewed it, but the watchman hadn't had the benefit of the noon–time sunlight that gave the scintillating burnish to Gail's present hairdo. As for Jud's reaction, Gail preferred to keep matters on a strictly business basis.

"This is no time for sentiment, if that's what you call it," rebuked Gail, across the table. A frown rose above her snub nose as she avoided Jud's eyes by studying the newspaper. Then, laughing in spite of herself, Gail passed the paper back to Jud, as she added. "Read that!"

Jud read it and laughed too. It was the garage watchman's testimony given in detail. He described Gail as having dark hair and dark eyes, which certainly didn't fit with either auburn or blue.

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"I'll tell you who it does describe," stated Gail. "It fits that catty creature who was watching me at the hotel. I hope they found out her name was Margo Lane. If they do, she'll have to explain what she was doing in Stanwich."

Never having heard of Margo Lane by name or otherwise, Jud's expression became quizzical.

"She's a friend of Lamont Cranston," explained Gail, "but Margo doesn't know that I'd seen her around town."

"Around Stanwich?"

"Of course not," returned Gail. "Around New York. She belongs here too."

"And Cranston?"

"He's a New Yorker too. He was up in Stanwich with the other bigwigs who were reviewing the parade."

"What would Cranston know about Sark?"

As Jud put that question, Gail's face became troubled. Its sudden flush gave her complexion a color resembling her hair, despite the way Gail's lips tightened as she bit them. Then, in a low tone, the girl declared:

"I don't believe that Cranston is concerned with Sark. I am afraid he was thinking in terms of my father."

Gail put it so frankly that Jud was forced to nod. That cleared the situation considerably. Without the slightest reserve, Gail inquired:

"You are thinking in terms of my father, too?"

"To some degree," admitted Jud. "You see I work for Philo Brenz."

If Jud expected Gail to denounce him as a cad, or anything like it, he was happily disappointed. There was nothing of the ogre about Brenz, where Gail was concerned.

"Brenz has a right to doubt my father," conceded Gail in her same frank tone. "After all, his company lost some very good contracts which my father not only admitted, but wished, had gone his way. Was that why Brenz sent you to Stanwich?"

"He sent me there to check on Sark."

"Of course," nodded Gail, "because Sark was the man who arranged those contracts through smaller companies. That's just the trouble, Jud."

Until now it had been "Mr. Mayhew," whenever Gail addressed Jud. But now the girl was leaning forward, her hand appealingly clutching Jud's arm. That Gail was more than serious, Jud could tell from the way her fingers trembled.

"The accounts are all wrong, Jud," Gail undertoned. "It isn't just a case of checking on some of those little companies. He can't even prove that the companies existed. Where some of the materials came from is a mystery; there were supposed to be priorities, but all the evidence is missing."



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Jud's teeth gave a grit.

"In Sark's suitcases, I'll bet! That's why he got rid of them and himself along with them!"

Gail shook her head.

"I'm not so sure about either," she declared. "Sark may just be trying to make us think that he disappeared in a puff of smoke, taking those documents with him."

"At least he tried to coax me into being the fall-guy," conceded Jud, "but I still don't see why he would keep evidence against himself."

"The evidence points to my father," explained Gail. "That's why Sark wanted to preserve it. Besides, Sark has enemies of his own."

That truth came right home to Jud as he remembered how he had been snatched from what would otherwise have become a fatal cab ride. Who Jud's brief captors might have been, he couldn't even guess, and the perplexity that registered on his face made itself understood to Gail,

"If I tell you more," said Gail, "you'll keep it to yourself, won't you? I mean you won't give facts away – not even to Brenz – until I say you can?"

"Not if you tell me something I don't already know."

"All right then." Gail drew a deep breath of relief. "Did you ever hear of a man called Tanjor Zune?"

"No," admitted Jud. "In fact I never heard a name like it."

"Does the name Ludar mean anything to you?"

"Another blank."

"Very well then," decided Gail. "Since you're not to mention either, I'll tell you what little more I know about them. Zune is Sark's chief enemy; Ludar is the go-between."

"You mean just sort of a mutual emissary?"

"No. I mean that Ludar works for Zune but tells Sark whatever happens. But I'm not sure that Ludar doesn't tell it all right back to Zune."

"What gives you that idea?"

"Listening in on Sark's telephone chats with Ludar. Somehow it seems like a double-cross all around."

"What sort of people are Zune and Ludar?"

"I've never seen them," admitted Gail. "I've only heard Sark talk to Ludar about Zune. But you won't mention this to anybody."

Jud smiled at Gail's tone, which carried command more than request. That explained itself by what followed.

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"Because if you do mention it," stated Gail quite positively, "I won't show you where Sark lived. If I don't do that, we won't be able to go into the place together and find Sark's papers, if they still are there."

"An excellent proposal," returned Jud, "except that it would amount to burglary."

"Why not?" queried Gail. "We stole a cab last night, didn't we? By the way, Jud" – Gail put mock toughness in her tone – "where did you stash the hack?"

"In one of Brenz's garages," replied Jud with a smile. "Nobody is going to find it, stuck in back of a lot of concrete mixers, unless –"

Gail's hand interrupted with a warning clutch. At the same moment, Jud was conscious that somebody had just come in the door. Then Gail eased her grip.

"It's all right," she confided. "I thought for the moment it was that Lane job wandering on my trail. I recognized the blue ensemble. It comes from Fifth Avenue in the Fifties. Margo doesn't have a monopoly on those styles though. This one has a blonde in it."

Jud was smiling at the comment, when Gail added:

"Don't look now, but I know that blonde too. She has an odd name: Ilga Vyx." Gail pronounced the "y" like "i" and then continued: "I don't think she's a friend of Margo's. At least she won't be, if each sees the other copying their patterns. Suppose I run along; then you can watch Miss Vyx and make sure she isn't too interested."

That suited Jud, so Gail left. Paying the lunch check gave Jud ample time to stall and finally, when it was his turn to leave, he gained his first look at Ilga Vyx. She was rather a startling blonde and of a definitely foreign type, with eyes that moved dreamily and became blank when they fixed on anything such as Jud.

What impressed Jud chiefly about Ilga's get-up was the broad, circular hat she wore, tilted well back on her head. Full front, the hat accentuated her blonde hair, but when Jud looked back from the door, he saw that the hat completely concealed the blonde evidence, which explained why Gail, sighting Ilga from the back, had mistaken her for Margo.

If Ilga Vyx had some connection with this case, it wouldn't surprise Jud Mayhew at all. With a red-head and a brunette already mixed in it, there was certainly room for a blonde. But that had nothing to do with Jud's next mission, which was to turn in a report to Philo Brenz.

Taking a cab to Brenz's building, Jud went directly to his employer's private office. The president of Brenz, Incorporated received his star investigator with a warm hand-clasp, then turned to introduce him to a calm faced visitor who was seated beside the desk.

"A friend of mine," announced Brenz, "who is very anxious to hear your report on what happened in Stanwich last night Jud, I want you to meet Lamont Cranston."

## CHAPTER VIII

THERE was nothing for Jud to do but give an honest report, something which he had planned to deliver anyway. But any temptation to let slip with names such as Zune or Ludar was immediately ruled out.

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That Gail North was sincere, was something Jud Mayhew did not question. Maybe she was blind in her loyalty to her father, Townsend North, whose peculiar practices had played hob with Brenz's contracting business, but that could be determined later.

Right now, Jud felt that he could concentrate on Alban Sark and the various happenings that Jud himself had witnessed in Stanwich, without committing himself too far.

So Jud began it very simply. He stated:

"I located Alban Sark."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Brenz, rubbing his hands warmly. Then, his tone turning troubled: "But did he suspect that you were looking for him?"

"I'm afraid he did." As he replied, Jud looked straight at Cranston who met him with an impassive gaze. "I may have made a mistake in asking for Sark. He was registered under another name."

"What name?" interrupted Brenz.

"I don't know," replied Jud. "I ran into him by accident."

"The other name was Hubert Rudland," put in Cranston, placidly. "The room number was 720."

Wrenching his eyes from Cranston's somewhat hypnotic stare, Jud looked to Brenz for an explanation and was rewarded with a beaming smile.

"Cranston has been looking into those North contracts," Brenz explained. "That was one reason why he was in Stanwich. When he found out that North had gained them through unusually low bids, he naturally wanted to tally with other companies. That is why he is here."

"And meanwhile," put in Cranston in an even tone, "I was interested in learning more about Alban Sark. He is something of a mystery in his own right, this man Sark; but the mystery that concerns us more is the collapse of the warehouse in Stanwich." Cranston's eyes were steady on Jud, as he added: "Perhaps you can tell us more about it."

Jud could and did. In fact he was eager to cover that question rather than others.

"I saw the warehouse fold," asserted Jud, "and the present theory is all wrong."

"You mean it wasn't due to the vibration?" queried Brenz in surprise. "Why, the experts said –"

"The experts weren't there," interrupted Jud, "unless you count me as one; I saw the Remagen Bridge collapse after our army had used it to cross the Rhine. It wasn't vibration that did it. The bridge was weakened."

Brenz lifted his gray eyebrows.

"You think the Stanwich warehouse was structurally weak?" he queried. Then, turning to Cranston, Brenz answered his own question. "That would account for one of North's cheap contracts. Poor materials, insufficient labor, perhaps other contributing causes. Still, the experts may be right" – slowly, Brenz shook his head, as though to banish Jud's claim – "because the warehouse did collapse just as the parade went by."

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"Before the parade went by," corrected Jud. "The tanks were still on the concrete bridge when the crash came. That's the key to the whole situation, if people would only see it. If anything had cracked from the vibration it would have been the bridge."

"But the bridge was concrete," argued Brenz. "I recall the contract for that superhighway, even though it was North who handled it."

"The warehouse had concrete foundations too," returned Jud, "and if North had skimmed on one job, he would have done the same with the other. But you're missing the main point, Mr. Brenz. Any sway from those vibrations would have been confined to the bridge itself. They couldn't have carried to the solid ground and then to the warehouse. In my opinion, the collapse of the warehouse, occurring at the time it did, was purely a coincidence."

Cranston's tone came evenly, repeating those very words:

"Purely a coincidence?"

"Unless somebody framed it," Jud declared, "which is quite possible. It would have been a smart stunt, even though they did beat the gun."

Brenz was keenly interested.

"What makes you think that?" he inquired. "It would have been suicide for men to enter that building and bring it down upon themselves."

"Not while they had an outlet," explained Jud, "and they had one. I think that building was sabotaged and the men who did it escaped through a culvert leading to an old junkyard. A batch of cars and trucks pulled out from there."

"You saw them?"

"Yes, but I couldn't stop them. What's more somebody stopped me first. The same thing happened over again when I tried to take Sark's cab and find out what was in his bags."

Strumming the desk in his reflective style, Brenz decided that Jud had rendered a report both thorough and satisfactory. He ended the interview by making an appointment for the next day, which pleased Jud doubly.

Going down in the elevator, Jud was glad that he hadn't needed to go into details involving Gail North. He was sure that by tomorrow he would have more facts for Philo Brenz. The prospect of raiding Sark's own preserves, wherever they might be, rather appealed to Jud right now.

Except that there was now an unknown factor: Lamont Cranston.

How heavily Cranston figured, Jud couldn't guess, but he was forced to the conclusion that Cranston's path at least ran parallel to his own. Maybe Cranston knew a lot more than he had told; he was the sort who probably would. So it behooved Jud for the present to look closer into the Cranston situation.

Jud was determined on that policy by the time he completed the elevator ride. Out on the street, Jud began to study the possibilities of obtaining a cab, if he needed one in a hurry. This being Manhattan, not Stanwich, Jud preferred a more conservative method than borrowing a cab outright.

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Across the way, Jud saw a likely opportunity. A cab was parked at a little lunch room and in the window was a cab driver specializing in coffee and doughnuts. So Jud crossed the street, tapped the window, and gestured to the cab with one hand while brandishing a batch of dollar bills with the other.

The cab driver was a peakfaced character who gave Jud a shrewd and pointed stare. At last he nodded as though he understood. Jud wanted to hire his cab on a continuous basis, which was a rather attractive idea.

But it wasn't just Jud's offer that brought the cabby's nod. Behind Jud's back, a little, stoop-shouldered man had sidled from the shelter of a news-stand and was poking his wizened face past Jud's shoulder. The nod that the little man gave in passing, was the thing that brought a similar response from the cab driver in the window.

Jud didn't even have a chance to see the little passer-by, let alone recognize him. The man in question was Hawkeye, the able spotter who had served The Shadow in Stanwich.

As for the cab driver in the lunch room, he was another of The Shadow's agents, Shrevvy by name. Not having met Jud, Shrevvy couldn't identify him and was therefore dependent upon Hawkeye. And now, Shrevvy, about to gulp his coffee, received another tip that Jud was the right man.

The tip came from Jud himself. He gestured for Shrevvy to take his time. Lighting a cigarette, Jud idled by the window, looking across the street; then, when he saw Cranston emerge from Brenz's building, Jud turned and gave Shrevvy an impatient gesture.

By the time a big limousine was rolling up to take Cranston on board, Shrevvy appeared from the lunch room and took the helm of his own cab, with Jud as a passenger. When Shrevvy asked "Where to, mister?" Jud wasn't tactless enough to say "Follow that limousine" and no more. Instead, Jud took Shrevvy into confidence. This being in the Wall Street area, Jud had a take that sounded good.

"See that limousine?" queried Jud. "There's a customer in it and I'm a customer's man. In case you don't know, that means I work for a stock broker and try to keep his clients in line. So tag after that limousine for me."

Shrevvy nodded and obeyed, spurred by a few dollars on account which Jud thrust through the front window. Up ahead, Lamont Cranston looked back from his limousine and gave the slightest of smiles.

Giving Jud Mayhew a chance to run up an expense account with Brenz, Incorporated was quite to Cranston's liking, since it was just another thing that Jud would somehow have to explain. Cranston was interested in Jud's explanations – or lack of 'em.

Of course Cranston's interest was The Shadow's; but there were others who held similar notions, as events were soon to prove.

## CHAPTER IX

MARGO LANE blew a cloud of cigarette smoke that made her look like Ilga Vyx. Which meant that the smoke simply curled up and around her face, obscuring the dark hair that formed a foreground to her halo hat. Margo was wearing her favorite blue outfit, quite oblivious to the fact that Ilga was at present sporting a duplicate array.

It was early evening and despite herself, Margo was a trifle piqued at the way she and Lamont weren't getting anywhere. They had just drifted from one place to another and were at present in a little cafe having coffee,

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with no plans as yet for dinner or further functions. But if anybody deserved blame, it was Jud Mayhew.

Having trailed along from one spot to another, Jud was at present playing ostrich behind an evening newspaper at the far side of the little restaurant.

"What's he doing?" Margo asked Cranston. "Still trying to find out how much the newspaper didn't find out about what went on in Stanwich?"

"Probably," agreed Cranston, "but he's stalling, too. Those occasional phone calls that he's made aren't just reports to somebody. They've been too short. I'd say that he's been calling a number without getting an answer."

"And the number is Gail North," asserted Margo. Then, abruptly, she queried: "What did go on in Stanwich? I still don't know the half of it."

"Nor do I," conceded Cranston. "It was rather uncanny the way that caravan disappeared from the superhighway. Quite as amazing as the collapse of the warehouse."

Margo smiled at Cranston's use of the words "uncanny" and "amazing," two adjectives which were usually applicable to his own activities. Then the very thought sobered her, for when Lamont became confronted with the impossible, it must mean that singular things were stirring.

"Vincent covered the terrain today," Cranston resumed, "and couldn't find a trace. He learned, though, that some trucks resembling those from Stanwich had gone through a couple of small hamlets, several miles away from where the caravan vanished."

"And from there?"

"No trace," replied Cranston. "We are right back where we started, if that far. Unless we count the deduction that I made from what Marsland learned at the Apex Garage today."

Immediately, Margo was agog, for the garage angle with the subsequent obliteration of Leo's cab, was important in itself.

"Marsland traced a chap named Jeff," explained Cranston. "This Jeff had been bootlegging gasoline that was left at the junkyard and Leo was one of his customers. Oddly, Jeff couldn't provide a single clue, even under pressure."

Realizing that Cliff Marsland was the dynamic sort who knew the meaning of applying pressure, Margo thought the matter closed. But she hadn't heard Cranston's deduction yet.

"The fact still stands," analyzed Cranston, "that Leo's cab was supplied with fuel brought from the junkyard that the warehouse raiders had left. Since we know that they carried a large load, those raiders, we may assume that Leo's gasoline was part of it."

Margo's eyes opened wide.

"You mean some super-explosive!"

"Exactly," nodded Cranston. "Self-acting under certain conditions, after a given time interval."

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"And the stuff was in the warehouse!"

"Yes, until the raiders took it. Undoubtedly they used some of it to destroy the foundations of the building, which were probably already weak. Therefore I would class the stuff as a powerful disintegrating fluid, explosive under certain conditions."

Margo sat fully awed.

"Leo didn't go to pick up Sark by accident," continued Cranston. "Somebody arranged it and since Jeff didn't; the blame hinges on the last man that anyone would normally suspect. He was the garage foreman, Kromer by name."

"Did Marsland talk to him?"

"No. Kromer has disappeared too. He had an excellent record and was due for a vacation, which they think he has taken. By an odd coincidence, Kromer used to work for a construction company, now defunct –"

Cranston paused long enough only to watch a question start to form on Margo's lips. Then:

"And that company," Cranston added, "supplied the materials used to convert the old brick mill into a factory. It was just another of those puzzling sub-contracts let out by Townsend North, as head of Universal Contractors."

"Then Sark must have known all about it?"

"Naturally, since he was the chief instigator. But matters went beyond Sark, as we learned last night."

"Yes, his friends were certainly out to get him."

"And Sark knew it," reminded Cranston. "That's why he tried to decoy Jud Mayhew into the cab. Fortunately, we intervened."

Margo began to speculate.

"If Sark saw what happened to Jud," she said, "he might have taken that cab himself. Unfortunately I didn't see whether he went out or not. I was trying to trace Gail. Besides" – Margo pursed her forehead – "I didn't get a good look at Sark in the first place, so maybe I wouldn't have recognized him."

For answer, Cranston placed a photograph upon the table. It showed the darkish face of Alban Sark, with all the insidious glitter of eyes and teeth that went with that insidious countenance.

"That is Alban Sark," declared Cranston. "Philo Brenz gave me the photograph today. Study that face closely, because you will be seeing it again; perhaps this very evening."

Margo's eyes were startled as she raised them. That Sark might still be alive was bad enough; that he might be seeking Margo, was something strictly horrible.

"Don't worry," soothed Cranston. "Sark won't be looking for you. I want you to go and find him."

Instead of calming, Margo's eyes fairly bulged with terror. She was staring straight past Lamont toward the wall, and her hands shook so badly that the photograph fluttered from her fingers to the floor. Stooping to

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regain the picture, Cranston allowed Margo a better view of what she thought she saw.

"Don't let that White Skull bother you," spoke Cranston. "It's just a symbol. It comes as an after-effect of looking at Sark's picture. I have an idea that the photograph was specially posed."

From across the cafe, Jud was watching everything; his own experience was an index that told him what Margo's horror was all about. Jud saw Cranston replace the photo on the table and lean forward to talk to Margo, who answered with understanding nods. That was about all that Jud needed to conjecture that one or the other – or perhaps both – were thinking in immediate terms of Alban Sark. Edging from his chair, Jud went to the pay telephone to put in another phone call to Gail North.

Jud's guess was right.

"Sark is now a hunted man," Cranston was telling Margo. "Don't ask me all the details, because they're what I'm trying to learn and theories are too plentiful to keep adding more. But being hunted, Sark will not be dangerous if approached innocently or mildly.

"Sark's chief enemy is a man named Tanjor Zune, who uses an intermediary named Ludar to reach Sark. Just where Ludar stands is a question; the phone calls that I overheard between him and Sark still leave the issue in doubt. We now know that Kromer is also in the game, definitely on Zune's side. You can mention these facts as seems fit."

Margo began to stammer.

"But how – but – but why –"

"How are you going to see Sark?" queried Cranston. "Simply enough, by calling on him at this address." Cranston placed a card in Margo's hand. "Why should you go to see him? Because you are suspicious of Gail North. She's working for her father, so you think, to help him cover up a lot of shady business which he intends to blame on people who trusted him – like myself."

Margo was nodding now and with assurance. A man as canny and mysterious as Sark would doubtless know that Gail was checking on him and that in turn Cranston had been watching Gail. What was more logical than that Cranston's girl friend, Margo Lane, would move into a picture where another woman was involved?

From his phone booth, Jud was watching Cranston and Margo leave the cafe. He was talking to Gail now, for she had finally arrived home. Any doubts that Jud had so far cherished about visiting Sark's premises, were herewith vanished.

"Get into your hat and hurry," Jud was telling Gail. "I'll be around in the cab right away... No, not the one you stole, this is a local job I hired for the evening... Yes, we're going to Sark's, that's why I need you to show the way... Of course we'll crack into the place. We want to be there when somebody else arrives..."

Leaving Gail to worry over that one, Jud hurried from the restaurant, took a look to make sure that Cranston and Margo were really gone, then climbed into Shrevvy's waiting cab.

Jud Mayhew thought that he was stealing a march on everyone tonight, including The Shadow!



## CHAPTER X

SARK'S house looked like a skull in its own right. Yawning from a row of forgotten brownstone residences, it was one of those architectural monstrosities that had characterized Manhattan at the turn of the century.

Built to stay, the building had, and it was unquestionably the best in an otherwise dilapidated block. Its skull effect was due to the grilled windows on the ground floor, their bars giving the effect of leering teeth; while the hollow nose was a second floor balcony; the eyes, tall, gloomy windows belonging to the higher stories.

The commodious limousine that rolled past Sark's paused only slightly as though its chauffeur were taking precautions against bad paving in this ancient block. That slackening speed however marked the advent of The Shadow, creature of blackness who preferred such shrouded surroundings.

From the moment that he reached the darkened sidewalk, The Shadow was literally swallowed by the night.

Next, The Shadow was moving up the building wall, the grillwork serving him as a ladder. Another climber might have been noticed; but not The Shadow. Even the men who were moving into the block in the wake of the departed limousine, were unable to discern him. They of all people should have, for they were the agents who formed The Shadow's own clan.

Reaching the jutting balcony, The Shadow paused there; then, continuing higher, he skirted the dim windows that might have barely revealed him. His goal was the roof, on the chance that it afforded a trapdoor entry. If not, The Shadow could return to one of the tall windows and make an entrance there.

This night's business was hazardous, risking not only The Shadow's life but those of his agents, by a margin which might exist only in The Shadow's imagination.

If The Shadow was right, all was right. If wrong, this expedition could mean complete obliteration.

As a mass proposition, the issue lay between The Shadow and an unknown foe named Tanjor Zune. Just as The Shadow had his crew of competent agents, so did Zune, whoever he might be. Mystery shrouded The Shadow, but the same was true of Zune. When it came to action, The Shadow's agents, though capable against great odds, were faced with an opposition that even their chief could not outweigh.

If Tanjor Zune unleashed the forces that he had used in Stanwich, this entire block might crumble or explode, eliminating everybody in it. But in calculating that fact, The Shadow had come to the conclusion that the residence of Alban Sark was free of such danger.

To liquidate Sark in his own home, or to wreck the place itself, would give away Zune's game. Zune wanted to be rid of Sark, but he could only try it in settings such as Stanwich. Zune might attempt to capture Sark, should the latter still be alive, in these premises that were Sark's own. But Zune wouldn't unleash total destruction – or at least so The Shadow hoped.

Five minutes after the passing limousine had disgorged the fleeting figure of The Shadow, a cab pulled into the block and dropped two passengers. That done, the cab went around the corner to remain on call. It was Shrevvy's cab and the persons from it were Jud Mayhew and Gail North.

Jud and Gail hadn't stopped at Sark's front door for a very good reason. They didn't intend to use that door. In fact, one look at the place decided Jud that they wouldn't be able to enter at all, but Gail drew him into a little passage that formed a blind alley beside the brownstone house. There Gail whispered:

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"Look!"

Jud looked back toward the street, and didn't like what he saw. There were lurking places in the form of house steps across the way and Jud thought he saw figures shifting there, as though prowlers were getting a vantage spot to watch what happened in the blind alley.

"Not out there, silly!" undertoned Gail. "Here, above this brick wall. The little window. I think we can squeeze through it, don't you?"

Staring upward, Jud saw the window that Gail meant. It was directly above the six foot wall that blocked off the alley and it wasn't barred. It looked like a stairway window, which had been classed as inaccessible, because someone had forgotten about the brick wall being just below it.

Feeling that retreat to the street had been blocked off, Jud decided that the window was a good bet. Cupping his hands, he extended them to Gail and decided:

"Let's try it! Up!"

Inserting her foot in the step that Jud provided, Gail reached the top of the wall with her other knee. Standing up, she couldn't quite reach the little window, but she was able to give Jud a helping hand that sped his own progress to the wall-top. In his turn, Jud reached the window, worked it open, and hauled himself up through. Within he found a stair way landing and reaching out, he prepared to help Gail follow.

Right then, Gail gave a warning whisper.

Sudden alarm filled Jud, not for himself, but for Gail. As she stood there, the girl formed a tense, rigid target, had anyone started shooting from the street. True, Gail was wearing a dark gray dress, which reduced visibility, but her red hair wasn't fully concealed by her tam-o-shanter hat, while her trim legs, encased in sun-tan stockings, might have been seen from a distance. Besides, Gail's face showed very white in the darkness.

Then, the reason for her strain became evident. Jud felt relieved as Gail expressed it.

"It's a car!" The girl told Jud. "Stopping in front of the house!"

"All the more reason to hurry," returned Jud, gripping Gail's elbows to hoist her upward. "It's probably just Sark."

"But I'm sure Sark is dead –"

"And I'm sure he isn't. Not that fox. He knew they were after him – say, look out! You'll be breaking your neck if you aren't careful!"

Jud added this as Gail came headlong through the little window. Her dress catching on a hook, Gail tried to wrench it free and as a result peeled her shoulders right out of it. Her arms entangling in sleeves, Gail couldn't ward her fall with her hands and she went sprawling backward, her head aimed for the steps.

Fortunately, the steps went downward, otherwise Gail would have bashed her head at floor level. Jud was able to catch her shoulders and turn her sprawl into a half somersault which finally ended when Gail's flying feet hooked the banister posts. There was plenty of clatter in all this, but it was drowned by the dull clangor of the front door bell, ringing long and impatiently.

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"That's a break," declared Jud. "Sit down and catch your breath."

Shaking back her ruffled hair, Gail sat on the steps and fished the torn back of her dress up to her neck, where she pinned it with a brooch that she was wearing.

"Lucky I wore this brooch," decided Gail, "but don't worry about the noise we made, Jud. There's nobody home."

The bell lulled at that moment and from below, Jud heard the slow tread of footsteps. He looked at Gail and said:

"No?"

In the dull gloom of that stairway, Gail turned very pale. In her daylight trips past this house, she had come to the conclusion that Sark lived alone here. Since last night, Gail had felt equally sure that Alban Sark was dead. Now, the sound of those footsteps, slow, ominous with their drag, made her think of something ghostly.

"It can't be Sark," whispered Jud, without understanding Gail's pallor. "It's probably just some old servant who works for him. But that may be Sark at the door. Let's sneak down and take a look."

A dim light appeared in the hallway below and dispelled most of Gail's ghost theory; therefore she was willing to accept Jud's plan, particularly as he motioned for her to be cautious as they descended the stairs.

In fact, the appearance of the light was better received by Gail than it was by another young lady who had been ringing the door-bell. Out on the front steps, Margo Lane had been hoping her ring wouldn't be answered.

Now the drawing of big bolts was a worrisome sound and Margo looked hopelessly toward the street. Cranston's limousine hadn't waited after bringing her here on its second trip and Margo felt very much deserted. Maybe that was good psychology, for it caused her to face the door as it opened.

Inside stood an old, tired-faced servant, who bowed quite scrapingly.

"Good evening, ma'am," he said, in quavery style. "I am sorry, but no one is at home."

Margo became emphatic.

"But I want to see Mr. Sark."

"Sorry, he isn't here, miss –"

The servant changed from one title to another because he could see Margo more clearly now and she looked younger in the light. The reason she was in the light was because she was pressing her way into the hallway. To the servant, Margo said boldly:

"And who are you, to tell me Mr. Sark isn't in when I'm so sure he is?"

"My name is Tobias, miss," the servant explained. "I wouldn't be here if Mr. Sark was, because I'm just a hired caretaker. I'm only here when Mr. Sark is away."

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Margo was looking toward the stairs, thinking she saw motion there. If she had seen such, it withdrew from the light before she could identify it. Thinking in terms of The Shadow, Margo was a trifle worried, knowing that he wouldn't have shown himself unless purposely.

"Mr. Sark won't like it," began Tobias. "To have people coming in unannounced is something he wouldn't approve –"

"Are you sure?"

The question came in a short, clipped tone that made Tobias wheel. There, standing at the lighted door of what was evidently a study, was Alban Sark. Head bowed toward the light, his chin thrust forward in its challenging style, the man's features matched his photograph to the dot.

Margo had never seen a face so frozen, so artificial in expression. If Cranston's face had often impressed her as masklike, Sark's could be described as having no mask at all, not even a human one.

Sark lifted his head and his face caught some light, but its cold, gray resemblance to a skull worried Margo all the more. Then, dismissing Tobias with a wave, Sark gestured Margo across the threshold of the study. Timidly, the girl advanced; once inside, she waited, ready to run out through the door again if Sark started to close it.

Hand on the door, Sark closed it, but only part way. Through his teeth, which seemed to smile only because his lips were spread like an oval around them, Sark gritted a laugh. Yet the laugh itself was not unpleasant. Sark's character, like his picture and its after-image, seemed to run in positive and negative.

Bowing the girl to a chair, Sark turned to a corner of the old-fashioned but well furnished room. Riveted, Margo sat there, her eyes glued to the figure that reminded her of some monstrous raven, a logical simile, because Alban Sark was unquestionably a creature of prey.

So strained was Margo Lane that she didn't hear the slight creaks from the hallway, announcing interlopers who intended to view her meeting with Alban Sark.

Jud Mayhew and Gail North too had their interest in the affairs of the strange man who lived in this strange house!

## CHAPTER XI

IF Alban Sark had any virtue, it was patience. The reason he had stepped to the corner was to open a large, old-fashioned safe that stood there. Apparently the safe was balky, as was often the case with old worn combinations, for Sark had to begin over half a dozen times. Yet Margo, in her turn, felt that this might simply be a stall.

Perhaps Sark was expecting someone else!

That thought turned Margo's attention to the hall and she was briefly conscious of the creaks, which ceased immediately. The door was opened in Margo's direction, hence she couldn't see beyond it, but she gained an increasing impression that some one was peering in from the hall.

Then the safe clattered open and Sark, rising from beside it, brought a stack of documents that he laid on the desk near Margo.

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"Mr. Cranston would like these," announced Sark, in his choppy tone. "You will take them to him, Miss Lane."

Margo stared, quite amazed.

"You will tell him that I am in danger," continued Sark. "There was a plot against my life in Stanwich. Fortunately I foiled it."

Again, Margo nodded, but now it was dawning on her that Sark was merely coming up to expectations. If able to cope with such enemies as the mysterious Tanjor Zune and the band which served him, Alban Sark should certainly be capable of checking on others who moved into his affairs.

"I shall remain here," declared Sark, bluntly, "but I want no further visitors. Things might happen to them for which I could not be held responsible. Now you must leave, Miss Lane."

As he spoke, Sark rolled the papers and affixed a rubber band around them. Politely, he stepped toward the door, as if to open it further for Margo's departure. His stride at that moment was exceptionally silent and swift, for a reason which evidenced itself a moment later.

So rapidly that Margo blinked, Sark whipped the door wide, wheeled around it, and snapped a revolver from his pocket. An instant later he was covering two startled people who stood flat-footed on the threshold: Jud Mayhew and Gail North.

That forced grin of Sark's evidenced itself and with it his face clouded. Recognizing the intruders, his eyes held an ugly glister that boded no good for them. Sark's gun made a quick, impatient beckon and Jud nudged Gail into the room, since he could think of no better course.

Most persons would have classed this a time when quick thinking was needed, but not Jud Mayhew. Sark held an option on rapidity; the only antidote was to be cool and deliberate. Even to play sluggish would be good, as Jud knew from experience. There had been a time when Jud had dodged loose from a whole squad of krauts, over beyond the Rhine, just by playing dull until the right moment. He could do the same with Sark.

But there was something else to consider, the safety of the two girls. Jud wasn't just including Gail, for he counted Margo on his side too. The fact that Sark had given her papers to take to Cranston didn't incriminate Margo, nor Cranston for that matter. It smacked more of some deal that Sark was planning. Apparently Sark considered those documents a security against Tanjor Zune, to date his one great enemy; but it followed that he wouldn't want them to fall into the hands of Gail North.

Right now, Jud's cool calculation told him that he must, at all costs, keep Sark from gaining the false notion that Margo's visit had been just a blind for Jud and Gail to enter. Along with this, Jud hoped that Margo would be smart enough to play the right part.

At the moment, real distress was showing on Margo's countenance and Jud knew that she was concerned for him and Gail. Fortunately, Gail didn't get it; in her turn, she was throwing dagger looks Margo's way. Sark was taking all this in as he turned his head back and forth. Profiting while Sark's glance was swinging the other way, Jud gave a quick head-shake that Margo caught. Then, Jud was staring stolidly again, when Sark looked back at him.

Relaxing, Margo forced a laugh which at least sounded as genuine as those in which Sark specialized.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

"I thought you were springing, a little surprise on me," Margo told Sark. "Bringing these people in at the wrong moment rather gave me a jolt. They've been meddling in too many things lately."

Sark's eyes rested momentarily on Margo; then returned to Jud and Gail. It was good policy for Jud to look surly, so he did; as for Gail, she needed no prompting for she believed that Margo meant the things she said.

"Some contracts go to the lowest bidder," remarked Margo, significantly. "That was the way Townsend North did business. But there are other people who sell to the highest bidder. Mr. Cranston works that way, so I know he'll listen when he hears your terms, Mr. Sark. After all, keeping papers in a nice safe place is a very simple matter, isn't it?"

Gail really glared. She would have stormed a few accusing statements if Jud hadn't nudged her to be silent. He faked that, while stepping in front of Gail as if to shield her, a move which brought a snarl and a gun gesture from Sark.

It was small wonder that Gail fumed. She thought that Margo intended to walk out scot-free, taking along the evidence that Jud and Gail themselves had come here to obtain. Nor did Margo seem at all worried any longer about what might happen to her rivals.

Jud's interpretation was different. From the way Margo had taken his cue, Jud was sure that she intended to contact Cranston and arrange a rescue. To do that, she would have to get out of this house; therefore, she was playing the best possible game.

If Jud had known that Cranston in his other life was The Shadow, he would have counted this game in the bag. Even now, it looked sure enough when Sark stated crisply:

"Very well, Miss Lane. You may leave. But remind our friend Cranston that he is not to come here. I have other guests" – Sark turned a smile that was really a scowl upon Jud and Gail – "and I prefer them. Documents are dangerous to keep, but hostages are excellent. Ludar will have something to tell Tanjor Zune when I inform him that I am holding these prisoners."

With that, Sark turned his back on Margo and used his gun to motion Jud and Gail to the corner near the safe. It was the logical corner for it formed a perfect pocket. At the other deep corner was a door which Jud had been eyeing enviously as a possible outlet in emergency. But Sark wasn't giving his prisoners – or hostages as he preferred to call them – anything that might resemble a break or a chance for it.

In turning, Sark remained fairly close to the main door of the room, which was Margo's exit to the hall. Bundling the rolled papers under her arm, Margo started toward the hallway, feeling that she had begun a death march. What was to prevent Sark, that master of the double cross, from wheeling about and making her a target?

The very thought was terrorizing; it made Margo turn her head and throw a quick look in Sark's direction, only to see that he was still facing Jud and Gail. Beyond Sark, Margo saw Jud, his face very grim, but telling a story by its very grimness. His expression meant just this: that if Sark swung to aim at Margo; he would have Jud to deal with. From the tense pose that Jud showed, Margo knew such dealings would be swift indeed.

It was better to go through with this; better for Margo to get clear and come back with aid as soon as she could bring it. Yet somehow Margo felt uncertain, as though the very atmosphere of this old musty house had all the characteristics of a morgue. It was like a death factory in miniature, giving Margo doubts as to whether Jud and Gail would still be alive, once she was beyond the outer door.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

Nevertheless, Jud wanted her to chance it, so Margo turned toward the hall. She was in the doorway when she stopped, halted by a new fright that momentarily seemed silly. It was the death's head again, that after-image produced by a long look at Sark's face and Margo had taken too long a look for comfort.

There it was, a shifting, grinning skull, against the gloomy background of the hall. Margo blinked to shake off the illusion, only to realize that it wasn't the same that she had gained before. This skull wasn't a big one, leering from the far wall in two dimensional form. It was human in size and alive!

Nor was it a single skull. Margo was seeing three of them, all in a cluster, and they weren't bodiless. They were white skulls painted on black hoods that encased human heads. For Margo could see the bodies that belonged to them, bodies garbed in tight fitting black costumes that were painted with the white ribs of skeletons!

New intruders these, and below each leering painted face was a hand that clutched a gun. Behind the sinister trio was Tobias, the old caretaker, standing at an open door that led up from the cellar, gesturing the three invaders toward Sark's study!

Though Margo stood riveted for a mere moment, that moment seemed forever. The hooded men with the painted skulls seemed to mock the horror that showed so plainly on Margo's chalk white face, against the background of her dark hair and the circle of her halo hat. Compared to such creatures as these, even Sark seemed preferable, unless he had summoned them as a grim jest, to cut off Margo's escape.

But Margo didn't think of that. Her thoughts were a couple of jumps behind. All she could do was turn and fling herself back into the study, shrieking incoherently of the danger that had menaced her from the hall. Simultaneously, the skeleton men sprang forward, thrusting their guns ahead of them. Even uglier was Sark's face as he wheeled about and Margo's brain reeled with the thought that this was the end of everything.

It would have been the end, if Sark hadn't shown that same rapid ability which he had exhibited before. Spinning, Sark hooked Margo with his gun hand and flung her toward the corner by the safe, bowling Jud from his feet as he lunged forward. With the same move, Sark's other hand flicked the light switch, darkening the room. The driving skeleton men saw him bound toward the other deep corner of the study, but by the time they arrived from the hallway, a slam of the connecting door announced that Sark had reached another room.

They went half way after him; then turned. Darkness had swallowed them, now it disgorged them as they started back into the hall, thinking that they could use it to cut off Sark's escape. Sprawled over near the safe, with Jud on hands and knees beside her and Gail huddled further in the corner, Margo saw what happened next.

It was like another illusion, that mass of solid blackness that loomed from somewhere to cut off the skeleton trio. At least it seemed an illusion until it voiced a shivering, challenging laugh that no other fighter could begin to imitate.

That fierce mirth stood for rescue. It was the laugh of The Shadow!

## CHAPTER XII

How The Shadow had arrived so suddenly seemed quite explainable to Margo. He had a habit of appearing at a crucial moment, hence this was his usual form. What Margo couldn't understand was why The Shadow hadn't arrived sooner. It wasn't his normal way to leave emergency situations in the hands of doubtful characters like Alban Sark.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

Even now, The Shadow was handicapped by his own delay. He didn't have time to open fire with an automatic and scatter the men in skeleton costumes. They were upon him all at once, swinging their guns instead of firing them, trying to beat down this adversary who had shown himself too boldly.

On his feet, Jud was charging out into the hallway hoping to aid The Shadow. Jud had a gun that he had been unable to draw until now, but here was his chance to use it. Pulling the gun, Jud surged into the black-garbed whirl that was mixed with the kaleidoscopic effect of skeleton ribs and skull-faces, all in white.

Then something struck, like a living tidal wave. It was another crew of hooded men, coming up from the cellar. Reeling away from hard swung blows, Jud saw The Shadow detach himself from one cluster and wheel back toward the study. Cutting across the path of The Shadow's attackers, Jud was hurled ahead and pitched headlong through the open doorway, just as The Shadow beat back another drive of half-groggy foemen.

In all that fray, not a single shot had been fired. Always, the members of the death's head corps had been too close, too clustered, to risk shots without hitting each other. In his turn, The Shadow had preferred that close-up fighting as a means of beating down the opposition without wasting bullets. Now, in a lull which was hardly more than an instant, The Shadow gestured his gun hand across the study and gave the quick order:

"That way!"

Margo understood. They were to take Sark's way out. Grabbing Jud by the arm, Margo dragged him along and Gail, rather than be left behind, hurried after both of them. By the time Margo reached the corner door that Sark had slammed earlier, Gail was gripping Jud, telling him not to trust Margo too far.

It seemed that Gail couldn't quite understand.

Out in the hallway, the lights were blinking off. The men in the skeleton costumes wanted complete darkness. Now they were dashing back down into the cellar, The Shadow after them. For the first time, shots were heard, but they were muffled, so deep below the house that their reports could not have carried to the street where The Shadow's agents waited.

Margo heard them, however, as she found her way through a dimly lighted kitchen. Satisfied that The Shadow had put his enemies to rout, Margo decided that the best way was out. In all this turmoil, she hadn't lost her sense of direction and ahead she saw a door which she knew must lead to the back of the house.

Beckoning to Jud, Margo brought him along despite Gail's protests, which only resulted in Jud dragging Gail along too. The precious papers tucked under her arm, Margo went through a swinging door that led into a pantry, then through another into a dining room.

Here, a pair of lighted candles were glowing on a large table as though in preparation for some gruesome feast. By the dim light, Margo saw two doors and she picked the one which she was sure must lead out to the back. Her guess wasn't entirely right; she'd missed the back door, but what she found was a side door at the end of a little hallway. It was bolted, but in the dim light, Margo coolly unbolted it and gave another beckon to draw Jud and Gail along.

Then, Margo was in the fresh air of a narrow alley that led to the front street. She went that direction, only to drop back startled, as figures rose to meet her. Then, Margo was laughing lightly, happily, when she realized that these were The Shadow's agents, waiting on call.



## THE WHITE SKULLS

Margo's laugh became half hysterical as she tried to control it. She was turning, telling Jud and Gail that everything was all right now, except that neither Jud nor Gail was standing there. About her, Margo saw doubtful faces, particularly those of Clyde Burke and Cliff Marsland.

So silent had been the slugging struggle in the thick-walled mansion that none of these watchers had heard a sound. They were wondering if Margo's talk of other people could be a product of her own imagination. Then, Harry Vincent decided to test the question; he went to the door from which Margo had emerged and tried to open it.

That door was now locked from the inside, indicating the impossible; namely, that Margo must have come out through a solid barrier!

There was only one way to disprove that unreality; the way was to pry open the door and go into the house itself. So Harry and the others began that process, finding it difficult considering the strength of the door. Meanwhile Margo stood by in complete disbelief, unable to understand why Jud and Gail hadn't followed her outdoors.

The answer was more astounding than the question. Jud and Gail were still following Margo inside the house, at least so they thought. In the dining room, they'd seen her beckon, not from the rear door but the front. Thinking that Margo knew her way around, they had gone that direction.

Now they were back in the large hall and finding it totally deserted, though its lights had been turned on again. Totally deserted, that was, except for Margo, until Jud and Gail learned that they were wrong on that supposition too. For when the girl in blue turned about, she wasn't Margo Lane.

Blonde hair now showed against the halo hat; cold, steel-gray eyes accompanied the hard smile that belonged to Ilga Vyx. Equally steely was the gun muzzle that covered the former prisoners of Alban Sark, prisoners who had escaped one captor to fall into the hands of another clan.

From corners of the hall arrived two left-overs of the skeleton contingent, men who took immediate charge of Jud and Gail, starting them down by the cellar route, with Ilga bringing up the rear. All during that march, Ilga dealt in hard-toned gibes.

"So Sark thought he would keep you as hostages," declared Ilga. "It's just the other way about. Zune will hold you and make Sark come to terms. Those papers of his mean very little, they don't tell the real story.

"The only thing that matters is if Sark talks. He won't talk now, because he needs your evidence. Besides, he will soon know that we could frame him, now that we have the right people to serve as victims. Ludar will tell Sark that."

They reached the cellar during Ilga's harangue and there Jud saw a sight that he could hardly believe. In the cellar wall was a humpy archway that looked as though some mighty force had compressed the stone up into itself. Nor did the arch stop there. It led in the shape of a long narrow tunnel, in a direction which could only be under the rear street.

"Don't think The Shadow will help you," sneered Ilga, as the skeleton-clad men thrust Jud and Gail through the tunnel. "Our men led him on a wild-goose chase through the connecting cellars of the other houses. They were scheduled to shake off the trail at the end of the block. By the time The Shadow is back, we shall be gone."

## THE WHITE SKULLS

They were gone as Ilga declared it. Through the tunnel, they had emerged into the cellar of an old house in the rear block, which was one place that neither The Shadow nor his agents would look for them. Jud was just about to ask how Ilga intended to cover up the evidence, when she proved how easily it could be done.

There was a peculiar machine in this old cellar, with wires leading from it to the wall. Ilga pressed a lever, the machine began to quiver. Like misshapen cardboard, the jammed wall began to regain its shape, under the powerful vibration. Stonework settled down in place, all through the tunnel, marking the end of the pressure that had arched it. The whole effect was silent, uncanny in its action.

With Ilga covering the astonished prisoners, the skeleton men packed up their equipment and led the way further through the cellar, where others met them to aid in controlling the captives.

Back in Sark's house, The Shadow's agents had just begun to work the door loose when it opened. A whispered tone ordered silence, then told them to enter. Margo followed the others, still gripping those papers that Sark had given her, until in the hallway The Shadow took the bundle from her and spoke one word:

"Report."

Taking it for granted that The Shadow knew the first part of the story, Margo mentioned the matter of the double disappearance staged by Jud and Gail. The Shadow sent his agents off to search the house; then, deciding that the cellar required further inspection, he went down there.

At the very rear of the cellar, The Shadow studied the stonework. It looked solid enough, but it bore peculiar traces. It looked as if it had been pounded with sledgehammers, pulverizing some of its surface. Near the bottom, some of the masonry was loose, the component stones twisted a trifle askew.

Yet when The Shadow tested those stones, he found that he couldn't budge any of them. Nothing short of an earthquake shock or the force of some terrific explosive could have caused that result. This was something that even a scientific mind would doubt, or perhaps attribute it to some peculiar tremor due to a flaw in the ground stratum. The Shadow had a scientific mind, but he was gifted with imagination too.

Instead of doubting, The Shadow laughed. His tone was grim, mirthless, as it echoed its strange whispers through the low-roofed cellar.

Things from the past were explaining themselves by the present and from them, The Shadow was gauging the future. What that future held for Jud Mayhew and Gail North, was a very doubtful question.

Nevertheless, The Shadow had a way to solve it. That way was to play two strange and singular personalities each against the other: Alban Sark versus Tanjor Zune.

The Shadow knew!

### CHAPTER XIII

PHILO BRENZ strummed his big desk and studied Lamont Cranston very speculatively. His gray eyes were troubled and Brenz was showing the broad, grim expression that went with a worried mood.

"I don't like it, Cranston," Brenz insisted. "Young Mayhew wouldn't have forgotten his appointment today. Something has happened to him."

Cranston shrugged as though the matter were unimportant. That brought a sudden outburst from Brenz.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

"You were the last person to see him," reminded Brenz in a half-accusing tone. "To some degree the responsibility is yours, Cranston."

"No more than yours," returned Cranston, calmly. "I was still here when Mayhew left."

Thinking a moment, Brenz nodded.

"So you were," he recalled. Then, his mood becoming hopeless, he added: "What could have happened to Jud? Do you think" – a sparkle came suddenly to Brenz's eyes – "could that North girl have had anything to do with Jud's disappearance?"

"Very possibly," declared Cranston. "It might be a good idea to question her."

That brought a snort from Brenz. "Try to find her first!" he asserted. "Here, Cranston, look at these reports!"

The reports were from various private detective agencies and they covered not only Gail North but Alban Sark. The word "covered" was hardly correct, however, because the facts that the reports gave were too slim to be of much account.

Gail had been tabbed chiefly when she went to visit her father, Townsend North, who was at present in a private sanitarium recuperating from a nervous breakdown. Sark had been checked only on those rare occasions when he showed himself in towns like Stanwich or appeared openly but briefly in New York.

None of the private operatives hired by Brenz had begun to penetrate to the question of Tanjor Zune. As for Sark's residence, scene of last night's fantastic combat and another disappearance of the principals concerned, Brenz's investigators hadn't even learned that such a place existed.

Their reports dealt with the same old matter of contracts, a subject on which Brenz knew more than they did. There wasn't a single fact pointing to anything deeper, unless the general ignorance of the reports could be so interpreted.

"Phone me later this afternoon," suggested Brenz, as Cranston prepared to leave. "Perhaps we may have learned something by then."

"Why say 'we' when Mayhew will report to you?"

"Because Jud is covering every angle of the case," explained Brenz, "and you are one of the angles, Cranston."

"I suppose I am," conceded Cranston with a slight smile. "I just hadn't looked at it that way. Among other things, I was in Stanwich when things fell apart there."

"Exactly. You are a bit of a mystery man in your own right, Cranston. Now that I've put the case in Jud's hands, he may think that by checking on someone like yourself, he may gain a lead to Sark if the fellow should still be alive. Anyway, phone me, Cranston."

Brenz shook hands and Cranston left. Though he went from the Wall Street section, his next stop was a place that had some relation to it. Lamont Cranston called at the uptown office of an investment broker named Rutledge Mann.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

Of all the serious minded persons that Cranston knew, Mann rated tops. That was why Mann rated as an agent of The Shadow. Publicly, Mann was just a roundish-faced gentleman whose chubby expression was that of a sleepy owl and whose idea of a huge adventure was a good, rousing chess game. Privately, however, Mann's methodical mind, his meticulous way of winnowing everything down to the last grain and then winnowing the chaff, made him invaluable to The Shadow where research was concerned.

Mann was also a contact agent, through whom The Shadow's active workers reported. Right now Mann had a visitor who was going over papers with him when Cranston arrived. The visitor was Margo Lane; the papers were those that once belonged to Alban Sark.

"It's all a hodgepodge, Lamont," expressed Margo, gesturing to the pile of papers. "With all the fuss Sark made about this evidence, you'd think some of it would be important."

Cranston was writing a list of names which he handed to Mann. Then:

"Call these private detective agencies," Cranston told Mann. "Find out why they bogged down on the investigations they made for Brenz."

That took care of Mann for a while. Cranston let Margo show him through the papers.

"Maybe Sark thought the papers were more important than they are," argued Margo. "He couldn't have opened that safe for a long time, because he had a lot of trouble with the combination. Maybe he was nervous, but he didn't show it, except that he acted awfully fast when he got started.

"Why, the way Sark turned out those lights was even speedier than when he trapped Jud and Gail. When those skeleton men chased him across the study, he was through the other door before they had time to fire at him.

"It was while they were trying to find Sark that they ran into The Shadow." Margo paused to gaze at Cranston as though expecting him to admit that he knew all about it, but he simply kept on looking through the papers. "So Sark really helped us," Margo said, "though probably all he wanted was to get away, which he did."

Sorting the various papers into piles, Cranston gestured for Margo to do the same. The process wasn't very helpful, considering that the letters, memos and all that, were definitely incomplete and anything but incriminating. In fact, the contents of Sark's safe contained a lot of immaterial things, such as racing sheets, theater programs, and receipted bills from night clubs.

It was these last that specially interested Cranston. One batch of receipts were stamped with dates that showed them to be a week apart. Working along that line, Cranston found the same true of some ticket stubs that came from a large movie house.

Next, Cranston was examining Pullman receipts which were some indication of Sark's travel habits. Like a link to all these, was a little day book, its pages blank, except for a few printed pages that included such things as postal rates and a calendar. The one page that was fairly well thumbed was the one that bore the calendar.

"Rather a methodical chap," commented Cranston. "Or I might say that Sark had regular habits. He seemed to know where he was going to be at certain times. I wonder who else knew."

That speculation still remained unanswered, except possibly in The Shadow's own mind, when Mann returned with a report on his phone calls. They were very much of a pattern.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

"All the detective agencies say the same," declared Mann. "Brenz became impatient with them too soon for them to get results. If an operative didn't produce a good report on Sark, Brenz said the job was poorly handled. If one good report wasn't followed by another, Brenz decided that Sark must have found out that he was being watched."

Cranston gave no comment, but Margo did.

"Brenz was right," declared Margo. "Sark proved last night that he knows what is going on. He had me tagged as Lamont's friend and he was expecting Jud and Gail. I wonder" – Margo gave Cranston an anxious look – "what did become of those two last night!"

"Of course, the detective agencies may have been giving me their usual talk," continued Mann. "Actually, I don't think they could be very competent. Those I called had a very poor credit rating in Dunn and Bradstreet."

"Those you called?" queried Cranston. "I thought you were going to call all of them."

"I couldn't," returned Mann, "because some of them are out of business. Apparently they were nothing more than fly-by-night concerns. I suppose Brenz wanted cheap service; if so, he got it. You might tell him that it doesn't pay to patronize cut rate companies."

That brought a smile from Cranston, since if anyone should have preached that lesson, the man was Philo Brenz. In fact, Brenz's greatest criticism of the enterprises managed by Townsend North had been their practice of underbidding. Mann's statement, however, was a reminder that Cranston was to phone Brenz and learn if he had gained any further leads to Sark.

It was now after five, so Brenz would be home by this time. Cranston promptly put in a call, only to find that the line was busy. This proved to be the case with three repeats that Cranston made, but finally he managed to get Brenz on the wire.

When Cranston informed Brenz that he was hard to reach, Brenz had a prompt answer.

"I've been calling lawyers," Brenz explained. "All the lawyers who had anything to do with those North contracts. I've insisted that they look into the details and they're doing it right now. But meanwhile, I have found something important. Come right over, Cranston; I'd like to have an hour with you. It may do a lot to clear the question of Sark."

Liking that promise, Cranston agreed to visit Brenz. Telling Mann what Brenz had said, Cranston remarked:

"You may phone those same lawyers, Mann, and see what you can find out for me. Phone me at Brenz's in about an hour. Any other questions?"

While Mann was shaking his head, Margo put one.

"We have a dinner date," she said to Cranston, "or don't we?"

"I don't recall one," replied Cranston.

"Of course it's a trifle late," admitted Margo. "Just a matter of twenty-four hours. We never did meet up in time to eat after I left Sark's last night."

## THE WHITE SKULLS

"I'll call you later," promised Cranston, as he was going out the door. "Just be patient, Margo."

"How much later?"

"An hour or so."

"If you mean an hour multiplied by twenty-four," rejoined Margo, "maybe I'll dine with someone else."

"Who else for instance?"

"For one instance," retorted Margo, "I might have dinner with Alban Sark. Or wouldn't he do?"

"He might if you can find him," decided Cranston. "Good hunting, Margo."

The door closed and Margo gave it an angry glare which Mann didn't notice because he was busy looking up lawyers in the red-book. Then, with a sudden dawn of an idea, Margo turned to the papers on the desk, remembering that they might furnish some clues to dining habits.

When it came to dining, Margo was seldom forgetful, though Cranston often was. At present, Cranston wasn't thinking of dinner, at least not in specific terms. What Cranston was considering was the present plight of Jud Mayhew and Gail North.

After all, the plight of hostages was not apt to be too pleasant, though Cranston doubted that it would become too difficult within a single day. At least he could spare an hour with Brenz, who might furnish some real information, before embarking on the one course that might aid two helpless prisoners.

It happened that Lamont Cranston was embarking on a lot more than he realized, even as The Shadow!

### CHAPTER XIV

DUSK was deepening over the Hudson River when Lamont Cranston turned from the window and watched Philo Brenz lay down the telephone with a final shrug of disappointment. In his turn, Cranston laid down the drink that Brenz had furnished him.

"At least the visit has been enjoyable, Brenz," said Cranston. "You have a nice outlook here, along Riverside Drive. It's probably worth the rent it costs you."

Despite himself, Brenz laughed. He waited until a stolid servant had removed the tray with its glasses. Then Brenz said:

"The rent is nothing. What matters about this place is the number of the servants I need to keep it up."

"So I noticed," nodded Cranston. "You must have close to a dozen."

"Too close to a dozen," admitted Brenz. "But let's forget the servant question. That phone call was from the last of the lawyers. I've kept them working overtime in their offices and they've found out —"

Pausing, Brenz waited for Cranston to supply the word and Cranston did. The word was:

"Nothing."

## THE WHITE SKULLS

"Exactly nothing," agreed Brenz. He picked up a paper that lay on a side table. "But still, this may mean something –"

"Just a moment," interrupted Cranston, picking up the telephone. "This is the first chance I've had to call my broker and find out how we made out today."

Cranston's phone call was brief. He looked worried as he laid the phone aside. Brenz in his turn appeared puzzled.

"Why call your broker so late?" queried Brenz. "The Exchange closed hours ago. Surely, he would have known about the market long before this."

"It wasn't the market," said Cranston. "It was a couple of horses. We were both playing the same daily double."

"And?"

"Exactly nothing," replied Cranston. "Funny, he called a lot of places without even getting an answer. But getting back to Sark. What about this message he sent you? What does it prove?"

Brenz passed the paper to Cranston. It bore a roughly typed message, as though done in a hurry, by someone who knew as little about using a typewriter as repairing it, for the imprint was out of line.

The message read:

I am in danger. I must see you. I can give you information, the very kind you want. Come alone to Thorneau Place at seven o'clock this evening.

If you think that prying into my affairs can help you in any way, you are welcome to try. I prefer to state my case in full to anyone who is prepared to listen. Are you?

It was indeed a curious message, but the thing that gave it weight was the signature "Alban Sark" that was scrawled boldly beneath. Cranston had seen that signature often enough, both on actual contracts and in the letters that Margo had delivered, to know that it was genuine.

The simplicity of Sark's signature was its validity. Though ragged, the man's writing of his own name was blunt. It was the hardest kind of signature to forge and Cranston was sure that this one wasn't.

Looking at Brenz, Cranston asked:

"Are you going there?"

In reply, Brenz gave a smile that was a cross between mild and grim. He asked a question in return:

"Would you?"

## THE WHITE SKULLS

Cranston shook his head.

"Then add that to your collection," said Brenz, meaning the badly typed paper. "At least it is the only thing of any consequence that I am able to give you."

Pocketing the paper, Cranston started to the door. Politely, Brenz showed him the way out from the elaborate apartment. With all the servants in his household, Brenz found none available when he needed them and grumbled over the fact.

"These servants have their dinner while I wait for mine," complained Brenz. "Half of them always seem to be taking an evening off. I have chauffeurs enough for three cars but only enough gasoline to run one. When my lease is up, I'm going to give up this apartment and move to my club."

Cranston agreed that it would be the best thing to do. But as he spoke, his manner was reflective. Brenz's servant problem was a minor matter, compared to Cranston's speculations. Realizing that Cranston's mind was on the message, Brenz said in parting:

"At least we know that Sark is still alive. A dangerous man, Sark, too dangerous to tackle. It is obvious now that he must have framed that cab explosion himself, probably by planting a high explosive charge in his own luggage. Personally I intend to ignore the message, but if I can find Matthew, I might have Hugo drive him down there to see if anyone is around."

Matthew was Brenz's butler, Hugo one of his chauffeurs. Cranston had seen both of them among the various servants who had been in and out during Cranston's brief visit at the apartment. But Cranston's own personal opinion was that the business at Thorneau Place, if important at all, would prove too important to be investigated merely in passing fashion by someone's butler and chauffeur.

This was proven not only by the fact that Cranston's own limousine headed directly for Thorneau Place with himself as passenger, but by the fact that his trail was picked up by other cars, among them Shrevvy's cab. Cranston had a system with his limousine, which even its driver, Stanley by name, did not recognize, Stanley not rating as one of The Shadow's agents.

By ordering changes in route which meant odd stops or turns; by telling Stanley to increase or slacken speed, Cranston was able to signal when he wanted his agents to follow and how far. Thus when the limousine neared Thorneau Place and Cranston stopped it, ordered it further on, then alighted and finally dismissed the big car, half a dozen of The Shadow's staunch henchmen knew where he had gone although they did not see him go.

Merely stepping into sheltering darkness, Cranston enveloped himself in a cloak that he had been carrying over his arm. Clapping a slouch hat to his head, he became his favorite character, The Shadow. From then on he might have been a patch of night moving of its own volition.

In that brief interval before he became The Shadow, Cranston's figure was hidden by his own departing car. Even if a chance observer had glimpsed the tall form, he could not have sighted Cranston's face. It might have been anybody who stepped into that darkness and very shortly the gloom contained nobody.

The Shadow had gone to keep an appointment which belonged to Alban Sark and Philo Brenz, though the latter wanted no part of it. Now, even Lamont Cranston, self-appointed as a substitute for Brenz, had effaced himself from the scene.



## THE WHITE SKULLS

Small wonder, for entering Thorneau Place was like going into a trap. The Place was shaped like a collar-button and the interior, where it widened, was mostly a matter of, solid walls. Warehouses and other homely structures had replaced the old-fashioned residences surrounding this courtyard which was in effect a blind alley.

Brenz had only dimly recalled hearing of Thorneau Place, but Cranston had known all about it, though he hadn't expressed himself too volubly on the subject. A cul-de-sac of this variety was just the sort of locale that The Shadow considered in his plans. Some day – or more specifically some night – The Shadow had anticipated that he might be in Thorneau Place under trying circumstances.

Tonight was the night.

As silent as he was invisible in the gloom, The Shadow passed through the portals formed by two hulking walls. Here again, he was chancing that the whole surroundings might collapse, but he doubted that such would be arranged on this occasion. The Shadow was certain, however, that Thorneau Place had been turned into a trap.

Perhaps The Shadow could see in the dark; maybe he possessed that uncanny sense common to certain creatures, of distinguishing obstacles that sight could not discover. Whichever the case – or possibly just by some hunch – The Shadow paused at just the proper moment. Extending his gloved hands, he felt a waist-high object that he identified a sizable ash-can, its cover tilted loose.

The ash-can was heavy, but only because it was of sturdy metal construction. It was empty, as The Shadow ascertained by tilting it, very slightly, upon the cobbles that formed the paving of Thorneau Place. This obstacle had been set here just so someone would blunder into it and send it rolling together with its clattery top.

Half a minute passed, with sounds so subdued that no listening ear could have caught them. Apparently The Shadow was making up his mind whether to test this trap or not; all the while he seemed to be on the point of trying it.

Then The Shadow did it.

Over went the big ash-can with a clanging thump, a roll that brought echoes from the cobbles. Instantly there was a response from low roof tops and high walls surrounding the court. Powerful flashlights hurled their beams, sweeping inward from the entrance to the courtyard, as though to comb in anyone who might have started out that way.

With the sweeping rays came spasmodic shots at clumps of darkness, probing those spots with bullets rather than await gunfire from them. At least half a dozen marksmen were surrounding Thorneau Place, intent upon eradicating the fool-hardy intruder who had defied their snare!

Men of murder were acting like marionette manipulators, their gunfire the strings with which they were staging a dance of death, in which The Shadow was scheduled to play the puppet!

## CHAPTER XV

SWEEPING lights, blazing guns, both had their play but briefly. The lights certainly weren't uncovering The Shadow; therefore it seemed logical that the gunfire had found him. All this was happening while the overturned ash-can was completing its roll to the wall from which it slowly recoiled, its metallic echoes drowned by the louder fury of the guns.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

And then, as suddenly as the attack had opened, the counterattack arrived.

Other guns spurted valiantly from the alley entrance, the spot that killers had immediately ignored. Whining bullets skimmed the edges, of the roofs and bashed against the tops of walls. Flashlights went flying from hands of owners who realized that they were making themselves targets.

The Shadow's agents had arrived promptly in the wake of their chief and were giving the opposition plenty.

Lurking murderers hadn't bargained for such a response from an unexpected quarter. They took to flight and wisely, for The Shadow's fighting crew didn't stop at walls, or for that matter, roofs. They scaled the walls as the first step in reaching the roofs and during the process, they seemed to draw themselves up by their own gunfire. Though lacking time to chop down the routed opposition, they reduced it to an amateur status. Aces all, The Shadow's fighters took over the roof tops in no time, only to find that the enemy had scattered.

There still was the question of The Shadow's fate, for in this rapid fray he hadn't fired a single shot, which was something more than unusual. Anxiously, the agents gathered abandoned flashlights and turned them down into the courtyard, hoping to find some sign of their chief.

The Shadow was gone, as totally as if the cobblestones had swallowed him!

All that remained as evidence of the cloaked invader's brief adventure was the overturned ash-can lying empty with its lid beside it.

That happened to be the answer to the riddle. The ash can hadn't lost its lid until after the counterattack. The Shadow had turned that crude device to his own use.

All he had done was ease himself into the big container, drawing down the lid before overturning it from within. The Shadow, encased in a cylinder of metal, had been rolling across Thorneau Place while his enemies were raking it with shots that were directed at every spot but the right one, which in turn was the one invulnerable item on the scene of battle!

Now that his agents had taken over, The Shadow was departing by the very route that he had entered, hoping if possible to handle other phases of this peculiar situation.

Only a block from Thorneau Place, a big car skirted nervously as its front-seat occupants went into a sudden huddle. This car belonged to Brenz; its driver was Hugo, his companion, Matthew. Chauffeur and butler couldn't understand the prolonged outburst from the depths of Thorneau Place. As they veered around the block, Matthew hoarsely urged Hugo to avoid the path of a car that came racing from the next street.

That car was followed by another, both making their getaway while distant police sirens gave evidence that the gunfire had been reported. Hugo turned the big car in the opposite direction, determined not to be linked with the fugitives that had just sped past. Matthew started to commend the choice, only to interrupt himself as he heard the car door slam.

Then a crisp voice was delivering orders, for between the shoulders of Matthew and Hugo peered a face that both recognized under the passing street lamps.

It was the face of a man who had visited Philo Brenz, but not recently. If the face had belonged to Lamont Cranston, Brenz's men might have accepted him as something of a friend. But the face was one that bulged, with eyes that glistened from their hollows like the teeth that formed an ugly smile.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

The unexpected passenger was Alban Sark!

Not only did Sark give orders; he backed them with a gun that moved from one man's neck to the other. Hugo took those orders and Matthew approved them, though silently. This car really had a back-seat driver, for Sark deserved the term, considering how his mere gestures guided their course.

Uncannily, this skull-faced man directed Hugo away from the paths of converging police cars, until they were riding entirely in the clear. Then, Sark stated exactly where he expected to be taken.

Reaching a neighborhood far removed from Thorneau Place, Brenz's car disgorged Sark and then scooted off like a boy finishing his last day of school. Unlike Cranston, Sark didn't step into sheltering darkness, instead he stood conspicuously on the curb. His eyes, though, probed the gloom around him, inviting any lurkers to come out and fight, but none put in an appearance. Then, pocketing his glittering revolver with a defiant, jerky motion, Sark shifted a squarish package under his arm and stalked along the street and around a corner.

There, Sark walked into a little restaurant that bore the sign:

### CAFE UNICORN

Above the door was a sign bearing a picture of the heraldic creature from which the cafe was titled, but Sark paid no attention to it; likewise, he ignored the hat-check girl who smiled and reached for his odd package. Continuing to the rear of the cafe, which was modeled somewhat in the shape of Thorneau Place, Sark took a table for four and placed his package very carefully upon one of the vacant chairs.

A waiter came over, nodded, and tendered a bill of fare, which Sark gestured away as something unnecessary. Nodding again, the waiter decided that Sark wanted his usual order. Relaxing, Sark simply waited for something to happen. It did.

From a corner of the cafe came a girl in blue, whose blonde hair showed conspicuously against the high circle of her halo hat. She stopped at Sark's table and faced him boldly, covering a certain trend toward apprehension with a wise, steady stare. Receiving no invitation to sit down, the girl reached to a chair.

"Not that one!" spoke Sark, quickly. "Around here. I have a package on that chair."

The girl saw that there was a package and gave the chair a wide berth. Noting a quick change of her expression, Sark gave a short laugh.

"Worried, Ilga?" queried Sark, soothingly. "You needn't be – at least not yet."

Ilga Vyx set her lips firmly; then became quite casual, even to the gesture that her pliant fingers made in the direction of the package.

"Since when have you been carrying your own, Alban?"

"Only recently," returned Sark. "The idea came to me as in a dream."

Ilga's dumb stare was a pretense.

"A nightmare," specified Sark. "I saw that cab blow up in Stanwich, clear from my hotel window. I took a room on the seventh floor just because of the view."

## THE WHITE SKULLS

Placing a cigarette in a holder, Ilga poised so Sark could provide a light. When he had, the blonde said:

"You were very lucky, Alban."

"More so than I realized," stated Sark. "Some people had the notion that one of my suitcases contained the explosive that obliterated that cab. It gave me the notion."

"And that is why the package?"

"That is why the package. Two can play with dynamite as well as one, except that Zune uses something more than dynamite."

Ilga was raising one hand warningly.

"Maybe that package contains something more than dynamite," confided Sark. "Perhaps I know more than Zune realizes, or has he thought of that?"

"I wouldn't know."

"At least you came here to watch for me," expressed Sark. "Of course it's Wednesday, my usual night at the Unicorn. But I might have changed my habits after what happened in Stanwich."

"Yes, you might have."

"I would have," assured Sark, "if I hadn't brought along that package. Go tell that to Zune."

Ilga gave a rather hopeless shrug.

"Don't accuse me, Alban." Ilga failed badly when it came to faking a pleading tone. "You know I never see Zune."

"I may have thought you didn't," retorted Sark, "or I may have made you think I thought you didn't. But after what happened at Stanwich –"

"Quit harping about Stanwich!" gritted out Ilga, savagely. "What would I know about what happened there?"

"Enough to keep you from taking a ride in the wrong sort of taxicab," declared Sark, reducing his tone to a purr. "Being alive ends your bluff, Ilga."

Momentarily disgruntled, Ilga finally managed a disparaging shrug.

"All right," she admitted, "I did see Zune. But I'm like Ludar. I'm trying to help you."

"Ludar?" queried Sark. "The name does sound familiar –"

"Ludar sent me here tonight," interrupted Ilga. "I told him I'd phone him if you were here, so he could talk to you."

"Why didn't he just phone for himself?"

"Because he didn't want to ask for you if you weren't around. If you'll only believe me, Alban –"

"All right, call Ludar."

Ilga went to a phone booth in a corner of the cafe. When she returned, she merely paused at Sark's table.

"Ludar is on the phone," undertoned Ilga. "I'll see you later, Alban."

Sark carried his precious package with him to the phone booth, while Ilga hurried out the nearest door, not anxious to remain in the proximity of such a bundle. Over the phone, Sark laughed when Ludar, speaking in a stolid tone, expressed the wish to meet Sark somewhere.

"Very well, Ludar," said Sark, at length. "Come around for me, but be sure you stay in the car. We can chat while we ride, but I'll have the package that Ilga probably told you about. If I decide to blow myself up, I intend to have company."

Back at his table, Sark had less than a ten minute wait before the door man entered to tell him that a car was waiting for him outside. Having canceled his dinner order, Sark was ready to leave, but he was careful to take his package with him. The car proved to be a sizable sedan, with two men in the front. A third occupant, Ludar, was in back, beckoning through the open door.

Stepping into the car, Sark sat down, all the while handling his package very carefully, without tipping it more than a few inches. Ludar reached around him and across, showing a blunt, darkish face that did not reflect the apprehension which he must have felt. Hand on the door, Ludar paused.

"All right, Ilga," he said, "come along if you want."

Before Sark could turn, the girl had stepped into the car and was sitting down beside him, turning her head to adjust her overlarge hat while she closed the door with her other hand. It took quite a dip to get a hat like that through the door in the first place, which was why Ludar hadn't noticed something that became apparent when this new passenger turned her face toward the men beside her.

Ilga had more than a new hair-do; she had a hair-dye. At least it looked as though the blonde had converted herself into a brunette, until Sark and Ludar saw her face. Then they realized that she wasn't Ilga at all.

The girl was Margo Lane, smiling grimly above the muzzle of a compact automatic that she had drawn from her purse. All Margo had to say was one word:

"Surprised?"

## CHAPTER XVI

THEY weren't surprised, exactly.

The big surprise was past; the fact that Ilga Vyx had decided to take this ride voluntarily. Ludar had credited Ilga with a sudden show of bravado, which Sark had apparently shared; but it now seemed more logical that Margo Lane should be in the car, since she didn't know about the package.

Neither man spoke, so Margo smiled. She felt quite confident over the fact that she had found a trail and followed it before The Shadow.

"I was looking over some of your odd papers," Margo told Sark. "Somehow they seemed to fit with your calendar. You liked to see movies every Monday night, always at the same theater. Tuesday, you just loved to

## THE WHITE SKULLS

see the races. Wednesday, you always dined at the Unicorn and kept the receipts from the waiter's check."

Ludar grunted something that didn't sound complimentary to Sark, but Margo interpreted it differently.

"If you're worrying about Ilga," remarked Margo, across her gun, "She's all right – or will be when she gets back from the cleaners."

That seemed to call for further explanation, so Margo gave it.

"I saw her coming out the side door," Margo continued, "so I stopped her – like this." To emphasize the method, Margo gestured her gun at the faces which were turned toward her. "I didn't mind ruining that blue dress of hers, because it really isn't a blonde's type, you know.

"Anyway, I needed chunks of it so I could tie her up and gag her. The laundry wagon was waiting there, so handily, all loaded with nice bundles. I just stacked them all around Ilga, so that if the lot goes down a chute, she won't get hurt.

"Ilga ought to have a nice time, since she likes playing hide-and-seek. Or maybe it was follow-the-leader. Anyway" – Margo's eyes moved from Sark to Ludar – "now I know why a couple of people didn't go out the door I tried to show them, that door in your house, Sark. Ilga must have crossed their path and coaxed them her way."

There wasn't a sign of a response from either Sark or Ludar. The reason dawned rapidly on Margo.

"It wasn't your work then," she said emphatically to Sark. "I suppose you were gone before it happened, Sark. As for you" – her eyes traveled on to Ludar – "you probably don't want to admit that you knew what happened."

Ludar's blunt face showed a scowl that made it into a darkish blur.

"You must be Ludar," decided Margo. "No wonder you don't want to show your cards to Sark. He might guess that you've been double crossing him with Zune."

It was just a shot in the dark, but it took. It wasn't the mention of the double-cross, however, that enraged Ludar, for Sark had already expressed suspicions on that point. What angered Ludar was that Margo was acquainted with the existence of Tanjor Zune.

He must be a mighty personage, Zune, to hold the control his mere name indicated. A snarl issuing from his faceless visage, Ludar came half to his feet, as though to rocket across the car and lay his hands about Margo's neck. He didn't care any longer whether Sark knew the two-way game. All Ludar wanted was to choke Margo, so that she could never again reveal the name of Zune.

Perhaps it was fortunate that Margo wasn't quick-triggered. If she had shot Ludar, he would have jarred Sark, which might have proved very serious. Sark himself indicated that prospect by a thrust of his square package; the moment that nudged Ludar, the fellow recoiled back to his corner of the car.

"Look out!" panted Ludar. "That box is loaded with explosive! If Sark drops it, we are finished!"

"I do not have to drop it." Leveling the box, Sark tilted his ear toward it. "Too much of a slant would be sufficient. But I do not hear the clockwork."

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Margo's gun was wobbling in her hand.

"You mean it's going to explode?"

"Not yet," reassured Sark. "This is different from most infernal machines. They have clockwork that goes tick-tick and tells people what they are. Have no worry while this one is silent. It works in reverse."

"But if the clockwork starts, you would hear it?"

"Yes, but not for long. Now tell me" – Sark supplied one of his obnoxious grins – "does this make any difference in your plans?"

"It means I'm stopping the car and getting out," Margo decided. "The rest are coming along with me, but you are staying in this car, Sark, until I send the police to get you."

With that, Margo threw a glance from the rear window just on the hunch she wouldn't have to wait for the police. If Cranston had gone through Sark's papers as thoroughly as Margo hoped he had, he logically would have watched the Cafe Unicorn too. Probably he wouldn't have entered there as Cranston; maybe he had been delayed as The Shadow.

But there were others, a string of agents whose names were lining up in Margo's mind, who might have been deputed individually or collectively to check on Sark's usual Wednesday habits. How Margo wished for a sight of Shrevvy's cab, back through that window!

Occasional headlights were distinguishable along the darkened street, but Margo had no way of telling if any belonged to Shrevvy's cab. Then, as if realizing that Margo wouldn't be looking for a police car, and therefore must be thinking of some quicker aid, Sark said crisply:

"We do not intend to stop."

"Sorry," began Margo, thrusting her gun firmly, "but we do."

For answer, Sark let his own hands ease from the box, which tilted precariously upon his knees. Margo recoiled as Ludar had. Then, finding her voice again:

"You'd be a fool, Sark, to let Ludar take you to Zune!" exclaimed Margo. "Don't you realize that he intends to do just that?"

"Quite," returned Sark, straightening the box. "I should like to see Zune."

"But he tried to kill you once –"

"And would probably try again, should occasion warrant. Am I right, Ludar?"

Ludar grunted something that sounded affirmative.

"Sulking Ludar?" sneered Sark. "You shouldn't be, considering that I am letting this ride continue. Suppose you tell Miss Lane just how I stand with Zune."

A snarl meant that Ludar wouldn't, but when Sark let the box swing about until it rested on only one corner, the blunt-faced man capitulated.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

"Sark is the White Skulls," asserted Ludar, "but he is not our leader. He is only the custodian."

Margo stared at Sark and asked:

"Custodian of what?"

"Let Ludar tell you," returned Sark, leaning back and drawing the box toward him. "Only put away that gun. It makes me nervous and it isn't right that I should be nervous."

Margo decided that Sark shouldn't be nervous and therefore put away the gun, though reluctantly. Sark nodded for Ludar to proceed.

"Custodian of the treasure," stated Ludar. "After all, if you know so much, why should you not know more? Sark came to this country before the war began, to guard the treasures which we knew that we would send him."

By "we" Margo knew that Ludar must mean the bigwigs of the Nazi swarm that had spread all over Europe like a locust plague. Only why they should send treasures to America, Margo didn't understand until Ludar explained further.

"Some fools thought they saved their treasures," sneered Ludar, "but we had the facts in every case. Our agents not only posed as refugees; they encouraged others to put whatever they still owned in places where we wanted them.

"It was Sark who had charge of all that and it was his business to arrange everything for our convenience when we arrived as we did in other countries, using the white skull as our secret symbol."

The full light broke on Margo. It was the game of the Wooden Horse as played in Norway and other countries. In terming Tanjor Zune the leader, Ludar must mean that Zune had come as the head of the secret tribe of invaders.

Suddenly, Margo became defiant.

"But it didn't work here," she asserted. "You were stranded, all of you. There's nobody home in Nazi-land to receive the goods that you can't even ship. You'll only give yourself away if you try to steal those treasures."

Instead of taking that to heart, Ludar responded with a snarl:

"So Sark said!"

Those big hands of Ludar's were itchy, this time for a grip on Sark's throat. Toying with the box as a reminder that Ludar shouldn't try, Sark said bluntly:

"After all, I am the custodian."

"But Zune is the leader!" stormed Ludar. "He said we would proceed despite you and we did! Our first victory gave us what we needed to gain the treasures that are really ours!"

"And Zune did well," complimented Sark. "I shall tell him so. If I had known how perfectly all would work, I would not have obstructed matters."



## THE WHITE SKULLS

Ludar relaxed with an ugly laugh that fairly teemed with confidence.

"Try to make Zune believe that now."

"I shall," assured Sark, "because I know the one thing that Zune needs. He wants a hostage."

That made Ludar laugh again.

"Zune already has two hostages," said Ludar. "He brought them from your house, Sark."

"Those two?" Sark gritted a hard chuckle. "They were scarcely more than strangers where The Shadow is concerned. To influence The Shadow, you must hold a hostage that he values. I am bringing one as a peace offering to Zune."

Finishing his cold laugh, Sark stared straight at Margo Lane. Under the frigid glare of those glistening white eyes, the girl felt a chill that seemed to creep to every fiber. Alban Sark was right. His was the master stroke. In Margo Lane he had produced a human weapon that Tanjor Zune would welcome as a threat against The Shadow!

## CHAPTER XVII

ALONG with the chill that swept her, Margo felt a sinking, sickening sensation that she thought was mental, like the blackness that came with it. Then, with a last despairing glance through the back window, she saw the reason.

This car had reached its destination, somewhere in Manhattan, but it was entering a sort of place that Margo hadn't believed existed. Here, in an alleyway that squeezed between two old buildings, the car was being swallowed by the ground itself!

The street had dipped down like a hinged contrivance and looking back, Margo saw the whole thing springing up again. There was a last sight of street lights, but no sign of a pursuing cab among them; then the view was blotted.

Blackness in back and not the blackness that represented The Shadow, who somehow must have been diverted from the trail. If Margo had known of that recent fray in Thorneau Place, she might have had an explanation of The Shadow's absence. But as it was, explanations didn't matter. The Shadow wasn't here; that was all.

Dipping deep into this subterranean domain, the descending car came to a lighted area where the ramp leveled toward a blocking wall. Now more amazed than frightened, Margo saw the great wall split and spread like two parting curtains, its steel halves sliding into buttresses of concrete. Next the car rolled through a rough-hewn tunnel to a second door, which opened like the first, the tunnel serving as an ante-room between.

Stocky men approached and Margo heard voices speaking in a peculiar language which was probably of an International variety. She could guess why it was used, as she alighted from the car along with the other passengers. The men who occupied this underground realm looked like the renegades of a dozen nations, hence they required a special language to talk among themselves.

Here was first-hand evidence of pre-invasion methods that the Nazis had used and which still existed in this relic of their vast plans. Under Sark's direction, a vest-pocket city had been hollowed deep beneath New

## THE WHITE SKULLS

York itself, the workmen being these renegades who passed as citizens of threatened countries, not of the menacing German nation, or its satellites.

This beginning, of course, must have dated back to the pre-war period and Sark, the future treasure custodian, had arranged it. Even now, some of the underground dwellers showed respect toward him and Margo noted that Sark was listening to catch and analyze the words of the jargon that they uttered.

Other doors, smaller doors, were sliding open, producing a deeper route into this strange domain. Ushered along as though she were an invited guest, Margo kept watching Sark and Ludar as they accompanied her. All the while, Sark was carrying that precious box of his with a nonchalance that was maddening to anyone informed as to its contents.

While most of the underground inhabitants accepted Sark's presence, there were occasional men who sprang forward angrily, ready to challenge the skull-faced visitor. Ludar always gestured these back, firmly and swiftly, with explanatory words in that tongue which Margo was now beginning to understand. One word for instance that Ludar repeated was "mordo" which Margo guessed meant "death."

It applied to the contents of Sark's box, of course, and was sufficient to force bold men back. But when Margo looked over her shoulder to watch the reactions of such individuals, she saw each one leer behind Sark's back.

Maybe that term "mordo" would apply in reverse after Sark met Zune. For these men who flashed that antagonism toward Sark, appeared to be those who were strictly in the know. Margo heard Ludar address one as Kromer and remembered that such was the name of the man who had been planted at the Apex Garage in Stanwich.

From the grim smile that Kromer furnished, Margo was sure that Sark had escaped one death warrant only to invite another. Still, final decision would rest with Zune.

Unless there was other intervention!

Margo held no brief for Sark.

The man deserved to die as much, if not more, than any of the dwellers in this invisible realm, Zune included. But as the target of fellow criminals, Sark was a threatened person, who should be protected just as a way of frustrating the plans of murderers.

The Shadow would therefore prefer to keep Sark alive, in fact had already demonstrated that preference. That to Margo meant that The Shadow would reach this realm if possible, and as soon as he could manage it.

But did The Shadow know that such a place existed?

Something important must have engaged The Shadow this evening, otherwise he would have been at the Cafe Unicorn. Perhaps as the result of some run-in with roving foemen, The Shadow had traced them here!

Looking back a few times more, Margo saw that blackness kept constantly closing in behind her, in the form of dropping curtains and sliding doors, which respectively seemed like the falling of shrouds or the clamping of coffin lids. If only The Shadow were part of that following blackness!

Then, what seemed to be a death parade, came to its conclusion as curtains parted to admit the small procession to a room hung in purple. There, in contrast to the regal surroundings and the gilded furniture, a

## THE WHITE SKULLS

plain desk was at the far wall.

Behind that desk sat a man who seemed to grow in proportions as he arose and stood with his fists doubled on his hips. Across his heavy, bloated face, played a venomous expression that beggared any efforts at imagination.

This visage from a nightmare belonged to Tanjor Zune. It was little wonder that the man who owned it stayed deep in the concrete mole hill which he ruled and let others handle public relations for him. Nobody who saw Zune once would ever forget him.

Peculiarly, Zune seemed glad to see that Sark was still alive. When Ludar pointed anxiously to the square box and began to speak in terms of "mordo" and other appropriate words, Zune glowered, but not at Sark.

Zune's glare was of the silencing variety and it covered Ludar. Then, letting his features writhe into a less ugly contour, Zune furrowed his thick eyebrows and inquired in English:

"Who is this?"

The hand that gestured from Zune's elbow indicated Margo.

"A hostage from The Shadow," explained Sark, in his crisp tone. "Better than those you already hold. They did not come to my house at The Shadow's bidding; they were intruders there."

Zune's hands performed a peculiar cross-slap that furnished a sharp sound like that of a beaver's tail smacking the water. Instantly curtains parted and two of Zune's bitter-faced henchmen introduced Jud Mayhew and Gail North to the scene.

No fakery was needed on the part of those prisoners. The challenging contempt that Jud showed toward Sark; the dagger looks that Gail tossed at Margo, convinced Zune that there has been no prearrangement where this meeting was concerned.

Turning, Zune parted a pair of curtains behind his desk and drew down a huge roller map. The guards were about to remove Jud and Gail, while Ludar was drawing a gun to cover Margo. Only Sark stood unmolested, by virtue of the package he carried. Swinging about, Zune spoke imperiously:

"Let them stay!"

Eyeing Sark steadily, Zune questioned:

"You are prepared to collaborate as before, now that I have demonstrated what can be done?"

"Cooperate is the correct word," returned Sark, crisply. "I am ready."

"And you are right," Zune acknowledged. "We need no Quislings any longer. They would handicap, not help us. We shall be masters of our own underworld."

Sark supplied a bow to that.

"I shall show you my plans," stated Zune. "In return I expect you to prepare a full report, covering the information in the documents you destroyed."

## THE WHITE SKULLS

Again Sark bowed. Remembering the paucity of evidence in the papers Sark had sent to Cranston, Margo realized that Sark must have disposed of anything and everything important.

Satisfied, Zune turned to the big map and used a long ruler as a pointer to indicate its details. Here was the time so long awaited, when the inner machinations of stupendous crime were to be disclosed.

All that was needed was one all important witness for whom Margo Lane looked in vain.

The Shadow!

### CHAPTER XVIII

ZUNE'S large scale map showed a network of highways some miles outside of New York. The roads were marked in various colors, some stretches being mere segments; hence the map was very unusual, but Zune did not comment on that fact.

Conspicuous on the map was the town of Stanwich. Zune tapped that point with his ruler.

"Our first stroke was there," asserted Zune. "It was essential in order to obtain the valuable supplies that you had planted in the warehouse."

This was spoken to Sark, who nodded.

"You did well, Sark," complimented Zune. "I was truly sorry that it seemed necessary to liquidate you later. When I first arrived in New York, I wondered why these quarters were so cramped." Zune gestured about him as he spoke. "Considering the quantity of the disintegrating fluid that we sent you, I had expected something like the huge hidden city that lay beneath Berlin.

"When you explained your other uses of our Formula Four Hundred, I was greatly pleased." Though facing Sark, Zune gestured toward the map. "Even better was your plan of saving a surplus to store in Stanwich with the neutralizer. We have enough of the N-Five to cover up all we may do with Formula Four Hundred. I salute you, Sark!"

Clicking his heels, Zune was about to hoist an arm in Nazi style when he remembered Sark's package and desisted before Sark could start to copy the salute. Then, with a happy leer, Zune gestured to the package:

"We can add that to our store, Sark, when you no longer need it – or think you need it."

Reverting to the map, Zune wangled a ruler cross-country until he came to the area of a town marked Hartfield, some twenty miles from Stanwich.

"The treasures are there," announced Zune. "Art treasures worth millions, enough to finance our future indefinitely. Or should I say definitely?"

As Zune leered from the map, he saw that Jud was drinking in all these details, something which Zune could ignore. It was Sark upon whom Zune concentrated.

"Your objection sounded solid, Sark," stated Zune. "Why should we reveal our hand?" Zune shook his head. "By using Formula Four Hundred and N-Five in combination, we would not reveal it."

## THE WHITE SKULLS

This made much sense to Jud. He remembered the vaulted tunnel that Zune had literally pried into Sark's cellar, only to close later by another process. Zune was talking about it now.

"The treasures are in the old Crabtree Museum," reminded Zune, as though Sark didn't know. "In and out – and we shall have them, leaving only death and mystery on the premises. That should please you, my friend of the White Skull."

Eyes narrowed, Zune was staring at Sark as though trying to produce the optical illusion that Sark's face supplied, but the light was wrong for it.

"I have learned, however," continued Zune, "that the treasures may soon be removed; in fact that plans were already made for it. Was that your idea, Sark?"

Sark did not answer, but he did not flinch his face in the strong light which Zune had purposely directed on it.

"Or could it be," demanded Zune, "that you were conforming to the plan of somebody else? Of somebody we no longer need, for the reason we both have stated?"

Trying to think who might be meant by "somebody", Margo lingered on the name of The Shadow, but she wasn't too certain. Then came an interruption, a sharp cracking sound, but this time it wasn't the cross-clap of Zune's hands. It was the sudden rolling of the map as Zune released it.

"We shall keep all the hostages," decided Zune. "I agree with you, Sark, that she is best" – Zune pointed to Margo, then gestured toward Jud and Gail – "but these others may be valuable. As for yourself, I have this."

Scrawling something on a slip of paper, Zune handed it to Sark, and added:

"A pass for yourself, so that you can leave these premises. But I am sure you will prefer to wait until my full plans are made, as I would like to discuss them with you. However –"

Finishing with a shrug, Zune beckoned to one of his stolid retainers:

"Show our friend Sark to his own apartment."

There was a reason why Zune did not first send away the hostages. Zune was the type who preferred an appreciative audience whenever he revealed himself as a master of the double-cross. As soon as Sark had been ushered out, Zune turned to Ludar and Kromer.

"We start for Hartfield within the hour," announced Zune. "If Sark tries to leave his quarters, eradicate him. After we have gone – myself and the men with me – use your own discretion. For Sark – mordo!"

Ludar and Kromer nodded their pleased agreement.

"At your own convenience," added Zune, "and with due discretion. That box Sark has with him, we need its contents for ourselves. Remember too that Sark still has a few friends among us. Therefore it is better that only you two should know."

Clapping his hands, Zune produced other servitors who marched Margo away with Jud and Gail. They arrived at a cell-block, which did not look too uncomfortable, except for its barred doors. There they were stowed in separate cells to await their fate.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

This wasn't to be a long wait.

Elsewhere in this honeycombed domain, Ludar and Kromer had taken over watch outside of a fancily curtained doorway that represented the apartment which Alban Sark, as the famed White Skull, had provided for himself. Having dismissed the other guard, Ludar and Kromer buzzed between themselves.

"It would be komika," stated Ludar, "yes, funny, if Sark should try to use that pass with us!"

"He may try," rejoined Kromer, "since he does not know that we are here."

"But how soon would he try?"

"Perhaps very soon."

There was a pause; then Ludar's faceless visage twisted uglily.

"Maybe too soon, Kromer!"

"Too soon?"

"Yes. Perhaps already, while the other guard was here!"

At Ludar's notion, Kromer's face distorted in its own right. Then:

"We are friends of Sark," reminded Kromer, "or we can pretend to be. We enter and address him as amiko, saying that Zune has sent us to ask if he has any further request. Then we shall see if he is still there."

"And the box!" added Ludar, warming to Kromer's suggestion. "Perhaps –"

The two sidled through the curtains and past another door beyond. There they reached a small but comfortable living room, with the half-opened door of a bedroom just beyond. Near that far door was a table, on it Sark's precious package. Lying on the package was the pass that Zune had provided.

So eager were Ludar and Kromer that they didn't think of the gloomy ante-room through which they had just passed; in fact they hadn't paused there and certainly would not do so now. That was why they failed utterly to see the stir of the ante-room curtains.

Out of those drapes came blackness, living blackness, which stole swiftly up behind the interloping pair. It was the cloaked form of The Shadow and his gloved hands shot forward from the end of piston arms just as Ludar and Kromer were about to grip that all-important box which lay upon Sark's table.

Simultaneously The Shadow's gloved hands took two necks and brought their accompanying heads together with a crack as resounding as Zune's beaver clap. The Shadow had to catch Ludar and Kromer by their collars and give them slight flings at opposite angles, to keep them from landing on the table and overturning it, box and all.

Neatly done, that job, a fitting sequel to The Shadow's mysterious and unsuspected arrival in this realm. But there was more to follow.

Outside the cell block, a short while later, a patrolling guard paused to look contemptuously at the hostages who peered from their cells, like creatures in cages. A moment after, the guard wilted, his face much pained.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

It looked as though a pair of black tarantulas had crawled around his neck to press his throat from either side. But when the choked guard sagged, those black grippers revealed themselves as gloved hands belonging to a cloaked owner.

Margo Lane gasped the name spontaneously:

"The Shadow!"

A whispered laugh as The Shadow stooped to pick up the guard's keys. Then the cells were open, but as Jud Mayhew emerged, The Shadow clapped a hand on his shoulder and turned him into the light. As Jud paused, wondering, The Shadow brought a gauze mask from beneath his cloak.

Next, he was placing that object on Jud's face, molding it there. Though thin, the mask had structure and could be shaped. It took The Shadow only a few minutes to smooth back the edges and tighten them with their gummed borders. Jud felt his lips drawn apart by the tight gauze; he could feel a pressure, like that of hollows, around his eyes.

In fact, Jud felt like a grinning ape and thought that Margo and Gail ought to be laughing instead of giving the amazed gasps that they did. Then, The Shadow turned Jud toward a mirror at the end of the corridor and Jud gulped too, as well as he could.

The face that leered at Jud Mayhew from the mirror was a perfect replica of the skullish countenance of Alban Sark!

Next, Jud was pocketing an envelope that The Shadow gave him, speaking brief, whispered instructions that went with it. Then, in Jud's hand, The Shadow placed the pass that would take him to the outer world.

Jud nodded. Then:

"It's a sure bet," he said, "provided I don't meet Ludar or Kromer –"

"Which you will not," interposed The Shadow. "From then on, follow the instructions in the envelope."

Nodding again, Jud gave an anxious glance toward Margo and Gail only to see that they weren't worried, at least not for themselves. In the company of The Shadow, they were safe; their only concern was for Jud's future.

Maybe that future still boded strange events. For as Jud Mayhew turned to leave as The Shadow's messenger to the outside world, he heard a weird, whispered laugh that seemed to warn him to guard his actions well.

Strange, that laugh of The Shadow!

## CHAPTER XIX

ONE hour later, the invasion of Zune's underground citadel came as swift and as short as the explosion of a blockbuster, with about the same result, except that there was no explosion. These preserves, which Sark had planned as something impregnable, proved to be anything but that.

It happened right after a string of automobiles bearing Zune and his followers had emerged from their secret alley. The paving locked behind them but it didn't stay that way. Deep underground, two guards that Zune had left behind, suddenly found themselves confronted by guns. Margo and Gail were taking over, backed by

## THE WHITE SKULLS

The Shadow.

There was a third man present, another of Zune's henchmen. He was at the switchboard that controlled the automatic doors. The Shadow was handling him personally, again using that gloved neck grip that had the effect of velvet plated steel. Tossing the limp man aside, The Shadow operated the switches, then drew a pair of automatics and relieved Gail and Margo of the job of covering the two prisoners.

Soon, cars arrived from the ramp, three of them, headed by Shrevvy's cab. From them came The Shadow's agents, to learn their chief's next plans. The Shadow unrolled the big map from Zune's room and showed them the route along which he intended to travel with them, in pursuit of Zune.

Except that Margo and Gail weren't going. They were steered right into the cab, and next thing, Shrevvy was whizzing them up the ramp to the outside world. Reaching the street, Shrevvy drove a few blocks; then stopped at a cigar store to make a phone call.

Good friends now, Margo and Gail could discuss the turn of events that had put them in the discard. It was Gail who brought that up by asking:

"Who is the cabby calling?"

"The police, probably," replied Margo. "He's tipping them off to Zune's set-up so they can take over while Zune is away. I only hope they don't forget to look through a few laundries and gather Ilga Vyx for a bonus."

"Tanjor Zune will have a big surprise waiting for him," decided Gail, "when he gets back from Hartfield."

"If he gets back," corrected Margo. "Meanwhile, I'm wondering what became of Alban Sark. I mean the real one."

"That's right!" exclaimed Gail.

Sark must have gotten away! I only hope nobody mistakes Jud for him, now that it's no longer necessary.

By that time, Shrevvy had returned and Gail, to ease her worries over Jud, put a hopeful question to the cabby.

"You didn't happen to meet a friend of mine, did you?" queried Gail. "His name is Jud Mayhew and he's the person who gave the word about that underground city where you found us."

It was Shrevvy's policy to play ignorant, at least to the degree where he seemed merely a chance cab driver who had been commandeered by The Shadow's agents without knowing who they were.

"Don't know anything about it, Miss," rejoined Shrevvy. "But there was a passenger I took up to Riverside Drive. He was going to see somebody named Brenz, I think it was."

That meant Jud. Calling on Brenz was part of his business. It meant too that he was out of the disguise The Shadow had fixed for him. Gail couldn't drop around and see Brenz, but she had another idea of how to while away the time during the next few hours.

"Riding in a cab reminds me of something," Gail told Margo. "I ought to take a certain cab back where it belongs, so people will stop saying it was stolen instead of just borrowed. I know where it is, so let's go and get it."



## THE WHITE SKULLS

The idea appealed to Margo. She knew the cab Gail meant; the one that belonged in Stanwich. If they took it there, they would be closer to Hartfield than they were at present. Therefore they might get news of The Shadow's expedition sooner. At Margo's nod, Gail told Shrevvy where to drive them.

Meanwhile, Jud Mayhew was finishing an important interview with Philo Brenz. His hand strumming the table, Brenz's face showed an expression which carried a considerable quota of amazement.

"Incredible, these things you tell me." expressed Brenz. "But if they are true, Jud, we should do something about them."

"About everything has been done," asserted Jud. "All we can do is sit back and wait."

"Not quite." Brenz shook his head. "Wait here a few minutes, while I see if Hugo is around. He is the chauffeur who works for me on Wednesdays."

When he returned, Brenz was shaking his head.

"No Hugo," he declared. "In fact all the servants are either out for the evening or gone home. Well, we can use my coupe to drive to Hartfield. Suppose we phone the Crabtree Museum first and warn them."

Brenz tried the call, only to learn that the museum phone had been disconnected.

"The place is probably closed," decided Brenz, "and they are getting ready to move the art treasures, I suppose. We'd better drive out there right away."

How Brenz and Jud were to fare in the general race for Hartfield was a question, considering the head start that others had gained. But there was a factor in their favor that did not disclose itself as they sped along in Brenz's fast-gearred car, which really clipped the miles as soon as they were free of the New York environs.

The persons who were to learn that factor were Gail North and Margo Lane. They discovered it because Gail insisted on trying a short route to Stanwich. Coming over a hill, Gail halted the taxicab that belonged to the Apex Cab Company. This cab had a double seat in front, being of the small town variety. Seated beside Gail, Margo also saw the moonlit panorama that lay before them.

Down the slope was the superhighway, dominating a small network of roads. The question was which of two forks to take, here on the hill, in order to reach the best spot on the superhighway. What confused the issue was the fact that this was near the elaborate clover-leaf pattern of bridges and underpasses that formed a feature of the highway system near Stanwich.

Only from this spot could the girls have observed the singular thing that occurred amid the rolling valley.

Like little scooters, a row of cars whipped into sight along the superhighway and suddenly spread apart to take different routes among the clover-leaf ramps. They seemed to be playing a game, those cars, until three others came into view, pursuing them.

"Zune's caravan!" exclaimed Margo. "And there are The Shadow's cars catching up to them!"

"But they ought to be over by Hartfield!" expressed Gail. "What made them head for Stanwich instead?"

"It must have been something on that map," decided Margo. "Let's see what happens next."

## THE WHITE SKULLS

They saw and promptly. One by one, Zune's cars began to disappear. It happened each time one swung down into the deepest underpass, a spot to which they all purposely converged. At the sharp bend each car veered and a portion of a concrete buttress swung back from a framework of steel girders, swallowing the arriving cars, which came in such quick succession that the great door hadn't time to close before the next car reached it.

The clever feature of the system was the divergence of the original routes. This made differences in the distances traveled to the focal point, hence the cars arrived at intervals and disappeared as neatly as by clockwork.

There was another tricky point to the system. The lead car of The Shadow's pursuit party should logically have followed the tail car of Zune's caravan, since it was the easiest to overtake. That was the way The Shadow's agents had tried it, the night they had made a chase from Stanwich. But on this occasion, the first pursuing car took the route that the leader of the fleeing caravan had used.

Margo and Gail saw the result. Having taken the shortest course in this blind game, The Shadow's car, first of the pursuit party, was gaining its objective at the expense of the last car in Zune's group. Just at the last car made that fancy veer, The Shadow's car sighted it.

There was time for Zune's last car to scoot from sight; time, too, for the concrete portal to slide shut. But The Shadow had cracked the system. His car duplicated that wide swing over toward the buttress; the barrier opened and The Shadow stayed on the trail.

So did the rest of The Shadow's cars. Coming by the various routes, in the same order the Zune's cars had used, the pursuers saw exactly what awaited them and copied The Shadow's system to the dot.

Gail drew a long breath and said:

"Just try to imagine that!"

"I can't," rejoined Margo. "Not even after seeing it happen!"

"Well, we did see it happen," Gail declared, "and there's nothing to stop us from trying it ourselves."

Try it they did when they reached the clover-leaf and when the concrete opened magically in front of them, the girls found their car burrowing right through a tunnel beneath the superhighway.

Something struck home to Gail.

"This was one of those contracts let out by Sark!" Gail exclaimed. "We never could understand what happened to some of the materials. We were sure they were delivered, because the highway was completed, but it seemed just tons and tons short of concrete!"

"It came from here then," returned Margo, "or rather this is where it didn't go. I have an idea where it is though."

"So have I," declared Gail with a nod. "Bolstering that underground citadel that Sark built for Zune to occupy!"

"Somehow Sark strikes me as the real genius," mused Margo aloud, "and therefore the more dangerous. This highway would have been good for ten years before it began to cave and by then its purpose would be

served."

"There must be a dozen others like it," said Gail, unhappily, "all places where that White Skull crowd could vanish and disappear. My father had all these contracts and Sark figured in every job."

Coming out through a camouflaged exit that lifted like a portcullis, the car swung into a narrow by-road that Gail recognized as one leading to Hartfield. The tunnel had carried them off through a hill, away from the superhighway. Then Gail remembered something else.

"There's another of those clover-leaves near Hartfield," Gail told Margo. "I suppose we'll find the same thing there. If we do, I can guess where it will lead."

"Under the old museum?"

"Either that or pretty close to it."

"If we do," decided Margo, "we'd better drive into the tunnel. There's nothing we can do to hurt and there might be some way we could help."

There was good reason for the confidence in Margo's tone. She felt sure that The Shadow's plans – like those of others – were coming to a climax.

When that happened, bets were best laid on The Shadow.

## CHAPTER XX

WHIPPING into the outskirts of Hartfield, a speedy coupe took the hill leading up to the Crabtree Museum. Coming around a final turn, the car gave quick toots of its horn and a big gate swung open.

Next the coupe rolled into an inside court where men were loading quantities of crates and bulky frames into some waiting trucks. The coupe stopped and Jud Mayhew stepped from one door; Philo Brenz from the other.

Promptly, Brenz convinced the truckers that he had a right to be here. He was ushered into the museum itself to find some attendants helping pack the art treasures. The hired help at the museum had been expecting the trucks almost any day and were glad that they had arrived so soon.

So was Jud Mayhew.

Jud's only wish was that the truckers might have arrived sooner. Still, there was time for them to get everything out before Tanjor Zune arrived. At least Brenz thought so, for he stepped right into the position of supervisor and began to make things move.

Apparently taking it for granted that the more important treasures had been stored away from public eye, Brenz asked where the vaults were and was shown there. Jud went along and the truck men followed, down to a great arched cellar where goods were already packed.

Hardly had the truckers and attendants started to remove the massive crates from the cellar before the dreaded stroke arrived. The whole building seemed to quiver as it absorbed the vibrations of a peculiar explosion that had a flowing effect, as though spreading itself up through the foundations of the museum.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

The floor heaved itself apart as men recoiled from its upward thrust. Then, from what seemed a self-splitting mole hill of gigantic size, invaders appeared, wearing the black costumes that bore the painted skeleton ribs and hooded death's heads of the White Skull.

The truck men must have sensed such danger while it was still on the way. As they fell back to the corners of the great cellar, they drew revolvers to offset the guns that the invaders displayed. Philo Brenz did the same; stepping forward, gun in hand, he was about to call for combat when Tanjor Zune appeared from the slanted gap in the cellar floor.

Zune barked an order and his men spread to vantage spots. Gun for gun, Zune faced Brenz while the truck men, Jud among them, dodged for shelter of their own. Both groups seemed to cancel themselves in pairs, leaving the field to Brenz and Zune.

The thing became an immediate stalemate. All around the cellar were pillars, supporting its vaulted roof. Those pillars served as the shelter that both fractions needed. Each group seemed dubious about starting battle, fearing to heap reprisal on itself.

And Jud, finding himself an ex-officio member of the trucking crew, decided that he'd better stay right where he was, until something broke this spell.

Face to face, Zune and Brenz were eyeing each other like creatures from another world. Then Zune spoke, in that harsh, fierce tone of his.

"I should have known you would be here," declared Zune. "Whoever you are, whatever your name, you had too much at stake to stay away."

"The mistake was yours," retorted Brenz, abruptly. "You were a fool not to know when you had lost – as I did."

Staring, Jud could hardly believe what he heard.

"I have not lost," sneered Zune. "I am proceeding with a duty. I am here to take the treasures."

"Which proves you are a fool," specified Brenz. "The thing at Stanwich is still a mystery, but if the contents of this museum are stolen, it will be no riddle."

Zune eyed Brenz sharply. Then:

"Speaking of riddles," queried Zune, "why are you here to steal the treasures?"

"Only because you are," was Brenz's cool reply. "When I learned you were on the way, I had no other choice."

"You forget one thing." Zune's tone was rising, angrily. "I was the man appointed to take all this in charge!"

"I had more than an appointment," stormed Brenz. "I was promised full control once the work was done!"

Zune's anger suddenly changed to contempt.

"Everywhere there must be a leader," he declared proudly. "But to be successful in a country not yet conquered, that leader must depend upon some person there. A person who, to the world, is called a traitor –

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such as you."

"The greatest traitor," retorted Brenz, "is the man who hires one."

Knowing that the epithet was meant for him, Zune snarled back a single word that applied to Brenz.

That word, singularly suited to the term of perfidy, carried a contemptuous sound. The name that Zune had for Brenz was:

"Quisling!"

That utterance cleared Jud's brain.

It meant just this and simply. Zune was the leader of a criminal band, come to America and stranded here, no longer able to serve the purposes of the defunct Nazi regime. But to prepare for his arrival, Zune had needed the services of a man ready to betray his own country.

Such a man was Philo Brenz.

Brenz had been approached; he had done more than listen. It was Brenz who had supplied the ways and means of underbidding his own contracts and attributing the crooked work to Townsend North. Of all persons, Brenz was best equipped to stage such underhanded action, while North was equally eligible as his dupe.

But there was one man who had arranged both angles, a man who was the perfect go-between: Alban Sark.

Jud's mere thought of the name produced the man in question.

As Zune and Brenz stood glaring at each other, a harsh laugh intervened. There, emerged from the hole that Zune had hewn with Formula Four Hundred, stood Sark. How he had come along with Zune's own crew was a slight mystery in itself. For the present, the important thing was the fact that Alban Sark had arrived.

The grin from Sark's skullish face was more livid than ever. He seemed to relish this scene.

"Allow me to introduce you," spoke Sark. "Tanjor Zune, leader of the White Skulls, intended as the shock troops of an occupation force. Philo Brenz, the man appointed to be America's Quisling. Both disappointments to themselves – as well as to each other."

For the first time, Zune and Brenz found themselves in agreement. That agreement was their hostility toward Sark.

"I am no disappointment," argued Zune. "I am here to take wealth as my own, that is all!"

"I have been trying to keep what I gained," declared Brenz. "I landed plenty of contracts and high priced ones. Why should I sacrifice my profits for a title that no longer counts, or for treasures I could not keep?"

Zune wheeled toward Brenz.

"You were after the treasures here –"

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"To keep them from you," interrupted Brenz, "as I told you. I hoped to get them safely away and let you take the blame for a raid that failed. Perhaps they would never have found you, Zune, but they never would have even suspected me."

Zune's only answer was a glare. It was Sark who spoke and mockingly.

"Brenz is right, Zune," argued Sark. "You failed to learn who the Quisling was –"

"Because you never told me," interposed Zune, fiercely. "You said it was your business – not mine. Now I know why!"

"And why?"

"Because you made a deal with Brenz. You were to share his profits. Am I right?"

"Quite right." It was Brenz who gave the answer. "I made a deal with Sark. I was too clever to try to kill him, even if I had wanted."

That thrust deflated Zune. Brusquely, he tried to throw it off. With a wave toward the men who waited behind pillars on Brenz's side of the cellar, Zune demanded:

"These men? Who are they?"

Sark eyed the faces that were half-poked in sight and answered:

"Brenz's servants. I have seen them before."

Brenz nodded that Sark was right. More than once, Sark had been a secret visitor to Brenz's apartment. Then:

"I needed you again tonight, Sark," stated Brenz. "I tried to dispose of The Shadow, but it did not work. Remember that note you sent me once, saying to meet you at Thorneau Place? I added a threatening paragraph at the front of it, on that old typewriter that used to be yours."

Sark gave a grinning smile, as though he appreciated the ruse even though it had failed. Then, Sark's drawn lips stiffened. He turned to Zune.

"I prefer men who do not fail," announced Sark. "Perhaps you have better claim to that, Zune. Of course" – Sark swung to Brenz – "I am open for conviction. Since all these treasures are at stake" – Sark was sweeping the well stocked cellar with his glistening gaze – "what is the use to wait?"

Cold words, but they raised the rivalry between Zune and Brenz to a white-hot pitch. Neither waited for the other; both wheeled and bellowed for the attack to begin. Like unleashed hound packs, Zune's fighters surged to meet Brenz's servants, who launched themselves with equal fury.

One man wasn't in that fray.

That man was Jud, who no longer belonged on Brenz's side and wouldn't fight on Zune's. As his target, Jud took a neutral who in Jud's estimate was the real menace in this case. All Jud wanted was to settle scores with Alban Sark, otherwise White Skull.

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Sark's face seemed to loom gigantically as Jud drove forward, opening fire with his gun. Only it wasn't Sark at all, it was that old illusion, that of a white skull coming as an optical reflex after staring at a darkish face with grinning teeth and glistening eyes.

It seemed to float ahead of Jud, that thing that wasn't there, until Jud found himself actually tripping into the pit that represented the newly hewn tunnel. There, Jud was caught by a rising figure that emerged as suddenly as Sark had disappeared.

The Shadow!

A strident laugh sounded above the rattle of the gunfire with which Zune's men and Brenz's were chopping each other down. Reeling fighters turned to see The Shadow brushing Jud aside with a sweep of cloaked arms that brought two huge automatics into a pair of gloved fists.

From amid their faltering followers, Zune and Brenz wheeled apart, each intent upon being the first to deliver a concluding treatment to The Shadow.

Both were too late. The Shadow's shots came first. Flame-tonguing automatics drilled the rivals who had tried to salvage all they could from a ruined scheme, but who had each wanted all for his own and therefore had lost.

As they sprawled, Tanjor Zune and Philo Brenz looked up with glazing eyes and saw the face that was beneath The Shadow's slouch hat, which he had purposely tilted back.

It was the face of Alban Sark!

Jud Mayhew saw it too and couldn't believe it, until The Shadow cloaked a gun and used his hand to wipe that face away. On the floor he flung a gauze mask of that same molded pattern that he had given Jud for a temporary disguise. A tug of The Shadow's hat brim and his own face, that of Cranston, was obscured.

Zune's voice croaked from the floor.

"So we did blast Sark – that night in Stanwich –"

"But you couldn't believe your luck," coughed Brenz. "When Sark showed up again, you didn't guess he was The Shadow."

"It was in the gasoline – the formula – it blew up the taxicab –"

"And Sark was in that cab – The Shadow knew – only you weren't sure –"

That was all. Zune's say was done and he hadn't heard the words that Brenz added for him. Nor could Brenz add more than those few phrases. Like Zune he had sagged completely. Like the living link who had once been their connection, namely Alban Sark, both Tanjor Zune and Philo Brenz were dead.

They, the successors of White Skull, could no longer hope to profit from the schemes that his evil genius had founded.

As for the followers of Zune and Brenz, those that remained had likewise completed their own undoing. Having whittled each other down to pitiful remnants of their original numbers, the few survivors were firing stupidly and wildly at a surge of new fighters who were literally overwhelming them with a climactic gunfire.

## THE WHITE SKULLS

The newcomers were The Shadow's agents, sprung from the great gap in the floor, through which they had followed Zune's tribe to await The Shadow's call, which he had finally given.

Behind them came two others to witness the mop-up. Margo Lane and Gail North had followed the same route, but they didn't care to linger. Margo was beckoning Gail back through the gap when Jud Mayhew glimpsed the girl whose cause he had helped to vindicate.

"Gail!"

With that call, Jud disappeared into the tunnel where Gail was turning to meet him. As he went, Jud heard a strange, triumphant laugh that came upon the last echoes of the gunfire that conquered crime.

It could have been a knell for Zune and his men who had left their impregnable lair, or possibly that tone of parting mirth was in recollection of Alban Sark, the notorious White Skull whose death had enabled The Shadow to adopt his ways and thereby put an end to his evil successors, Tanjor Zune and Philo Brenz.

Only The Shadow knew!

THE END