



DICTATOR OF CRIME

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CHAPTER I. A MATTER OF MILLIONS

THE Clipper smacked the blue of Biscayne Bay and settled into a lazy squat, from which it taxied toward a landing. An audible sigh of relief came from the roped-off crowd that lined the shore of Dinner Key. Little wonder that the sigh was heard, for the throng was immense.

Seldom did the population of Miami, citizen and tourist, assemble en masse at the Marine Airways Base to witness the arrival of a Clipper plane. But the winged ship just in from the Caribbean was worthy of a huge turnout. Not only because its passengers were something of celebrities, but because of the cargo that they brought.

The plane was in from Centralba, a Caribbean republic long established but recently renamed by its dictator, Luis Castenago, a "strong man" who masqueraded under the title of president. The passengers on the Clipper were the militant leaders of the anti-Castenago party: Colonel Jose Durez and a handful of associates. What they were bringing with them was money, to the total of ten million dollars.

Only this afternoon had the news broken that the coming revolution in Centralba had been called off. Remarkable was the fact that it had been settled on peaceful terms, with the iron-fisted Castenago sending his opponents into banishment, instead of forcing them to meet the muzzle end of a firing squad.

Most extraordinary of all was the report, on positive authority, that Durez and his faction had sold their holdings and concessions, at full price, to the government of Centralba - which, in two words, meant Luis Castenago.

Singular that Castenago, of all persons, should have gone "genteel," for wholesale assassinations had long been the Centralban substitute for politics, with Castenago always supreme. Naturally, the facts led to rumors, of which there were two that carried a strong degree of truth.

The first was that Castenago, planning a merger of several Caribbean countries, with himself as head, felt that a show of leniency to opponents in his own republic would win over adherents in neighboring republics.

The other rumor was that Durez, while plotting revolution, had wisely gained the support of Francisco Peridor, former president of Centralba and idol of the populace, whose friends - Durez now included - had never been attacked by Castenago.

Of course, there was the fact that the United States was dickering for defense bases in Centralba, but that had been no deterrent in Castenago's killing off the opposition in the past, and therefore could have no bearing on the future.

The first rule of a good neighbor being to ignore all family squabbles in the house next door, gave Castenago all the leeway he wanted in his own home without having even to pull down the shades, though he was usually courteous enough to do so.

At any rate, live arrivals from Centralba were a novelty in Miami, and everyone had come to welcome the heroes who had been paid off in gold instead of bullets. Particularly, the crowd wanted to see the money, itself, which accounted for the presence of about fifty Miami police, with motorcycles, squad cars, patrol boats, tear gas, and all the appurtenances.

From the moment they alighted, Durez and his companions were surrounded by a flood of khaki uniforms. The spectators caught glimpses of some fair-sized coffers that other police took from the Clipper; but those, too, were promptly lost from sight.

Then the procession was proceeding toward the Terminal Building, which had been blocked off to the public. The only persons who remained were government inspectors, who piled into the Clipper with fumigation apparatus, to make sure that Durez and his friends hadn't smuggled in some yellow fever carriers along with their chests of funds.

NEAR the entrance to the balcony restaurant within the Terminal, Margo Lane watched the procession arrive. She'd been smart enough to get into the building by buying a ticket for San Juan, which she intended to redeem later. For Margo wasn't contemplating a trip to Puerto Rico. She was here on a much more important mission.

Only a few hours ago, when the radio had begun to blast that Durez was coming, and newsboys had started shouting special extras in the Miami streets, Margo had received a wire from Lamont Cranston, telling her to get to the airways base and learn everything she could.

The wire had added that Cranston was leaving New York immediately, by plane, for Miami, in hope of arriving before Durez did.

Unfortunately, the wind was strong from the south and it had sped the Clipper into Miami ahead of schedule. Meanwhile, Cranston's southbound ship was meeting head winds, that retarded it. This worried Margo, when she considered what Cranston's interest in Durez's affairs might be.

In private life - or perhaps the other way about - Lamont Cranston was The Shadow. He made it his business to battle men of crime, and the bigger they came, the better. If certain crooks had aspirations to acquire ten million dollars belonging to Durez Co., they would have to be very big, indeed.

In Margo's estimation, that made it all the more important that Cranston should have arrived first; which, quite apparently, he hadn't.

They were crossing the broad floor of the Terminal, now, Durez and his band. Margo got a good view of them as they passed the ten-foot revolving globe in the center of the concourse. A mosquito would probably have crowded the Republic of Centralba on that huge spherical map; nevertheless, Durez and the others paused to look for the little patch that they had hoped to wrest from Castenago.

By the time they had found Centralba, they were being pressed by the police who were carrying the ten million dollar consolation prize, so Durez and his companions smiled politely and resumed their way.

During the pause, Margo identified Durez quite easily, by his thin, sharp-featured face and small nervous eyes. As for the others, four of them, three looked very much alike, darkish men, who made good stooges for Durez.

The fourth man was a pronounced exception.

His face was dark as the result of tan acquired by long residence in the tropics. At that, it was but a mild shade of bronze, and he must have suffered sunburn during the tanning process, for his complexion wasn't the sort to take tan well. His light hair, a real straw-yellow, indicated that his natural skin color should be a very clear white.

He looked youthful, probably more so than he was, and his trim uniform enhanced his military bearing. In fact, Margo was wondering if he'd be more handsome if he weren't tanned, when it suddenly came to her who he was. She'd read about him in an extra, while riding to the airways base by cab.

This young man was Colin Nayre, until lately captain of the guard in Castenago's own palace. Margo had expected Nayre to be a grizzled soldier of fortune; instead, he looked like a recent graduate from a military college; which, indeed, he might be.

Somehow, for reasons not specified in the skimpy edition of the newspaper, Nayre had shifted from Castenago and joined the Durez faction.

Nayre didn't seem the sort who would sell out anyone, even a double-dyed wolf like Castenago. It struck Margo that the rise against Castenago must have reached the point of open demand, rather than remaining a secret cabal; otherwise, a decent chap like Nayre wouldn't have had part in it.

MARGO'S reflections were promptly justified. Past the big globe, Nayre overtook Durez and plucked his arm. In a voice that was pleasant, yet touched with an embarrassed tone, Nayre spoke:

"Perhaps I should leave you here, senior. You have important business to attend to, with your friends, while I -"

"No no," interrupted Durez sharply. "You come with us, capitan. You are to be our guest, and we shall remember you in that so important business."

"But we are no longer in Centralba -"

"Exactly! We are safer here than there. You come with us, capitan, to the Hotel Equator, where we have one fine room reserved for you. We talk business with the bankers, and afterward -"

Margo heard no more. The party was nearing the main doorway leading out to the avenue of royal palms, where cars awaited them. She saw the cavalcade roar away; it was paced by motorcycle police. Then came the cars, and finally an armored truck, carrying the precious coffers. By the time another motorcycle squad had closed behind the speedy caravan, Margo was on her way to a telephone booth.

The afternoon was late. Darkness would soon arrive in the sudden way it did in Miami's clime. As she called the municipal airport, Margo was hopeful that Cranston's plane had arrived. She learned that it hadn't, though it was expected any minute. So Margo left a message.

"Tell Mr. Cranston that Miss Lane called," she said. "I'm stopping at the Hotel Equator, in Miami Beach, and will meet him there."

It happened that Margo wasn't stopping at the Equator. Some of her friends stayed there, and she had guest privileges, but she considered the rates outlandish, even at times when she had money enough to afford them. Cranston knew all that, and therefore would understand what her message really meant.

It told that Margo had learned the one thing that wasn't in the newspapers, and probably wouldn't be made known for a few hours: namely, that Jose Durez and his party were the persons who would actually be found at the Equator.

There wasn't any reason why Margo shouldn't be there, too. Hurrying from the airport, she took a cab and managed to get started ahead of the departing sightseers. Her own car was in a parking lot in Miami, and she was sure that she could get it and drive across the Venetian Way to Miami Beach ahead of Cranston, even if his plane happened to land shortly at the municipal airport.

Perhaps, Margo felt, she might learn even more before Cranston arrived!

Margo was still considering that possibility when she transferred to her car at the parking lot. She turned on the lights because darkness had actually begun to settle. However, by that time, her chances of learning much more were becoming comparatively slim. A plane had just landed at the municipal airport. Its pilot was Lamont Cranston.

Margo's message was given to him while his bags were being put into a cab. Cranston stopped the process; he opened one bag, inside the cab, then closed it. He asked an attendant to keep the bags at the airport. Then Cranston was in the cab, and away.

The attendant stood watching the departing cab. He'd never seen anyone who impressed him quite like Cranston. Calm of manner, with an immobile face that had a hawkish expression, Cranston had shown no signs of hurry, yet had left with surprising speed. The attendant wondered just what Cranston had taken from the bag.

He'd have known, had not the cab sped away so rapidly on its long trip from the municipal airport over to Miami Beach. In the rear seat, Lamont Cranston was undergoing a rapid transformation. He was sliding his arms into a black cloak and clamping a slouch hat on his head. A pair of automatics, unwrapped from the cloak, went into holsters under his coat.

Amid the thickening darkness, the cab's passenger had vanished, which meant that he had merged with the gloom within the cab itself, for he was still there. A laugh, too low to be heard by the driver, came whispered from unseen lips.

Lamont Cranston had become The Shadow!

CHAPTER II. CRIME PREARRANGED

SEATED by an unlighted window in the exclusive Hotel Equator, a bulky man with hard eyes and square jaw was watching the procession that arrived outside. The bulky man was Murk Wessel, ace of con men, and quite as much a leader as was Jose Durez, head of the recent opposition faction in Centralba.

Murk had stooges, too; a pair of them, right here in the room with him. There were more planted throughout the hotel, guised as bellboys and servants. When Murk Wessel went after anything, he did it in a big way. When he went after something as big as ten million dollars, he did it in a still bigger way.

The same cars that left the Clipper base were in the procession that arrived at the Hotel Equator, even to the armored truck. The police, however, were wearing blue, and there were less of them. They represented the Force of Miami Beach, and they had taken over duty from the Miami police at a halfway point on the causeway across Biscayne Bay.

Murk watched Durez alight and gained a good look at him, because the hotel entrance caught the glow from a brightly illuminated swimming pool beyond a hedge. The pool lay toward the beach, where rows of cabanas awaited bathers, whether they chose pool or surf. For the ocean came next, and across it, an early moon was promising one of the beautiful nights that made the Miamis famous.

Pool, ocean, and moon meant nothing to Murk. He watched the armored truck pull into the garage at the rear of the hotel, until its contents had been removed. He counted the police who carried the coffers inside, and decided there were too many of them - for the present.

From the window, Murk noted two men who looked like bankers, and were. They went upstairs with the Durez party, and so did two others, who couldn't have been mistaken for anything other than private detectives.

Waiting patiently, Murk counted the police who came out. He accounted for all of the escort except two. The fact that some of the cops remained around outside, didn't trouble Murk in the least.

"Ten minutes more," said Murk to the men who waited with him. "Pass the word along to the boys and we'll all be set. Time the garage job right to the minute we pull ours upstairs."

One of the lieutenants spoke.

"What about the private dicks, Murk?"

"They're fixed," returned Murk. "They know what they're supposed to do. They've got it easy."

"I don't trust them guys," put in Murk's other lieutenant. "The way I figure it, a guy wouldn't be in their racket unless he was a double-crosser to start with."

"Which means they'll sell for the biggest price," assured Murk, "and nobody's able to talk bigger dough than I am. Not when I'm figuring on taking over ten million bucks!"

The very size of the amount brought cautious whispers from the lieutenants as they started from the room. Murk told them to quit acting foolish; that this job was just the same as any other. He added that it would "go the limit," which was the only difference, but that the size of the prize made it worth it, to which the other men agreed.

They went their way, and Murk struck a match to study his watch; used the flame to light a cigarette.

OUTSIDE the hotel, a trim roadster with lowered top pulled up beside the hedge. Its driver was an attractive girl whose looks brought approving stares from the police, though their sense of duty prevailed. One cop sauntered over. Rather pleasantly, he inquired:

"You're a guest here?"

"Why, no," the girl began to explain. "Only -"

"Sorry, then. You'll have to move along. Nobody but guests allowed to stop here, right now. Strict orders."

"But I have a privilege card."

The girl showed the card, and the officer read it. He checked her driver's license, to make sure that she was Margo Lane, whose name appeared on both cards.

Margo watched him read the back of the privilege card, which stated that it applied to use of beach and swimming pool. She reached for an overnight bag behind the driver's seat, and opened it as the policeman raised his head.

"I'm going for a swim in the pool," said Margo. "I've brought my bathing things along. See?"

The officer saw. He compared Margo's proportions with those of the bathing suit, and nodded.

"All right," he said. "But I'll be watching to make sure you take that swim."

Margo was fuming as she went through the lobby of the Equator and out by the front veranda, to a cabana. He'd be watching, that cop would. What he needed was a transfer to beach duty, so he could see all the bathing beauties he wanted. Right now, he was counting upon Margo as the sole attraction in that line, which meant he'd have an eye on the pool.

It didn't fit with Margo's plans at all. She hadn't intended to change to bathing attire, let alone be under surveillance. Her chances of learning anything more about the Durez crowd had gone absolutely nil, and any opportunity to meet up with Cranston would be very slight, since he probably wouldn't come anywhere near the swimming pool.

She was balking at the whole idea when she reached the cabana, until she convinced herself that a half hour in a swimming pool would be better than a night in jail. Stalling a cop whose mind was made up could prove bad policy.

So Margo decided to hurry through with the swim. She got out of her clothes and into the bathing suit as fast as she could. She put on a pair of bathing slippers, threw a light robe across her arm, and came from the cabana carrying a bathing cap. She strolled past the hedge, to make sure that the cop was still there. He was, lounging by the largest space that he could find.

Reaching the deep end of the pool, Margo sat down on a marble bench, laid the robe aside, and nonchalantly began to adjust her bathing cap. As she did, she looked up and saw above the hedge. Her gaze was riveted by third-floor windows at the rear of the hotel, above an extension which formed a garage.

Those windows were lighted, and through one of them Margo saw Colonel Jose Durez in ardent conversation with a portly American who looked like a banker. Other faces passed the next window and Margo recognized members of the Durez party. She'd located the suite where they were staying, and had also learned that their business, as mentioned by Durez, had begun!

MARGO found a pack of cigarettes in the pocket of her robe and lighted one since she could no longer stall with the bathing cap. Her idea, now, was to linger, not to hurry, and she found plenty of chances to glance up toward those windows. She calculated that the suite went the whole width of the hotel,

because the rear wing was comparatively narrow.

She saw the edge of a balcony, jutting at the rear, and remembered that it went the whole width, which supported her conclusion. Moreover, she was wondering why she didn't see Colin Nayre. He wasn't among those who moved about, so she surmised that he was in another room.

Durez and his friends were drinking Cuba Libres as a preliminary to business. From their slow sips at the long glasses, they weren't in any hurry.

Margo was just about deciding on a swim, when the glare of headlights cut through the hedge, illuminating the green brush and the officer beyond it. Margo saw other police come dashing up, as the lone cop called to them. She hurried over to the hedge.

The lights were from a taxicab, and police were arguing with the driver. They wanted to know why he'd come here, and what his hurry was. He was stuttering something about a passenger for the Equator, when one of the officers yanked open the door and said:

"Oh, yeah?"

The others looked in the back. The cab was empty. They didn't appear surprised, but the driver was. He couldn't remember where his passenger had dropped off, and he argued that he hadn't been paid.

That point struck home to Margo. She knew The Shadow's way of dropping out of cabs; but usually he fluttered a bill into the front seat, to cover his fare, with a healthy tip besides.

This new wrinkle would only mean that The Shadow hoped to hold the cab for later use!

The plan, at least, was working, for police had ordered the cabby to park over near the back of the garage. The cop who guarded the hedge was returning, so Margo had to scamper back to her bench. As she reached it, she took a quick look over her shoulder and caught a chance glimpse of something that stirred her even more.

A figure was scaling the wall of the garage. It had just rolled to the roof, away from view of the police. The shape appeared again, below the third-floor balcony, and prepared for a farther climb.

A faint breeze stirred past the white coquina wall, and Margo saw a slight flutter of blackness that represented the folds of a cloak.

The climber was The Shadow!

Boldly, almost openly, he was trying to reach the darkness of the balcony above, but to manage it, he would have to swing outward, into plain sight, should anyone else stare upward. The police by the cab might miss sight of him; they were close to the wall and still talking to the driver. But Margo's friend by the hedge had a perfect angle from which he could spot The Shadow. Margo's own stare up to the balcony certainly wasn't helping matters. If she kept it up a few moments longer, the cop would probably wonder what she was looking at.

The one thing to do was get her mind off The Shadow, and carry the officer's attention, too. So Margo tossed away the cigarette, kicked off her slippers, and tightened the bathing cap.

She walked to the springboard, stepped to the far end of it and poised, preparing for a swan dive. Her eyes raised and automatically she saw the lighted windows, where Durez and his friends were entertaining their guests. She even caught the sound of their rising voices.

Then!

Margo never took the swan dive. She was frozen where she was by the sudden thing that occurred in the rooms above. Light and gaiety ended together. With a single blink, the windows were blotted with an absolute darkness that seemed, by its very pall, to smother the babble which ceased as the blackness came!

With that blot that foretold immediate crime, Margo lost her last chance to spot The Shadow, as he swung out to pull himself up over the balcony rail!

CHAPTER III. DEATH GOES RAMPANT

THE last moment of light in the third-floor suite showed a scene that could not be viewed from below - one which presaged the horror that was to be when the illumination ended.

On tables and chairs in the center of the room were the coffers that had come from the armored truck, open for inspection by the bankers. The smaller coffers were by far the heavier, for they contained gold, in coin. Gold from the treasury of Centralba, stored up through years: governmental proceeds from such commodities as oil, bananas, and mahogany.

The former president, Francisco Peridor, who still called Centralba by its old name, had done well for his people. All the results of his economics had reached the hands of Luis Castenago, the present dictator.

These funds in gold, plus the American currency that swelled from the larger chests, were payment from Castenago to Durez, and others, who had fattened on private concessions, now the dictator's property.

But Durez and the rest were more than satisfied, as their laughter told. Their mirth had simply increased when they saw the two American bankers stare in awe at so much wealth, particularly the gold.

Then the scene of pelf was vanished in a trice! Not even the gold could glitter in the blackness that came when the lights went off. The blackout could mean but one thing: a threat that produced absolute silence. Someone was after the spoils that Castenago had yielded!

In the pitch-darkness, men trembled. Durez and his associates, fresh from a land where death could occur at the mere snap of a dictator's fingers, had thought themselves safe in this healthier clime where law had prevailed.

True, they had heard that criminals could strike in such cities as Miami, or the Beach, but they had been jesting on that very point when they mentioned the terrorism that prevailed in Centralba.

Jests were over. The menace was here.

A voice spoke from the doorway. Its rasp was crimeland's edition of a dictator's harsh demands. The tone belonged to Murk Wessel, big con man, who had switched from his more subtle specialty to outright banditry because of the profits involved.

"Anybody that moves gets croaked!" assured Murk. "That dough is going out of here, and nobody stops it! Savvy?"

This wasn't like Centralba, where the military police stepped up in daylight and marched their victims off to prison, with the promise of a mock trial that would mean a firing squad at dawn.

Here, things happened in the darkness, where accusers didn't even show their faces. Men of crime didn't believe in trials, even of the mock variety. Death's promise was immediate.

The stir that followed made all hearers shudder, thinking that some of their fellows had foolishly moved. But the motion came from Murk's confederates. They were groping for the coffers, and they reached them. There were slams as the lids went shut. Lugging their burdens, the crooks started out.

Even then, Murk's raspy tone was adding reminders. There was no telling how many more of his tribe stood present. Durez and his comrades still trembled, as did the bankers. Each felt sure that a gun had been trained upon him just as the lights vanished, and that its muzzle still threatened death.

TWO men in the room were steady. They were two members of the Beach police force, the pair that Murk hadn't seen go out. They weren't budging for the present, because the time wasn't quite right.

They wanted to get at the crooks when the exodus started, so they were gauging their wait for Murk's voice. It wouldn't do to start shooting while helpless men were involved. Besides, the police felt they could count on support.

They were thinking of the private dicks who had come with the bankers. They didn't guess that those two supporters had already sold out to Murk, and had guns ready, not for the crooks, but for the police themselves. This was a set-up made to crime's order, and it went even deeper.

Murk revealed its depths when he spoke again.

"Some light out there in the hall," he ordered. The light came, enough to show guns but not faces, for Murk and the two men with him had their backs to the wall. "Now, let's look this over. Good!" Murk turned, very slightly, muffling his face. "Come in, the rest of you. You're needed."

It wasn't a bluff. Two men eased in from the hallway, along which the precious coffers had departed. They were experienced gunzels, these, for their crouch, the handling of their revolvers, proved it. If Murk had shouted his intention, it couldn't have been more plain. He was doing things as they weren't done even in Centralba.

Murk intended to follow up his gigantic robbery with an absolute massacre!

It drilled home to Durez and his compatriots. It even gripped the trembling bankers. Most of all, it stirred the two local officers. Quickly, their hands went to their guns. They hadn't any idea that they were slated to be shot in the back; that their own actions would be the signal for a complete slaughter.

That was recognized by only one person opposed to crime, and his response was singular.

He laughed.

Strange that a laugh should have changed the case entirely, but that was because the laugh itself was strange. It came as a mocking challenge to all men of evil; a taunt that they recognized as a threat of doom to themselves.

Sinister was that mirth from the doorway to the open balcony, where its author was visible only as a wavering shape against the slight moonlight reflected into the room.

It was the laugh of The Shadow!

Murk's rasp was the lead tone in a chorus of snarls as crooks, one and all, wheeled toward the spot where The Shadow had entered. Even the traitorous private detectives betrayed their hands. They swung from the officers they covered and aimed for the balcony, too.

Guns volleyed with a thunder that rattled the windows, blasting straight toward the weaving target that the

killers saw. Blackness swayed, but remained.

Again, The Shadow laughed!

The phenomenon produced a panic. Crooks were springing about, madly seeking the door, prepared to bowl Murk Wessel from their path. The Shadow could have picked them off with rapid shots, right then, if the two police officers hadn't flung themselves into the tide.

Durez and his comrades, revolutionists by choice, were flinging themselves forward, too. Yet The Shadow could have overcome those handicaps. The real trouble came from another source.

A door slashed open, throwing a flood of light into the room. It was a connecting door, and the man who flung it wide was Colin Nayre, the only person absent from the conference.

THAT path of glow across the room showed the target that Murk's crew had riddled, but hadn't hurt. The thing was a hanging curtain at the balcony door. In entering, The Shadow had drawn it out so that the wind could stir it. He had been moving from the doorway when he laughed.

At present, The Shadow lacked his former advantage. Nayre's opening of the connecting door caught the cloaked fighter in the worst possible position. The Shadow was dodging across the room, hoping to outflank crooks before they reached the hallway.

Murk's harsh shout was scarcely necessary, for the rest saw The Shadow, too. Madly, they aimed for him as he wheeled back from the light.

The Shadow was gone, but guns were ripping, cutting a wide swath through the only area where he could be, shots aimed from three to six feet from the floor, sure to catch a whirling target, wherever he might be.

The throats of guns had shouted crimedom's cry, with bullets to back it:

Death to The Shadow!

CHAPTER IV. WAYS OF FLIGHT

THIS time, there was no responding laugh as the echoes of the volley faded. Instead, the bursts of guns were everywhere.

The two policemen, relieved of the traitors who threatened them, were springing upon the crooks, shooting as they came. They were yelling for others to get clear, and the bankers were heeding their advice.

Durez and his compatriots were not. They were thinking of their gold, and forgetting something else: namely, that Murk had given the order for their death. Grabbing for guns, the Centralbans were getting them from the muzzle end, with bullets as stingers.

An odd thing was happening deep in the room. The two private-detective traitors had turned and were looking at a figure on the floor. It should have been dead, but it wasn't. The Shadow was coming up, alive, and they knew why. He hadn't whirled away; he had taken a headlong dive, ahead of the barrage!

Rolling on the floor, The Shadow had been below the range of bullets. He'd flung himself right out of the battle because there had been no other way, but in a few seconds more he would be back in it, unless these two prevented him. Maybe they had thoughts of a bonus, as they aimed for The Shadow. Extra pay for treachery that they were never to collect.

A gun spoke from the floor, the one gun that The Shadow could use at that moment. It clipped one of the aspiring traitors and felled him, but left the other with an opportunity. The fellow didn't have time to use it. Another gun spoke.

It wasn't The Shadow's second automatic; it was a revolver drawn by Colin Nayre. He, too, had seen The Shadow's roll. Nayre's target was the second traitor, and he dropped the man whose aim The Shadow couldn't have stopped alone.

There was no time to exchange compliments. On his feet, The Shadow was wheeling out through the room, passing the unscathed bankers in their corners, and the two officers; they had halted, wondering whether to pursue Murk and his mob, or stand by to fight off a counter-attack. The Shadow cleared sprawled figures - two thugs and two of Durez's companions, who had gone down in a deadlock.

He was in the hallway. Ahead was another of the fugitives from Centralba, dead through his own folly. Murk Wessel was struggling personally with Jose Durez, trying to drag the money-mad colonel into the elevator, where two of Murk's men were ready with their guns.

The Shadow sent a laugh along the hallway, a tone that almost woke the dead with whom the criminals thought he was already numbered.

Sight of the black-cloaked avenger was too much. Murk gave Durez a fling, which wasn't difficult, considering that the man was already wounded. Then, with a dive, Murk was in the elevator and his men were trying to slam the door.

Sudden was The Shadow's stop, straight his aim. He wanted to put three bullets in that elevator before the door slammed: one apiece for the men inside. It was Durez who prevented it. Still on his feet, the foolhardy colonel flung himself right into the closing doors, blocking The Shadow's aim completely.

Guns ripped, but not The Shadow's. They were revolvers belonging to Murk and his lieutenants. They riddled Durez, flaying his dead body out from the doors, which promptly slammed.

Yet, in that last moment when Durez sagged away, The Shadow poked a shot between the three-inch space, to find one of Murk's lieutenants straight through the heart.

Speeding along the hallway, The Shadow found a stairway and started down. Things had been happening in instants, upstairs, so rapidly that the police from outside were just getting into the hotel. The Shadow passed them like a streak of light, as he saw the rear stairway to the garage. A few of the police followed him. Others dashed upstairs.

IN the garage, Murk and his one remaining lieutenant jumped into the rear door of the armored truck. There was a driver at the wheel, and they were telling him to get started.

No one had been worrying about the truck while it was empty, hence crooks had taken it over easily. The driver had to do what they told him, and the coffers were all on board; but one detail was forgotten: the garage door wasn't open.

Purposely, Murk had left that to the final moment, so the police wouldn't expect the coming flight. But The Shadow wasn't allowing the final moment. He was aiming for the rear door of the truck as Murk dived inside.

Hurdling the coffers, Murk flattened beyond them; they stopped The Shadow's shots. The driver, responding to the menace of guns, spurred the truck right through the garage door, which smashed apart like pasteboard.

An ordinary car wouldn't have had the weight to accomplish that little feat, but the truck was as heavy as a fair-sized army tank. All that The Shadow gained was a nice wide exit through which he could dash on foot.

As he came out, he saw the taxicab that had brought him from the airport. The driver, stiffened at the wheel, didn't know what to do. The Shadow sprang into the cab and told him.

THINGS were happening elsewhere. Up in the room where the battle began, one man was fighting off a pair. The one man was Colin Nayre, and he was struggling with the two policemen who had been in the fray from the start.

They had quite the wrong idea regarding Nayre. They thought that his chance opening of the connecting door had been intentional, and they wanted to hold him to account for it. After all, Nayre didn't quite belong to the Durez faction - a point which the bankers were shouting aloud. He'd been ruled out of the business conference by Durez. Maybe he'd sold out, the way the two private detectives had.

Only The Shadow could have testified in Nayre's behalf, and The Shadow was gone. So Nayre, thinking that The Shadow perhaps had fled from a misunderstood situation, decided that a quick out was his course, too. Flinging the two officers aside, he dived for the balcony just as other members of the Beach force came plunging into the room.

All during the cannonading on the third floor, Margo Lane had undergone a flood of reactions. First, she had stood petrified on the diving board; then, knowing that The Shadow must be in the thick of things, Margo had wondered what she could do.

She had hesitated, worrying about the police outside, particularly the guardian of the hedge, until she realized that the battle must have attracted them.

Dashing from the shore end of the spring board, Margo reached the hedge and pushed through it, to her car. The keys were in the lock, where she had left them just to show the too-suspicious cop that she trusted him.

All the while, Margo was darting looks up to the balcony, expecting to see The Shadow come out by the route which he had used for entry. She only hoped that his exit wouldn't be a tumble.

A terrific crash distracted her. It was the armored truck; smashing out through the garage door. Margo didn't see The Shadow follow, for she was looking upward again. Not sighting The Shadow made her magnify his plight, and she started the roadster, feeling positive that he would arrive in crippled condition and need someone to drive him away.

She realized, then, that she should have stopped to pick up her robe and slippers, but it was too late to get them. So Margo compromised by getting rid of the bathing cap, so she could shake her hair loose.

The roadster's seat was deep, and anyone noticing her head and shoulders would think that she was wearing an evening gown and driving home from a party, instead of being a fugitive direct from the Equator swimming pool.

As Margo wheeled the roadster about, she saw a figure vault the balcony, run and drop to the roof of the garage; but it wasn't The Shadow. She recognized Nayre, and he didn't stop with the garage roof. Instead, he leaped across it and jumped to the ground, just ahead of shots that police began to fire from the balcony.

Taking it for granted that revolution had broken out amid the Durez faction itself, Margo thought that the

police pursuit of Nayre was quite legitimate. Though she had liked his looks when she first saw him, that wasn't going to help him, at present.

Nayre, it happened, had a way of helping himself. He saw Margo at the moment she forgot him.

A cab was starting away. It was the cab in which The Shadow had arrived. Remembering her former impression, Margo had an idea that The Shadow was in it and decided she ought to overtake the cab, to give him a chance to change vehicles.

On that inspiration, she pressed the accelerator, just too late to avoid taking on a passenger.

The passenger was Nayre.

He opened the door just as the roadster spurted, and before Margo could shift to the brake pedal, Nayre decided matters for her. He still had his revolver, and he nudged Margo with it, telling her firmly:

"Keep right ahead, as fast as you can go!"

MARGO kept ahead. She wanted to overtake the cab, but couldn't quite manage it.

Guns were popping off like firecrackers, somewhere back, and police cars were whining to the chase. Up ahead, an armored truck was roaring off into the maze-like depths of Miami Beach, and the taxicab was heading after it, which Margo wanted to do, too, but Nayre decided otherwise.

In a tone as frigid as his gun muzzle, he ordered:

"Turn right. We're going north."

They turned right and went north at full speed, with Margo giving a last frantic glance toward the departing taxicab, hoping that The Shadow would see her. He couldn't have, thought Margo, or the cab would have stopped and returned to follow her roadster. Instead, the cab kept right ahead.

One reason that it kept ahead was because The Shadow did see Margo and the passenger in her car. If there was any man who deserved a break for freedom, that man was Nayre. Not only did The Shadow know; he was sure that Margo would understand, in due time. But there were other men, who deserved no chance at all: Murk Wessel and his crew in the armored truck.

Since he was on their trail, The Shadow stayed with it. His last word to Margo was a parting laugh that she was too far away to hear!

CHAPTER V. VANISHED CRIMINALS

THE chase through the streets of Miami Beach was unique in the annals of that city. In a sense, it wasn't a pursuit. It was a case of worriment. Any attempt to overtake and crack an armored truck was out of the question. The thing to do was keep the crooks on the go, until they gave up through weariness and exhaustion of their ammunition.

The Shadow set the style, and the police promptly copied it. Attracted by the sounds of shots, one police car cut into the scene, to see a taxicab spurt toward the truck and swing into a zigzag.

A few shots from the cab window enticed a whole deluge from the truck, but the responding bullets didn't count, because the cab, by then, had veered into another street.

So the police car took a stab at it and found that it worked. A few blocks more and the cab reappeared,

giving an example to another police car that had rallied to the chase. Soon, the truck was veering, too, its occupants fearing that the annoying cars would form a blockade against it.

There were times when the truck managed to disappear, but always it was flushed again, whereupon it opened fire wildly, and fled.

It was much like a fox hunt, except that no one shouted "Tallyho" and the fox was becoming very weary. This fox, by name, Murk Wessel, had a big chunk of the Centralban treasure in his possession and didn't want to be treed. But the more he drove in and about Miami Beach, the worse his plight became.

Two long bridges offered outlet from Miami Beach: one, the Venetian Way; the other, the County Causeway. Each had a drawbridge, that could be raised by sending word ahead, and Murk's futile efforts to shake off pursuers had wasted enough time for the draws to be set against him.

There was another route, to the north, which Nayre had been smart enough to take at once, but Murk hadn't. That route narrowed as it proceeded, and Murk had seen police cars speed off to block it.

A well-laid barricade would turn Murk's armored truck from a mobile menace into a stationary fortress, which could be starved out, if nothing else. Eating ten million dollars wouldn't be very healthy, particularly with so much in gold.

So the truck began new tactics. It cut in and out of streets around Dade Boulevard, a diagonal thoroughfare that made a patchwork out of ordinary squares. It looked like a game of hide-and-seek, and nothing more, for invariably the truck was spotted and forced to roar away again.

At last, it popped into sight over a bridge crossing Collins Canal, and suddenly cut southwest along the boulevard, which led to the Venetian Way.

It was then that the taxicab came back into the picture. Coming over a humped bridge that crossed the canal, it overtook a flock of police cars that were trailing the truck at a respectful distance. Daringly, the cab sped up behind the armored vehicle.

The police didn't recognize what was going on in the cab. Its driver, of course, was obeying The Shadow's order, as he had all along, for the ominous presence of a black-cloaked passenger from nowhere was enough to command obedience. That, however, did not explain why The Shadow ordered such a daring course.

The Shadow had noticed that the police cars were appreciably closer to the armored truck than Murk and his crew had previously allowed. The Shadow wanted to know why the fugitives weren't shooting back. His quick foray toward the truck was accompanied by vigilance.

He was telling the taut-nerved driver to veer away the instant he received the command. So far, The Shadow had managed to pick "outs" the very instant that mobster guns talked.

This time it wasn't necessary.

Though the cab wheeled almost to the rear of the fugitive truck, no shots came from the armored vehicle.

Inspired by The Shadow's example, the police cars made a spurt. They saw the cab make a sudden swing, as though to dodge a coming gunfire; but no shots occurred. The swerve sent the cab jouncing on to the tree-lined sidewalk across the boulevard from the canal, but the police cars continued the chase.

Apparently, the crooks were out of ammunition, and had simply bluffed by poking guns from the rear of the truck. Such wasn't the actual case however. The reason The Shadow ordered the cab's veer was

because he saw no guns at all!

AS soon as the police cars had whizzed past, the forgotten cab backed from the sidewalk, bounced over the curb and turned around, to speed back toward Miami Beach.

As the sounds of police sirens dwindled, The Shadow laughed. He could anticipate the surprise that the Miami Beach police would find.

It came when the armored truck jerked to a necessary stop at the raised drawbridge on the Venetian Way. The police piled from their cars and reached the truck, dodging its dangerous rear door.

They saw a scared driver at the wheel, both hands raised. He lowered one when the officers beckoned, and opened the front door. Springing into the truck, the police found it empty.

Murk Wessel and the remaining members of his picked crew were gone, to a man, and the coffers containing millions had vanished with them!

Shakily, the driver was explaining things. Gunmen had told him to keep looking ahead. Generally, they had said: "Keep going!" But occasionally they had ordered halts, when a hiding policy seemed preferable. He remembered that the last stop had been somewhere near one of the many canals that made a veritable Venice of the western section of Miami Beach.

They'd told him to wait about a minute and then start for the boulevard, to head straight for Miami. He had an idea that they'd gone out the rear of the truck during that wait, but he hadn't been too sure. He'd feared that at least one lurking crook had stayed on board, to make sure instructions were obeyed.

By the time the truck driver reached that stage of his story, the cops were no longer interested. They realized how they had been duped. Murk and his tribe had dropped off, swag and all, to take a water route, sending the police along on a blind chase!

Only The Shadow had guessed the ruse. Alone, he was returning in the cab that he had commandeered to hunt down Murk's band of murderers. Why The Shadow had undertaken that quest single-handed, was soon to be proven.

Recalling the most likely spot where mobsters could have disembarked from the armored truck, The Shadow was guiding the cab driver to it. They reached a park, where the moonlight glimmered on the waters of a curving canal - one of those serpentine waterways where aquaplaners frequently disported for the benefit of newsreel photographers.

Neither aquaplanes nor cameramen were in sight. Through the fringing palms, The Shadow saw the hulk of a low-lying boat, which might belong to Murk and his companions. Stealthily, The Shadow skirted toward a better vantage point. He was planning to reach an ornamental bridge and make a quick drop into the craft that carried the crooks, before it could really get under way.

Then came the thing The Shadow didn't want to hear.

It was the wail of an approaching siren, the same whistly trill that every police car had used while on the chase. The sound proved that the police had learned their error and were coming back, making an even greater mistake by proclaiming their return. The give-away howl of those sirens was the very reason why The Shadow had sent the patrols in the other direction.

Crooks heard the sirens, too. A motor coughed, and the lurking craft was off. Low, beneath the level of the palm-lined shore, it was where The Shadow couldn't reach it with bullets. The boat was roaring beneath the bridge as The Shadow reached the scene on foot.

Springing to the center of the short bridge, he stabbed shots after the fugitives, and they fired back. Palms that obscured the moonlight made the speedy boat no more than a low-lying streak of black, which The Shadow took as a general target.

In their return, Murk's gunners were shooting only at the stone rail of the bridge, from which a weird, taunting laugh accompanied the gun bursts. Then a turn in the canal carried the swift boat from sight, as well as gun range. The roar of a powerful motor echoed back along the wave-washed waterway, while sirens, rising in their pitch, howled a rapid approach.

HIS own ruse spoiled, The Shadow hurried back to the cab, to find that it had no driver. The fellow was blocks away by this time. He hadn't even waited to snatch the keys from the ignition lock, so The Shadow used the cab for his own departure.

He was around a bend in the road that swung through the park, when he heard the sirens halting, back where he had been.

Any chase along this driveway would be futile, for by this time, the fugitive speedboat had reached the broad waters of Biscayne Bay. The laugh that The Shadow gave was grim, signifying a coming problem which he could definitely foresee because the police had overlooked it. It was something that credited Murk Wessel with a high degree of shrewdness.

The very system by which the police had confined the crooks to Miami Beach was now aiding the getaway!

That system involved the drawbridges. They had been lifted to prevent an escape by road. But the criminals had taken to water, instead, and the draws were still lifted. Therefore, instead of being boxed between causeways, the fugitive craft would find whatever outlet it required!

No use to call headquarters and explain that situation. Before anything could be done about it, the crook-manned boat would have passed the hazards. The Shadow had gauged the speed of the craft. Murk Wessel wasn't risking ten million dollars on an old hulk. The getaway was actually accomplished.

The police would realize it, soon enough, and order a hunt, by boat, across the entire expanse of Biscayne Bay. They would probably carry it to a greater extent, searching everywhere from ocean to Everglades.

Having spoiled The Shadow's chance to stop the flight before it actually began, the police were welcome to all the bother that a widespread hunt would produce. They had more means toward such a quest than did The Shadow.

Besides, there was something else that the police had either overlooked, or forgotten, but which was quite important in The Shadow's estimate. Something that he might still have time to trace, as he had hunted down Murk's outfit after their transfer from armored truck to speedboat.

That something was Margo's roadster, which she had driven away under the command of Colin Nayre, a young man who might, at least, disclose some of the underlying clues to the movements of Murk Wessel and his gang of killers.

Those crooks had acted with a prearranged precision, and Nayre might afford some answer to the matter, even though his loyalty was unquestioned in The Shadow's mind. Having seen Margo's roadster head northward, The Shadow was quite sure that it had sped for the neck of land that led from Miami Beach.

Dropping his cloak from his shoulders and removing his slouch hat, The Shadow picked up a cap that the cabby had neglected to take when he bolted.

Police certainly wouldn't question an empty cab, driven by a man who wore a uniform cap, when it came to the northern barricade. The Shadow would simply claim that he was answering a call from Golden Beach, a few miles north, along the strip of land that separated the ocean from the bay.

Again, The Shadow laughed, this time in anticipation of a task that might amend the opportunities that freakish luck had turned to crime's advantage.

CHAPTER VI. MARGO TAKES A TRIP

THE roadster was making rapid time along the beach road leading north. Nayre was insistent upon speed, and Margo wasn't in a mood to disagree, not while the pressure of a cold gun muzzle was so constant.

Nayre had a casual way of easing pressure and applying it again. Sometimes he shifted the muzzle, so that Margo wouldn't merely imagine that she felt it.

How many miles they'd gone, Margo couldn't guess. She was just beginning to think about the speedometer, for future reference, when Nayre gave another nudge with the gun. Coolly, yet with a tone of politeness, he said:

"Turn in there."

By "there," Nayre meant a sand road at the left of the highway. Margo applied the brakes and made the turn.

As she did, she saw a building that looked something like an office, though it was in ramshackle condition. It was topped by a sign that could be read in the moonlight, even though the painting was faded. The sign read: FIVE DOLLARS AND UP.

Nayre told Margo to stop the car as they rounded the building. Obeying, the girl saw another ancient structure, that looked something like an airplane hangar.

Nayre turned off the ignition, but left the key in the lock, though it wasn't any help. As he opened the door on his side, he beckoned with his revolver and said:

"Come along."

At least, the sand was thick underfoot, and therefore soft to her bare feet, as Margo walked to the old office building, Nayre keeping close beside her. There, Nayre knocked, and the door was opened by a dull-faced man who held a lantern. Nayre didn't introduce himself. He merely questioned:

"Where's Brady?"

"Over at his cottage," the man drawled sleepily. "Want me to get him?"

"Yes. Hurry."

Hanging the lantern on a beam, the dull-faced man took a dim flashlight in its place and departed. Margo could scarcely see the flashlight's beam in the moonlight. She was watching the man walk over toward the beach, when Nayre's revolver supplied another reminder. Again, his order was brief:

"Come inside."

The room they entered was an office, as Margo expected. Nayre motioned her to a cushioned chair, the only one of its sort, and sat down on the desk. Pocketing the revolver, Nayre eyed Margo quite steadily.

"If you don't know who I am," he said, "my name is Colin Nayre. I came in with the bunch from Centralba."

Margo nodded. Nayre quizzed:

"And your name?"

Margo gave it; wherewith, Nayre furnished a reassuring smile.

"Sorry I had to inconvenience you, Miss Lane," he declared, "but I was in a big hurry. There was a lot of shooting going on, and the police seemed to think that I'd taken a hand on the wrong side."

"Which side was that?" queried Margo. "I really don't know very much about it."

"Let me explain what happened," suggested Nayre. "A crowd of crooks showed up and grabbed the cash that we'd brought in from Centralba."

"And you sided with your friends, of course."

"Yes, with my friends." Nayre's clear eyes took a meditative expression. "If you can call them such. Anyway, they're all dead, Jose Durez and his friends. I suppose I'll come in for blame, because they lost their cash before they died."

QUITE apparently, Nayre was watching for Margo's reaction. Inwardly, she was rather shocked to learn that murder had been accomplished. However, Margo was able to feign indifference.

She asked Nayre if he had a cigarette, remarking that she'd left her own in a pocket of her bathing robe. Nayre produced cigarettes, gave Margo one, and took another for himself.

"You've heard about this Centralba business," said Nayre dryly, "or you wouldn't take it so indifferently. Tell me: does it strike you oddly?"

Margo nodded. She admitted that she couldn't understand why a dictator like Luis Castenago had allowed an opponent of Jose Durez's caliber to go free, with his friends, and take along the profits from their previous concession. Her stress of the word "friends" caught Nayre's attention.

"I suppose you're wondering why I was tied up with Durez and his crowd," remarked Nayre. "The answer is simple: I wasn't. To answer another question that may be in your mind, I'm not a double-crosser, and never was."

"Then how -"

"How did I get mixed in it?" interposed Nayre. "Very easily. I was the man who organized the presidential guards under the old regime, when Centralba really was a republic. I mean when Francisco Peridor was president."

"So you stayed when Castenago took over?"

"Yes. Peridor suggested it. He said that Castenago's election was legal, which it happened to be, the way they run elections down there. The first man who gets to the polls has the privilege of counting the votes,

and Castenago had his men first, everywhere.

"Castenago wanted me to keep my job as captain of the guard, and when Peridor advised it, I did. I hated it the longer it continued, and was ready to quit when the Durez faction bobbed up. When everything smacked of revolution, they suddenly showed up at the presidential palace, bringing Peridor with them. A really fine gentleman, Francisco Peridor."

Nayre was staring into space, so ardently that Margo felt sure she could reach the door without him noticing her departure. The opportunity tempted her, but she didn't take it. Nayre had spoken frankly, and said enough to convince her that he was quite as decent a chap as she supposed.

Therefore, she wasn't worried, and by remaining, she might learn some real inside facts that Lamont Cranston would like to know.

Facts for The Shadow!

"Peridor was grand," declared Nayre, in a tone of recollection. "He told Castenago that he sided with the Durez faction because they wanted reform in Centralba. It amazed me, the way Castenago listened and the compromise he offered. He said he would institute every reform that Peridor wanted, if Jose Durez would leave the country and take his friends with him.

"Of course, they hedged, until Castenago became generous. He insisted on that one point: they would have to leave, as a token of good faith. So they began talking terms regarding their concessions.

"He granted everything they asked, provided that they get out. So they did, and I had to come with them; because, by then, Castenago classed me as a member of their group.

"Funny, isn't it?" Nayre shook his head. "All during the Clipper trip, Durez and his crowd were congratulating themselves on how they had outsmarted Castenago. They were talking about using a chunk of that ten million dollars to smuggle arms into Centralba and start a real revolution.

"They wanted me in on the deal, and I had to listen, though I didn't like it. Then, when they arrived here, they were knocked off by a bunch of American crooks."

Nayre tamped his cigarette in an ash tray and rose from his perch on the desk. Looking at Margo again, he saw sympathy in her gaze.

"Frankly, Miss Lane," he said, "I can't say that I'm sorry. Durez and his friends got just what Castenago would have given them had it not been for Peridor, the only honest man in Centralba. I can only state that I had no hand in it."

Margo nodded, indicating that she believed everything that Nayre had said. He was still watching her, intently, when an interruption came. The door opened and a stolid man with a weather-beaten face stepped into the dilapidated office, extending a hand to Nayre.

"RATHER quick notice, Nayre," he greeted. "I didn't think you'd be needing me so soon."

"There's been trouble, Brady," Nayre returned. "Durez and his crowd were wiped out by a lot of crooks, who took their money. I couldn't afford to stay about and argue with the police."

"They're after you?"

"I'm not sure." Nayre turned. "By the way, Brady, I'd like you to meet my friend, Miss Lane. She brought me out here."

Brady gave Margo an impersonal stare, and nodded. He didn't seem to regard it as remarkable that Nayre had been chauffeured by a young lady fresh from a swimming pool, as Margo's ultra bathing costume indicated.

Indeed, Margo received the impression that Brady wouldn't have been surprised if Nayre had shown up on a dolphin piloted by a mermaid.

Evidently, the two were old friends, and Brady had been expecting Nayre's arrival in Miami. For the present, that point was merely indicated by their mutual accord. Brady, in his stolid way, was more interested in Nayre's statements concerning the police.

Stepping to a radio cabinet, Brady pressed the switch. He struck a very appropriate broadcast, a news program, that was suddenly interrupted.

"Flash!" came a voice. "Miami Beach police are seeking the perpetrators of the most stupendous crime in years. Tonight, unknown criminals raided the Equator Hotel, murdered Colonel Jose Durez, with three other members of his faction, and took coffers containing ten million dollars which the dead men brought from Centralba.

"Police believe that a tip-off enabled the criminals to accomplish their work. Though the murderers escaped by water, from Miami Beach, the authorities are still searching for a man named Colin Nayre, who disappeared with them. Evidence indicates that Nayre could have informed the local criminals of every move that Durez intended -"

It was Nayre who interrupted the broadcast, by snapping off the switch. His face seemed frozen as he looked toward Brady, who said nothing. It was Nayre who finally spoke.

"They've figured it all out," he declared glumly. "Just as I expected: I'm the goat!"

"Lucky you told me to stick around," returned Brady. "The old crate is ready, like you wanted."

"To take me back to Centralba?"

"Too long a hop," Brady shook his head emphatically. "How about the Isle of Pines?"

"It will do," nodded Nayre. "I can get to Centralba easily from there."

"No use, then, to wait any longer." Brady gave a beckon that included Margo. Nayre turned suddenly and saw the girl's intensity. Margo was half risen from the chair, her hands on the arms. She eased back, hoping to show indifference when Nayre looked her way. Too late Brady caught the look that flashed between them, and asked:

"Isn't Miss Lane coming along?"

"She certainly is," assured Nayre firmly. "She's heard too much for her to stay here."

"But I can't go!" expressed Margo helplessly. "Not unless I can stop at my hotel, first, for more clothes."

"The bathing is fine at the Isle of Pines," snapped Nayre. "It's south of Cuba, you know. You can finish your swim there."

"All the way back to Miami?"

Nayre laughed, indulgently.

"Brady has friends on the Isle of Pines," he declared. "They owe him money, like everybody does. We'll stake you to a whole new wardrobe, and a Clipper trip back here."

"Sure we will," added Brady, "and there are a lot of wraps in the plane. You can bundle up in those. It will be a nice trip by moonlight. The crate will hold out that far."

ARGUMENT wouldn't help, and Margo knew it. Meekly, she accompanied Nayre and Brady out to the hangar, and stood by while they hurriedly put the plane in readiness. It was a cabin ship, though of a very antiquated model. Standing near the propeller, Margo watched Nayre spin it when Brady called "Contact."

Then, before Margo could make up her mind toward the next step, Nayre brought out his revolver and pointed her toward the cabin.

Only a gesture was needed, for Margo seemed quite resigned to the coming trip. She would have stepped into the ship if she hadn't chanced to glance toward the highway, where she saw a pair of headlights turn suddenly into the sand road.

With a quick turn, Margo darted across the wide stretch that formed Brady's rough landing field. She knew that she was a perfect target in the moonlight, but she felt sure that Nayre wouldn't aim for her. She heard his revolver speak, and the mere report shuddered her, but she kept on running.

Another gun responded. It stabbed from the newly arrived car, which Margo recognized as a taxicab. Stumbling over a hump in the sand, Margo landed with a half somersault that ended with a roar.

The roar came from Brady's plane, as it took off. More shots were spurting from the cab, but Nayre wasn't answering them. Margo knew that he must have hopped into the plane with Brady.

Then strong hands were lifting her from the sand. The lights of the plane were twinkling high, but the burning eyes that Margo saw were close. They were the eyes of The Shadow, peering from beneath the brim of a slouch hat that matched the blackness of his cloak.

He was walking toward her car, and on the way, Margo was panting every detail of her adventure.

When they reached the roadster, Margo heard The Shadow's whispered laugh. It denoted full understanding.

"Drive back to the Equator," he told her. "I shall return later, with the cab. You will have time to finish your swim -"

"Before you arrive?"

Again, The Shadow laughed, in response to Margo's eager question. His next words corrected her.

"You won't find me at the Equator," spoke The Shadow. "But I think you will meet your friend, Lamont Cranston, if you look for him. I believe that he has been looking for you most of the evening."

CHAPTER VII. THE SHADOW'S COURSE

It was afternoon, and Margo Lane was gazing from the roof garden of the Hotel Tropico, in Miami. She was looking across the wide green strip of Bayfront Park, to the greater breadth of blue that represented Biscayne Bay.

Among the assorted speedboats Margo saw one of somewhat larger build, yet with the trim lines of a

racer.

Coming up the bay, the boat was tooting for a drawbridge to open, and Margo identified the shrill, whistly blast that carried across the water.

"There's another," stated Margo. "That makes eleven."

Lamont Cranston didn't even glance up from his newspaper as he inquired absently:

"Eleven what?"

"Eleven of the mosquito ships," returned Margo, a bit petulantly. "I've been counting them, all afternoon, as you asked. Or didn't you?"

Cranston's usually immobile lips flickered with a smile.

"Sorry, Margo," he said. "I did ask you to count the mosquito fleet. Seven, you say?"

"Eleven," corrected Margo. "There should be one more. Go back to your reading. I'll watch for it."

Cranston gave the newspaper a flourish.

"A great deal here about the Durez murder," he declared. "The police are quite positive that a former con man named Murk Wessel maneuvered it. The only trouble is, they can't prove it."

Margo nodded, still a trifle annoyed. She had heard so much talk concerning Murk Wessel. The police had two reasons for suspecting him to be the master of the murder ring. First, all the dead crooks found on the battle round at the Equator had been former cronies of Murk. Again, Murk himself had been seen in Miami the morning before the crime.

There was also talk of a mysterious Mr. Brown who had reserved a suite at the Hotel Equator, thanks to the connivance of an employee who had been slain while helping crooks get away with Durez's millions.

Very obviously, Mr. Brown was none other than Murk Wessel, for the mysterious guest had disappeared at the time of the robbery. At least, the police regarded it as obvious, but that didn't mean it would stand in a court of law.

Murk Wessel would have to be found first. Once found, whatever alibi he gave would have to be shattered. Even then, the evidence against him would be largely circumstantial. So far, the police were still occupied with the preliminary work - that of locating the man they wanted.

"I've not only heard of Murk Wessel," mused Cranston, "I've met him, Margo. Two or three times, and he was always using an alias. I don't think the chap liked me. I knew too much about him."

"Why didn't you have him arrested?"

Margo put the question tartly, hoping that Cranston would catch the deeper inference. As The Shadow, Cranston didn't usually meet known criminals three times. Once was the usual rule, at which time he generally terminated their careers without having to call in the law.

Therefore, Margo's question really veiled another. She was asking The Shadow why he hadn't been up to his usual form, in Murk's case.

"Murk was a con man, then," observed Cranston. "You know how those fellows usually operate. They choose dupes who are quite as greedy as themselves. They show the suckers how to make some easy

money, and then trim them."

"Is that why you let Murk go?"

"Yes. As an object lesson to the dupes, whose money I saved. It would not have been just for Murk to pay a penalty, while they went scot-free. I had Murk listed, and was waiting for him to try to trim an honest man."

"Meanwhile Murk turned murderer."

"Something that couldn't be anticipated, Margo. Con men of his type seldom go in for violence. Besides" - Cranston's eyes steadied upon Margo - "I'm not so sure that he would have gone in for murder in this case, had the Durez crowd been an honest lot."

MARGO tried to catch the meaning in those eyes: whether or not Cranston might be expressing an actual opinion. He was certainly basing his statement on Margo's own testimony, regarding Jose Durez, which she had learned through Colin Nayre.

In substance, Nayre had said that Durez planned a new revolution in Centralba, at the cost of many lives. It might be fortunate, therefore, that Durez and his fellow conspirators had died.

Unless their revolt could have broken the regime of Luis Castenago and restored Francisco Peridor to the presidency of a true republic. Such a result would seem worthwhile, at any sacrifice!

Debating the question for about the fortieth time, Margo returned her attention to the bay. She kept watching for another mosquito boat that didn't appear. Reports said that twelve left Miami, the night before, to scour the coast for Murk Wessel and his batch of murderers.

Capable of sixty miles an hour, those ships would certainly have headed off an average craft. Their failure to find Murk signified that he must have come ashore and continued the getaway by land.

In fact, the roof-garden radio was introducing a news commentator, who supported that probability.

"The search for Murk Wessel has become nation-wide," declared the commentator, "but nowhere is it being handled more thoroughly than in New York. The Manhattan police have heard from several unnamed sources, supposed to be underworld informants, that Murk Wessel was seen in the big city shortly after noon today.

"How he arrived from Miami, whether by plane, train, or automobile, is not the important question. The police are trying to learn whether he is hiding out, or trying to create an alibi. Murk is alleged to have many friends in crimedom. How far their testimony can be trusted, is doubtful. If Murk seeks an alibi in this case of wholesale murder, it will have to be a strong one."

Margo leaned toward Cranston.

"Do you think Murk's alibi, whatever it is, could possibly stand?"

"It might," returned Cranston, without a smile. "The police believe a great deal, Margo. Last night, I understand, an officer at Miami Beach actually believed a young lady who said she was going for a swim in the Equator pool."

The brunette gave her head a slight toss at hearing Cranston's reference to her unusual adventure. Cranston's eyes were almost smiling, even though his lips weren't. Margo couldn't keep up the pretense of being angry.

"I did take a swim, later," she said. "What's more, I found out facts you wanted to know. Perhaps, though, you'd have preferred for me to go to the Isle of Pines."

"Not at all," assured Cranston. "If you had, you wouldn't be here to count the mosquito boats for me. How many were there? Ah, yes; eleven."

Before Margo could think of a retort, the announcer's voice came on again, stating that the last of the mosquito fleet had reported in at the Miami Yacht Basin, with no report of a lurking boat along the coast. This was proof conclusive that Murk Wessel must have continued his flight by land, which, in turn, backed the report that the suspected murderer had reached New York.

"Yet the Isle of Pines is very pleasant," Cranston remarked. "You would have enjoyed it, Margo. I'd have done better to count those mosquito boats myself. I don't think I would have missed one. There were twelve, Margo, not just eleven."

THIS time, Margo was angry at herself. How she'd missed sight of one ship, was a riddle. They'd all gone through the drawbridge, which had to rise when each approached.

She expected Cranston to chide her further, but he didn't. His understanding of Margo's real emotions was quite as keen as his recognition of her pretending moods. His casual way of changing the subject softened Margo's hurt.

"About Nayre -" Cranston reflected. "Did he say why he was going back to Centralba?"

Margo shook her head.

"They're still looking for him," Cranston continued, "although they're trying to find Murk first. From the standpoint of circumstantial evidence, it looks quite bad for Nayre, having Brady all set to fly him away from Miami."

"But Brady hadn't expected Nayre so soon -"

"A good point, Margo, especially because Brady thought you were a friend of Nayre's. Let's take Nayre at his word. He wanted to get away from the Durez crowd before they dragged him into business he didn't like. They were powerful, and he knew it might be troublesome, giving them the slip. So he had his friend Brady ready."

Margo nodded earnestly. She liked the theory. However, the most important point remained unexplained.

"Why should Nayre go back to Centralba?" queried Margo. "Any danger from Durez would certainly be less than the menace of Castenago."

This time, Cranston really smiled.

"You said that Brady wasn't surprised to see you," he told Margo. "Apparently, he took it for granted that Nayre would have a girl helping him to escape. Even a girl in a bathing costume didn't faze Brady. Yet Nayre would have to be a very persuasive chap, to convince a young lady to aid his flight at such short notice."

"Why, yes. But -"

"But Nayre wasn't at all intrigued by the situation. You thought he was woman proof. No wonder! If he'd admired you, as you deserved, he could have put away his gun and relied on his own personality, and the

moonlight, to convince you that you ought to help him. Therefore, comparing the Nayre that Brady knew with the Nayre you met, we must assume -"

"That Nayre is in love!" exclaimed Margo, as Cranston purposely paused. "Gone completely ga-ga over some girl in Centralba! That explains why he's gone back there!"

There was a nod from Cranston.

"Precisely," he said. "Having settled the problem of Colin Nayre, I can now consider the case of Murk Wessel. Having met him three times, I might very well help the hunt for him. Sorry, Margo. It looks like New York for me."

Margo couldn't withhold her disappointment.

"You talked of an air cruise down to Rio, Lamont. That's why I was here in Miami, to begin with."

"I know. The cruise starts tomorrow. You'd better take it, Margo. You'll like the crowd, and the pilot, too. His name is Kent Allard. Quite a celebrated flier; I forget what it was that made him famous, but he is. You'll hear from him."

CRANSTON was gone, and Margo, standing in the gathering dusk, felt very much alone. She wished she'd said she wouldn't take the cruise, but it was too late, now, to change her mind. By now, Lamont was speeding to the airport in a cab, and Margo knew his ship was ready for an immediate take-off.

All she could do was stand and watch from the rail of the high roof. Darkness had settled, a half hour later, when she saw two lights rise to the northwest and blink a signal from above the airport. Then those lights were dwindling to the north.

Their flash had been Lamont's parting signal. He knew that Margo would be watching for it.

It hurt, parting with a friend like Cranston. The darkened waters of Biscayne Bay reflected the lights from the Venetian Way with a dewy dance, when Margo looked in that direction. It couldn't be the waves that blurred the mirrored lights, for there were none. The trouble was that Margo's eyes were just about as dry as the bay itself.

From a table secluded among the palms that sprinkled the hotel roof, a guest who had just arrived looked across and saw Margo gazing over the rail. His face was different from Cranston's, but his lips phrased the same low whispered laugh, a tone that belonged to The Shadow.

Those blinking lights had marked the departure of Cranston's plane, under the control of a hired pilot. The Shadow, himself, had returned, for his future course lay southward, not to the north. Margo Lane wasn't going to find herself without a friend when she took the air cruise, tomorrow.

As happened often, The Shadow's theory regarding the whereabouts of a missing criminal was as at direct variance with that held by the law. He still intended to look for Murk Wessel, but in the last place where anyone would expect to find the missing murderer!

CHAPTER VIII. FORCED LANDING

MARGO LANE liked Kent Allard, as did the other members of the cruise party. It didn't take her long to find out why the pilot of their deluxe plane was celebrated.

Several years ago, Allard had started on a nonstop flight to South America, only to disappear from civilized ken. He had reappeared after a few year's absence, in company with some Guatemalan Indians

of the almost forgotten Xinca tribe.

Having landed in their midst, Allard had become the ruler of the Indians, and the departure of their white chief had been a cause of sorrow to the entire tribe.

It didn't occur to Margo that Allard could have been in America, particularly New York City, during the years when he had reputedly been among the Xincas; yet such was the actual case. The reason, too, was as definite as the fact itself.

Kent Allard was The Shadow.

To hide completely his identity from crimeland, he had pretended to disappear, before beginning open war upon the rulers of the underworld. Of course, as The Shadow, he had found it necessary to appear in public, so he had adopted the guise of Lamont Cranston.

Day in, day out, The Shadow posed as Cranston, and had almost come to regard the name and personality as part of himself. As Cranston, he could meet his various secret agents, among them Margo Lane, without necessarily hiding the fact that he was also The Shadow.

Should they be forced, under unexpected pressure, to declare that Cranston was The Shadow, he could simply drop that personality forever and keep his enemies hunting him until doomsday. Doomsday, in their case, would be translated by what would probably happen to them if The Shadow caught up with them while they were on the hunt for Cranston, the man they could never find.

There were times, rare indeed, when The Shadow did drop the guise of Cranston and become himself: Kent Allard.

This was one of those times.

The Shadow wanted to go to Centralba. He couldn't very well go as Cranston. The gatomontes, or secret police who served as Castenago's private organization, were very suspicious of all wealthy Americans who visited Centralba.

About all that such visitors could do would be to buy up concessions which had been sold to half a dozen others. Through various technicalities, all such concessions, together with the purchase money, became the eventual property of Luis Castenago.

Meanwhile, the gatomontes kept "protecting" the visiting Americans, to such a degree that they were glad to get out of Centralba, regardless of financial loss.

In his way, Luis Castenago made such big-time confidence men as Murk Wessel look like very small children who hadn't been broken of the habit of swiping pennies off stacks of newspapers. So, to meet Castenago properly, The Shadow was choosing a unique mode of entry into Centralba.

He was going there as Kent Allard, and because Margo Lane would probably escape suspicion, he was taking her along as an unwitting helper.

LIKE a great bowl of bluish chalcedony, the Caribbean Sea lay beneath the speeding wings of Allard's cruise plane. Other members of the party, half a dozen in all, were chatting about the fog-tinged weather, while Margo Lane was watching the pilot.

In one of those vague ways, which couldn't be explained, Kent Allard reminded Margo of Lamont Cranston. When she tried to reason out the resemblance, Margo decided, smilingly, that it was because the two were so different.

Allard's face was thinner than Cranston's; in a sense, it was almost gaunt. His eyes were set, rather than steady. His motions, though deliberate, were done with a precision, whereas Cranston's were leisurely to the point of indolence.

It seemed that Allard must have acquired his manner from association with the Xinca Indians, just as Cranston had learned a placid philosophy from the lamas of Tibet. Those things became ingrown with a man who experienced them.

Margo didn't begin to realize that one background could be dropped at will, and the other taken up. Few people could have done it, however, though The Shadow did.

He'd found, though, that people would compare Allard with Cranston, as Margo was doing at present. It didn't matter, because the longer the comparison continued, the more they would argue themselves into deciding that the two were different.

The thing that served The Shadow best was his ability to render each character unique. No two things can be unique and at the same time alike. Thus, Allard and Cranston, twinned at first impression, veered from each other, never to be reunited in any person's mind.

Where the ship was at present, Margo hadn't an idea. She knew that it planned to swing from island to island, and also follow the coast of the continent, for it was a land plane.

Allard hadn't announced the exact itinerary, but the passengers were talking in terms of Panama. Then, very suddenly, came the cry that land was in sight, ahead.

From the cabin window, Margo saw a low-lying coast, with a sprawling town stretched back from banana docks where white steamships were loading cargo.

If there happened to be a landing field, Margo didn't see it, and Allard, for some reason, ignored it. He was giving the ship altitude, as he headed for high-rising mountains that formed a background behind the seaport setting.

Someone was talking about fog above the mountains. Then laughter followed. The "fog" was smoke, issuing from a live volcano. Of a sudden, laughter ceased when one of the passengers exclaimed:

"Centralba!"

The very word cast gloom. It produced too graphic images of Castenago and his gatomontes. Out of the buzz, it became evident that everyone wanted to question Allard as to his choice of destination.

Recognizing the low chatter, Allard turned from the controls and spoke to Margo, the nearest passenger.

"Tell them it is a forced landing." His tone was clipped, quite the opposite of Cranston's drawly speech. "There is an excellent airport at Libertad, the capital. We shall use it."

Margo passed the word along. Others were doubtful, wondering. While Margo was trying to separate the queries, Allard did it for her.

"Our gasoline is low." He gestured toward a cluster of a dozen dials, among the many that spread over the panel. "Probably a faulty gas tank. Castenago won't annoy this party, unless individual members criticize his regime. There is an American consulate in Libertad; we shall notify it as soon as we arrive.

"The Imperial Hotel is excellent, and has survived half a dozen earthquakes. Anyone who wants to go home can take a train from Libertad to Puerto Marias, the town we just passed, and take the first ship

for New Orleans."

WHILE Margo was dispensing that information in individual doses, Allard guided the ship through a wide, curving mountain pass, where the roar of the motors awoke flocks of condors and sent the giant thunderbirds away in scattering squadrons.

The mountains spread into regiments of peaks, and miles ahead, a great valley splashed the vivid green of tropical verdure.

Fears of Castenago dwindled as the air voyagers watched the unfolding scene. Traces of white appeared among the green and soon became a solid splotch, with dabs of faint pink and creamy-yellow serving as a touch of color. The plane was approaching a city so charming in its setting, so bizarre in its own appearance, that no one could retain thoughts of the ominous.

Conspicuously inviting, the airport practically beckoned to Allard's plane. He crossed it, banked, and came to a perfect landing inside a mile-wide inclosure, where men in picturesque uniform came dashing over to meet the ship.

Some of these men were airport attendants; others police; still more were soldiers. One representative of each group was on hand when Allard stepped from the plane.

Allard talked in Spanish, with a trace of local accent that seemed to please them, with the exception of two listeners, who wore green-gray uniforms and remained in the background. After the passengers alighted, to be received with courteous bows by all but the green-gray pair, Allard undertoned to Margo:

"Gatomontes. They don't trust anyone, not even themselves. Don't tell the other passengers; they'd only worry."

Margo was pleased to thus receive Allard's confidence. She remembered what Cranston had said that afternoon in Miami. He'd spoken well of Allard, and Margo had seen the aviator that very evening, but hadn't known who he was until the next day.

When Cranston mentioned persons briefly, it meant that he regarded them as real friends. In this instance, it applied to Allard. Cranston was right in wanting Margo to take the air trip. She and Kent Allard were good friends already.

Automobiles were at the airport - large, closed cars that took the party of eight, in two groups of four. Margo was in the car with Allard, and just before they started she saw one of the gatomontes speak to an airport official. With a jerky bow and a monkey smile, the official bobbed his head into the car.

"It is very hot," he said to Allard. "So, senor, I must lower the window curtains. It is not good that you should get the sunstroke."

The driver lowered his curtain, too, the real purpose obviously being to prevent the visitors from seeing too much of Libertad until their status could be properly determined. As they rode along, Allard turned a curtain slightly and let Margo peer through the crack.

"You won't see much, anyway," he told her. "I've been to Libertad before, back in the days when the town had a more appropriate name. This driver is taking us through all the back streets, to reach the consulate."

"Will it be like this," asked Margo, "all the time we're here?"

"Quite the opposite," assured Allard. "After I've chatted with the consul, we'll be welcome. It takes

awhile for the proper word to reach a dictator like Louis Castenago. Those chaps usually become cordial when it is good policy to do so."

A SHORT stop was made at the consulate, and after they left, Margo observed that the blinds were no longer drawn in the car. However, the trip to the hotel was very short, and Margo saw little other than white walls and a broad, sleepy avenue, where even the palms were too tired to wave in the brilliant tropical sun.

She noted that the avenue was called "Avenida Castenago" and that the Imperial Hotel fronted a broad, parklike square - termed "Plaza del Libertador," which probably meant Castenago, too.

The dictator's pretense of being a liberator struck Margo as quite ironic. She wondered what Castenago looked like, and she found out, to a slight degree, when she bought some postage stamps at the hotel desk.

On the way up to her room, Margo noted that the stamps bore Castenago's portrait, that of a wide jawed man whose smudgy eyebrows gave the stamps a canceled look. Not much to judge Castenago by, but Margo decided that she wouldn't like him if she met him. By this time, she was feeling the oppressive heat of Libertad and decided to take a siesta, as the natives did.

She had hardly begun her nap before the telephone bell rang. Answering sleepily, Margo heard Allard's voice. It had the sharp clip of an order.

"Be ready at six o'clock," he said. "We're banqueting with Luis Castenago. If there's anything you need in the way of an evening gown, or what not, just call the desk and give the order. They'll make the local shops deliver anything that's needed. Don't worry about prices. If they're too high, Castenago will print some more money and pay the bills."

From her window, Margo took another look at the stilled green of the Plaza del Libertador. The silence of that deserted area seemed to reflect the ominous tyranny of Castenago, whose word was law in Centralba. She wondered if the plaza would ever be alive before the dictator's regime ended.

Alive!

Margo wondered, too, if that term still applied to Colin Nayre, so recently returned to Centralba in defiance of Castenago's power!

CHAPTER IX. CASTENAGO'S BANQUET

AT six Margo met the others in the lobby. They were all agog over the coming banquet. They'd taken Castenago at his word and bought plenty of things they required, from the shops in Libertad.

Margo, herself, had chosen a modest, but attractive evening gown - and paid for it. She didn't care to be indebted to anyone, even Luis Castenago.

Some ludicrous things happened in the lobby.

First, one of the group happened to mention to an English-speaking clerk that they were "members of Allard's party." The clerk was instantly horrified.

"There is but one party in Centralba!" he exclaimed. "The Castenago party!"

It took a deal of explaining before the clerk could understand the various interpretations of the English term "party." After that, Margo and the rest decided to announce themselves simply as "friends of Senor

Allard."

It was funny, too, the way the bellboys hopped about picking up packages of unwanted merchandise, to take back to the shops. They were doing something most unusual for bellboys: they were refusing tips. To accept gratuities from anyone important enough to be entertained personally by Castenago, was definitely taboo.

Margo had in idea that the bellhops would get their remuneration later, after Castenago ordered a new press run of currency.

Joining the group, Kent Allard provided the last touch of pleasantry, if it could be called such. He gave a package to a bellboy, telling him to take it back to the shop where it came from, because the shirts were the wrong size. He tucked a note into the parcel, to explain the matter fully, and then turned to his friends.

"I trust the banquet won't be a lavish affair," he said dryly. "You understand why, of course."

Headshakes proved they didn't understand. So Allard explained. It was Castenago's policy to wine and dine his foes, political or otherwise, whenever occasion required. Such occasion was invariably the death of the enemies in question, usually within the next two days.

Castenago always allowed enough time to pass so that no one would accuse him of having poisoned his guests. After that, sudden things happened.

Accidents or suicides were the general rule. Somehow, banqueting with Castenago inspired certain persons to dangerous undertakings, such as taking wild rides along the difficult highways of Centralba just when a bridge was going out or a landslide due to come. They'd even been known to go climbing volcanoes and slip into the craters.

Others, very curiously, became despondent after dining at the presidential palace. Such persons always tried to outvie each other in finding unique ways of suicide.

One sample case was that of a political opponent who had actually drunk poisoned wine that he had intended to send to Castenago - so the gatomontes reported. Finding the dictator to be so kindly a soul, the would-be assassin had become remorseful and taken his own life.

The listeners began to get uneasy, until Allard reassured them.

"This is only a ten-course banquet," he stated. "Nothing ever happens unless there are more than twelve."

"What about Jose Durez?" asked Margo. "Did he and his friends dine with Castenago before leaving Centralba?"

"They just had a snack," returned Allard. "A mere five-course luncheon. Their mistake was their ignorance of American customs. Murk Wessel didn't invite them to dinner in Miami Beach, so they weren't prepared for anything to happen."

STEPPING from the hotel, Margo paused in amazement to see the plaza thoroughly alive. The afternoon had cooled, and the citizenry of Libertad was abroad.

Most surprising was the fact that many people looked happy. They were laughing, chatting, and even singing when they met with strolling groups of musicians who carried odd instruments shaped like guitars.

"They were the mariachis," explained Allard, referring to the minstrels. "You'll see them everywhere in Libertad. Watch for the marimba players; they're even more interesting."

The ride by car to Castenago's palace was quite different from the earlier trip through Libertad. It was something like a guided tour through the capital, with Allard pointing out the interesting features.

Passing a great market place, where Indians in fanciful silver-buttoned jackets peered from beneath huge sombreros, the car swung around a lavish building of pink stucco that was centered in a tropical garden marvelous in its colorings.

Men were busily at work among the shrubbery, and unlike the natives, they were hard at their tasks. They didn't even turn when the cars went by. Evidently these workmen were imports.

"The new casino," stated Allard. "Eventually, it will make Monte Carlo a hamburger stand, in comparison."

"Who gambles there?" asked Margo.

"Americans - what few there are in Centralba. More will come." Allard spoke positively. "Castenago isn't trying to hurry them. The casino, itself, will bring them in time. It's already attracted some Europeans, who can no longer play at Monte Carlo."

Turning through quaint, narrow streets, where upstairs balconies jutted above the shop fronts, the car zigzagged toward the outskirts of the city. It detoured in order to pass a broad esplanade, fringed with strange tropical trees that half hid some old, yellow buildings that looked like relics from the days of the Spanish conquerors.

Someone was saying that this was the campus of National University, when Allard directed Margo's attention the other way. He was pointing out the first marimba player that they had seen, and Margo had time to study the musician while the car paused for others to peer at the university.

The marimba player was setting up his instrument on a broad sidewalk opposite the esplanade, while eager natives watched. His dark face was topped by a fancy-colored bandanna, and his shoes, like his gaudy jacket, had silver buckles.

More interesting to Margo than the bare-legged player, was the marimba itself. The crude instrument was a long board, with keys much like a xylophone, but beneath the keyboard were hollow gourds.

Two dozen in number, the gourds ranged in size from very small to huge, though the line looked somewhat irregular. When the player struck the marimba with small hammers, the gourds gave out soft, plaintive tones, perfectly in key. Evidently they had been matched for sound, rather than appearance, but before Margo could catch the strains of the native melody, the car was on its way.

Through a gateway not far from the marimba player, Margo glimpsed a lovely patio surrounded by a wall. As they swung the corner to follow the walled estate, Allard spoke.

"That is where Francisco Peridor lives," he said. "He is the head of National University, hence his residence is directly opposite it."

Through the slight dusk Margo saw the uniforms of soldiers, patrolling outside the grounds. She thought that she caught sight of a slinking figure in green-gray, one of the gatomontes.

Margo said nothing, but she felt that she fully understood. Francisco Peridor, friend of the Centralban people, had been placed under "protective custody" by Luis Castenago.

The car took another swing and the presidential palace bulked ahead. It was of modern architecture, but excellent in design; splendid with the blaze of lights that threw scintillating beams upon gushing fountains.

Only briefly did Margo observe a flaw in this glorious sight. As they flanked the palace, a square, low-roofed extension was visible behind it, forming an ugly contrast to the gorgeous palace.

"The presidio," remarked Allard, "where Castenago keeps his garrison. Very convenient, to have the military close at hand in case of a revolt. It helps politically too. They say that Castenago frequently receives senators through the front door of the palace and bows them out the back - to a jail cell in the presidio."

Margo shuddered, for by then, the car had reached the front of the palace and an escort of guards in full-dress uniform were waiting to conduct the guests into Castenago's presence.

All the way up the marble steps that lay between the spraying fountains, Margo kept wondering if she and her friends would come out by the same way!

USHERED to a vast reception room, they were met by Luis Castenago, himself.

The postage stamps didn't do justice to the supreme ruler of Centralba. No portrait could have properly depicted him. His face was too mobile to be caught in any fixed pose that could show the evil that it represented. Just as a snake is terrifying by its writhe, so were Castenago's features.

The dictator was heavy-set, with a short neck that made his head look as if planted between his shoulders. His face was wide, which added to the spread of his black-smudged eyebrows. In turn, those smudges accentuated the fierce eyes beneath, that could glitter, or dull, whichever their owner chose.

Castenago's nose was wide, an appendage to his broad forehead. Such a nose, which had no bridge between the eyes, would have appeared a deformity on any other face, but it fitted Castenago's.

The width of his forehead, matched by the huge sweep of his jaw, demanded a central feature, and the nose supplied it. As for Castenago's mouth, it, too, looked normal against the broad area of his total physiognomy. The coarseness of his thick lips was scarcely noticeable, for it offered no great contrast to his general appearance.

Castenago had the stern look of an Indian whose ancestors had roved the mountains long before the coming of the conquerors; but the Spaniards, in their turn, had contributed to his heritage.

There were probably other races mingled in his blood, and together they had produced - Luis Castenago. His nationality very definitely could be called his own, whatever it was.

This human snake, like bona fide members of the reptile family, possessed a power of attraction. His polite bow, his welcoming gestures, were sinuous. When he spoke, there was a veiled hiss to his tone that the courtesy of his words, spoken in English, could not hide.

The relief was the fact that Castenago turned his attention from one member of the visiting group to another, often enough to ease the tension that each individual felt.

There was just one exception to the last-named rule: Kent Allard. Margo was noting that Castenago did not daunt the aviator at all, when a major-domo dressed in colorful livery, announced in Spanish that dinner was served, or something to that effect. Therewith, Castenago bowed his guests into the banquet hall.

The dinner was served, with all ten courses; no more. The guests felt much at ease when Castenago

arose, signifying that the meal was ended. He was lifting a wine glass, ready to propose a toast, when he saw Allard at his right. Poising his glass, Castenago purred politely:

"Your privilege, Senor Allard."

"I propose a toast," spoke Allard stolidly, "to Centralba's esteemed citizen, and former president, Professor Francisco Peridor."

If a time bomb had dropped through the palace roof, to lie upon the banquet table, waiting to explode, the silence of the startled guests could not have been greater. The night was warm, but they stood frozen, until, to their amazement, Castenago raised his glass to his lips in acknowledgment of Allard's toast.

It was the signal for all to do the same, and when the toast was drunk, it was Castenago who again set the example, by smashing his glass upon the floor. There were echoing tinkles as other glasses fell, rather than were tossed, from numbed hands.

Only Allard's glass remained intact. He calmly replaced it on the table, while Castenago glared, only to temper that expression with a shrug.

"I REGRET, indeed," spoke Castenago, "that Professor Peridor could not be with us this evening. Since you esteem him so highly, Senor Allard, I assume that you would like to meet him."

"It would be a privilege, your excellency."

"It may then be arranged," declared Castenago. "Until then, senor, it would be quite unwise to call upon Professor Peridor without invitation. Due to an unfortunate misunderstanding" - by now, Castenago was addressing all the guests - "Professor Peridor has retired temporarily from public life.

"He was mistakenly linked with the faction headed by Jose Durez, a very unpopular group. It has therefore been necessary to provide Professor Peridor with military protection."

Castenago finished by bowing his guests from the banquet room. His manner was so abrupt that Margo sensed what lay behind it. Castenago had recognized a challenge from Allard, and was ready for the duel.

What that battle of courtesy and wits would produce, events would soon tell. Certainly, however, matters could not long remain in a preliminary stage. There was nothing humorous in the thought that sprang to Margo's mind; indeed, she was considering it as something very serious.

Margo was thinking that Luis Castenago might classify Kent Allard as a special type of guest, despite the fact that the banquet had been two courses short!

CHAPTER X. MAN FROM THE PAST

To others, it might have seemed that Luis Castenago still considered it important to entertain his guests, but Margo deemed otherwise. She was certain - too certain - that the dictator was trying to get rid of them, when they returned to the reception room.

Of course, Castenago had an excuse, and a good one, that he put quite blandly.

"You must see the casino," he assured them. "It is one of the sights of Libertad: an effort to produce international friendship, because, if ever all men are brothers, it is at the gaming table. This is the most popular hour at the casino, so I shall arrange an escort to take you there without delay."

Castenago bowed himself through a curtained doorway, which happened to be close to the chair that Margo had taken. Turning slightly, Margo caught a view of the edge of the doorway and saw the man that Castenago met beyond.

He was a hard-faced man, in a captain's uniform, evidently the successor of Colin Nayre as commander of the palace guards.

Margo was just near enough to overhear the words that passed between them.

"This Allard may mean trouble," said Castenago. "I shall order a search of his room at the hotel, and double the guards at Peridor's."

"Shall I attend to those details, excellency?" the captain inquired.

"No. You have a different duty," Castenago told him. "You are to escort Allard and his friends to the casino -"

"And watch them while they are there -"

"No, no, captain. Again, you are wrong. You will return here. Others will watch Allard while he is at the casino."

Margo was turned away when Castenago came from the curtained doorway, accompanied by the hard-faced captain. She couldn't tell whether Castenago was eyeing her, so she decided not to speak to Allard until they were in their car.

Unfortunately, the captain took it upon himself to assign the guests to their places in the automobiles. Margo and Allard were placed in different cars.

They rode to the casino by a roundabout route, which convinced Margo that the captain was taking time while Castenago arranged the hotel search and the doubling of the guards at Peridor's. They passed Peridor's residence on the way, and so far as Margo could observe, the soldiers numbered no more than they had earlier.

Again, Margo saw the marimba player, who by this time had gathered quite a crowd about him. The citizens of Libertad certainly enjoyed night life when entertainment was free.

As for visitors, they were ready to pay for their entertainment. That was evident when the cars reached the casino. The place was well thronged, and Allard's friends caught the fever. They all wanted to play roulette, Margo included, because she believed she would thus gain a chance to speak to Allard.

She did, after the captain had introduced them all to Pierre Treban, the dapper Frenchman who operated the casino. Finding a place beside Allard, Margo spoke in an undertone that was covered by the rattle of chips about them.

"Be careful when the captain leaves," said Margo. "Others will be watching you."

Allard lifted his eyebrows slightly, indicating that he wanted to hear more.

"Castenago is ordering a search of your room," Margo added. "He is also doubling the guard at Peridor's, in case you should try to visit there."

Allard's face was so immobile that Margo doubted if he believed her. She explained how she had overheard the conversation between Castenago and the captain.

With a slight nod that certified Margo's statements, Allard lifted a few chips and placed them on the board. Margo did the same. It was good business, showing interest in roulette to hide something else.

When Margo looked again, a few minutes later, Allard was gone!

ACTUALLY, Allard hadn't needed Margo's information, though it was helpful. Copying the example of other players, he strolled from the side door of the casino and took a walk in the garden.

It was evidently their way of changing bad luck for good, but Allard was using it as a preliminary process. What he saw - or, rather, did not see - fitted with well-formed conclusions.

The workers who had been so busily engaged that afternoon, had laid off during the evening.

Strolling back into the casino, Allard observed its many surrounding pillars that supported a balcony, where people could watch the play on the gambling floor. A good spot for hidden observers, that balcony.

The pillars made good shelter too, especially because of darkened doors beyond them. The casino was singularly lacking of police and soldiers; nor were any gatromontes in sight.

All of which assured Kent Allard that he was probably being watched. What Margo Lane had said merely proved the point. So Allard calmly crossed the floor and went out by the main door.

In the driveway, he beckoned to a taxicab which was at the head of a short line. Taking the cab, he told the driver to take him to the Imperial Hotel.

From the moment that the cab pulled away, Allard knew that he was being followed. The car that took up his trail came sliding from darkness on the far side of the casino building.

Allard began making suggestions to his own driver, regarding shorter routes to the hotel. Sometimes, he told the driver to go slower; at other moments, Allard called for speed.

He ordered more speed as they swung into a narrow street; then, suddenly, he told the driver to take the next turn to the left. The order came so unexpectedly, that the driver had to jam the brakes as he rounded the corner. The ancient cab rattled heavily, and with the clatter came the closing of a door; something that the driver did not hear.

Very neatly, Kent Allard had dropped from the cab just as it passed the corner. His strides across the sidewalk were very rapid; they carried him to a narrow alleyway, which he reached just as the trailing car swung into sight.

Allard didn't have time to observe the car's occupants; but that wasn't important at the moment. In their turn, they didn't see him at all, which happened to be very important.

As soon as the car had passed, Allard strode deeper into the narrow passage between buildings. It wasn't an alley in the usual sense, but merely a rift, of slightly more than shoulder width. The walls flanking the space were white, and couldn't have offered a chance at concealment in the glaring daytime. But this was night, and the shadows of the buildings rendered the narrow way obscure.

Where the passage widened into a tiny court, Allard tried a door in the wall on the left. The door opened and he stepped into a small storeroom, lined with shelves of merchandise.

Using a tiny flashlight, Allard recognized the package that he had sent from the hotel, that afternoon. It was tied just as he had sent it.

Opening the package, he brought out a slouch hat, a black cloak, and a pair of thin gloves. There were no automatics in the package. Allard already carried them. An aviator famed for landing in remote portions of the jungle would be expected to go about armed.

It took but a few moments for Allard to transform himself into The Shadow. Instead of leaving by the outside passage, he went through the shop itself.

In New York, and other American cities, The Shadow used various retreats where he could change from one guise to another. The rule still applied to Libertad, the isolated capital of the remote banana republic of Centralba!

SO silent was the shop, that the swish of The Shadow's cloak was audible as he passed through to the front door, which opened on another street, closer to the Imperial Hotel.

Closed for the night, the shop was made to order for The Shadow's purposes, for its interior was pitch-black, but with no obstructions to delay a person passing through it.

Evidently The Shadow knew that such would be the case, for he did not use his flashlight. Reaching the front door, he found it as expected. It wasn't bolted; it simply had a heavy burglar-proof latch, which enabled The Shadow to step out and leave the door as he had found it, by simply closing it behind him.

Even outdoors, The Shadow found his favorite habitat: darkness. The door of the shop was under a projecting balcony, which entirely cut off the glow of the old-fashioned street lamps so prevalent in Libertad.

Keeping to the shelter of balconies, crossing the street at places where the lights were feeble, The Shadow glided past a corner and came upon the Plaza del Libertador, opposite the Imperial Hotel. There he paused within the last fringe of darkness.

It was a fiesta night in Libertad which accounted for the shops being closed. The populace had deserted the narrow streets for open spaces such as the great plaza, and the scene was one of life and gaiety.

But The Shadow wasn't interested in the costumery of the merrymakers, who were enjoying pleasures that would cease when the iron hand of Castenago tightened. He sympathized with them profoundly, and wished that their era of carefree revelry would long continue.

That, in itself, was reason why The Shadow's attention should be centered elsewhere. Upon what he learned tonight, would hinge his whole campaign toward ending the tyranny of Luis Castenago.

The Shadow looked across the street to the front of the hotel. He saw the ancient taxicab that he had hired as Allard. It was the center of much speculation, voiced in voluble Spanish, by hotel employees, police, and even soldiers, all picturesque in their assorted uniforms.

Cabs didn't often roll up to the Imperial Hotel without passengers inside them, unless they had been ordered. This cab should have had a passenger; the driver was describing him and swearing by the sacred volcano of Lotomoro that he had brought the man in question from the Casino Internacional.

A serious offense on the part of the missing passenger, could the cab driver prove that he really had one, for the Castenago regime was very strict on such matters.

Nevertheless, the chance arrival of an empty cab did not account for all the police and soldiers. The Shadow laughed softly as he looked up and saw the real reason.

A light blinked off from an upstairs window, the very room which The Shadow occupied as Kent Allard.

The police and military had been finishing the search ordered by Castenago, when the cab arrived.

The last of the searchers came downstairs. They were a pair of Castenago's sinister gatromontes. The men in fancier uniforms began reporting to them. The case had reached the proper hands to bring official results. The Shadow let his gaze range his own side of the street, and saw what he expected.

A car, parked in the darkness, was getting into motion, its lights dimmed. It was coming right past The Shadow, the very car that had followed the cab from the casino.

IN swinging the corner, the cab had to pass beneath a street light, so The Shadow watched it closely. He knew that it wouldn't contain gatromontes, because there had been none of them around the casino. He was sure that this car was manned by irregulars, in the service of Castenago. Having lured them into the light, The Shadow wanted to identify them.

A sharp glitter came from the cab. It was the muzzle of a machine gun, trained directly toward The Shadow, but it didn't begin to mouth deadly flame.

The men behind the rapid-fire weapon failed to see The Shadow in his nest of gloom, even though they were leaning from their car, intent on searching every inch of the route back to the casino. All they did was put their own faces on display for The Shadow's eaglelike scrutiny.

The Shadow recognized those faces. He had seen them before. Leader of the murderous roving band was Murk Wessel; the men with him were the sharpshooting lieutenants who had aided in the wiping out of Jose Durez and his companions from Centralba!

There was a whispered laugh when the cab had passed; then The Shadow, too, was gone, sidling uncannily through the darkness. The tone of The Shadow's mirth did not betoken a discovery. It merely announced the proof of a well-held theory.

While the New York police were tracking down the planted rumors that Murk Wessel and his band of killers were somewhere in Manhattan, The Shadow had unearthed that notorious crowd in the one refuge where no one else had thought to look for them.

Only The Shadow could have analyzed the truth: that Murk Wessel had not operated on his own, but was secretly in the employ of Luis Castenago!

CHAPTER XI. FRIENDS OF THE SHADOW

NATIVES were dancing in the esplanade of National University when The Shadow arrived there. There were students among the crowd, and they were amusing themselves in various ways.

Some were tossing pennies to the stolid marimba player, who still kept up his musical beats outside the patio entrance to Professor Peridor's mansion.

Others were engaged in catching fireflies, of the amazing red-and-green variety seen in the tropics. The insects looked like flying traffic lights, and they stayed at an appropriate altitude, which made them difficult to trap. Whenever snared, they immediately become adornments for high combs worn by the promenading señoritas, wherein they shone like decorative jewels.

The briskness of the firefly hunt forced The Shadow to travel close to Peridor's wall in order to avoid the roaming students. They avoided the wall as if it were charged with electricity, because they knew the ways of the patrolling soldiers. Castenago's militia was trained to shoot at sight, should anyone violate a taboo.

As The Shadow kept to the wall's sheltering gloom, he heard rifles crackle, at intervals, followed by an immediate scattering of students and a fluttery flight of pigeons from the esplanade.

Fortunately, the soldiers were indifferent marksmen. Students and pigeons promptly returned to their respective tasks - the students plucking fireflies for the señoritas who, meanwhile, were feeding almonds to the pigeons.

Around the corner of the wall, The Shadow saw a uniformed man approach against the light from the esplanade. Blended with the tan stucco background, The Shadow awaited the soldier's arrival. Scouting students dashed close, saw the uniform, and scudded away as the soldier raised his rifle.

With a long stretch, The Shadow reached the top of the wall and lifted himself by his very fingertips. His soft-toed shoes dug into the stucco, and he was rolling across the wall top when the soldier resumed patrol.

The patio resembled a sunken garden, being several feet deeper than the ground outside. Clumps of shrubbery might prove the lurking spots of inside guards posted by Castenago, so The Shadow decided to choose the spot where he dropped.

There were trees inside the wall, and one, a coconut palm, sprouted from the midst of flowery tropical bushes. It looked like a good landing spot, so The Shadow flicked the pencil beam of his tiny flashlight toward it.

Instantly, crouched figures came to life. They could only be gatromontes, for no other uniforms would have blended so well with the shrubbery. Their silence told that they were ready to shoot, once sure where the prowler with the flashlight was located.

The Shadow was quite sure that the gatromontes were excellent marksmen with revolvers. Shifting along the wall, he reached for the thick-sprayed foliage of the palm tree.

Voices hissed below. The gatromontes were preparing to rake the wall with their fire. Even if The Shadow beat them to the shots, it wouldn't help. The sound of any gun within the patio would bring a score of guards, with powerful flashlights. So The Shadow flicked his own flashlight, instead.

However, its beam was no longer white. This was the special flashlight which he often used in signaling his agents. Its glow could be adjusted to red or green, and The Shadow used both.

The well-timed flickers were a perfect representation of the local firefly. Hovering between palms and wall, the blinks provided actual illumination. Like tiny beacons from the blackness, they guided the lurkers, giving them opportunity to work along the wall without using their own flashlights.

They were evidently pleased that such a magnificent firefly should have drifted by at such a moment. But the "firefly" was skittish. It suddenly floated toward the wall, gave quick, parting flashes and disappeared.

It was gone beneath The Shadow's cloak, and the men below were suddenly curious regarding the firefly's gyrations.

EASING toward the branches of the palm, The Shadow tilted his head at an angle and counted coconuts against the reflected glare from the esplanade.

The palm was quivering, not from The Shadow's well placed weight, but from the clutch of hands that were using the branches to gain the summit of the wall.

Five coconuts, bobbing and dipping crazily against the dim light. One went down from sight, but came up again, bringing another with it. Then one more extra coconut appeared right beside the first newcomer. Releasing his grip on the palm boughs, The Shadow lurched out into space, his hands ahead of him.

Crazy business, grabbing hanging coconuts to prevent a fall. Ordinarily, they'd be slippery, and useless as support, since they would drag down the boughs if grasped.

Not these coconuts. They weren't the sort that grew on palm trees. They were interlopers.

Catching the two he wanted, with an insweep of his hands, The Shadow's lurch was halted by supporting bulks attached beneath the coconuts.

Nothing, however, could have stayed the swift motion of his powerful hands, coming, as they did, like unseen creatures of the night. They bounced the coconuts together as a musician would crash a pair of cymbals.

The Shadow had chosen the right coconuts. The rest flipped upward, as all weight was released from the palm boughs. Two figures thudded the ground, and in sprawling, they broke the finish of The Shadow's dive.

Rising among the shrubs, the coconut basher turned his flashlight toward the ground, using its white beam. A low laugh sounded from the darkness above that penciled glow. The Shadow was viewing the two gatamontes, both limp and stunned.

Having remembered that these fellows always worked in pairs, The Shadow had simply waited for them to introduce a pair of human coconuts among the fruit variety. They'd done it in their customary precision, making each head a target for the other, under The Shadow's swift clutch.

The gatamontes wore fancy belts with their otherwise drab uniforms. The Shadow found those belts quite handy in trussing the unconscious pair. They carried gaudy handkerchiefs, too, in their inside pockets, for, like most Centralbans, they had a dash of the Indian in them.

The Shadow used the handkerchiefs as gags. Tossing a pair of revolvers into the shrubbery, he started a foot tour of the patio.

There were other guards about, police and soldiers on patrol. They were easily spotted by The Shadow and were comparatively harmless, since The Shadow had eliminated the mainspring of the works in the persons of the gatamontes.

One soldier, however, was a real obstacle. He stood on guard at a flight of steps leading up to a balcony that offered the only access to Peridor's mansion.

With the notes of the marimba flitting in from the great gate, The Shadow had an excellent musical score accompanying his next exploit. He skirted the tropical plants, and suddenly confronted the soldier just as the fellow turned. The Shadow sped both hands toward the sentry's rifle and seized it with a viselike grip.

Naturally, the guard doubled his own grip on the gun, which was exactly what The Shadow wanted. Dipping, he drove his knee against the sentry's, and as the man caved, The Shadow used the gun for leverage, rolling the surprised soldier right across his shoulders to a headlong landing on the tiled paving of the patio.

There was a thud, but no clatter, for The Shadow was the one who retained the rifle, the sentry losing his own hold under the twist that accompanied the rapid-rolling somersault.

Another guard was coming through the patio, blinking a flashlight toward the shrubs along the walk. So The Shadow hoisted his stunned prisoner and carried him away, rifle and all, under the fringe of the balcony.

Reaching an isolated marble bench, The Shadow mounted it and shouldered his human burden over the balcony rail. Poking the rifle through the uprights, The Shadow finished by climbing over the rail itself.

MEANWHILE, the glow from the flashlight had stopped back at the steps. The Shadow heard orders in Spanish, slurred with the local dialect. The inspector was evidently an officer come to organize the new guards. Finding the steps unwatched, he simply supposed that they had been overlooked, so he was summoning another soldier to patrol the weak spot.

Binding and gagging the man who had forcibly gone off duty, The Shadow tried a door leading in from the balcony. It was locked and bolted on the other side, so he tackled a window, instead. The window had a heavy grating, clamped on the inside, but The Shadow's fingers, probing through, worked delicate wonders with those clamps. The grating came loose.

All was silent in the mansion. Occasional lamps, soft in their glow, revealed deserted rooms furnished in exquisite Spanish style. There were short hallways, abbreviated flights of steps, that gave the house the semblance of catacombs, though the atmosphere itself was pleasant.

Below a curving flight of stairs The Shadow saw a stronger light, that indicated a habitable portion of the ancient domicile. He glided down the curving stairs and came to a square hall, not more than ten feet on a side.

The light was from the ceiling, and the hallway, with tiled floor and walls, was something of a patio in miniature. Opposite the stairway was a curtained doorway, through which more light came. On either side were similar curtains, denoting darkened rooms.

Considering the solitude upstairs, those side rooms would also seem deserted. The Shadow's logical course was across the hallway, to the door at the other end. He started there.

It was then that the lulling atmosphere produced a warning. The place was too quiet, too unguarded, to be safe. The thought flashed to The Shadow's brain a split-second before the trouble came. Before he could get his hand to a gun, the curtains at each side of the hallway parted simultaneously.

From each direction sprang an attacker. Wearing no uniforms, their drab attire gave them the look of spies, or servants, both dark-faced, and so alike that they might have been twins. But The Shadow had no time for such comparisons, except in relation to the weapons that the pair carried. Each dark attacker was brandishing a machete.

Both deadly blades were slashing for The Shadow. Had he remained rooted, his doom would have been sure. At best, he was only able to wheel toward the man on the right, meeting him a moment earlier than the other; but the quick twist was a lifesaver.

The first machete sliced above The Shadow, carving nothing more than a portion of his cloak sleeve. Before the second man could lengthen his lunge to bury the knife blade in The Shadow's back, the cloaked fighter had gripped the first attacker and was wheeling him about.

With a side step toward the stairs, the second man tried to make a cross-stab at The Shadow, but the spin was too swift. Using the first attacker as a human bludgeon, The Shadow flung him upon his companion.

As both reeled toward the stairs, The Shadow followed up his brief advantage with whippet speed. He grabbed the first knife hand that came his way and sprawled its owner to the stairs, where a jutting step met the back of the man's head. Then, lunging from the steps themselves, The Shadow gained an added impetus that flattened the other who was swinging in to meet him.

They landed heavily, the machete specialist beneath. As the machete clattered the tiles, The Shadow sprang from atop his half-stunned foe and moved toward the curtains at the far end of the hall.

He needed a vantage point from which to hold off his recuperating enemies, who were jolted, but not out of the fight. His spring, however, stopped before he reached the curtains.

They had parted, and The Shadow was confronted with a leveled revolver, held in the slender but determined hand of a dark-eyed Spanish girl, whose blazing gaze told him that another step would bring action from her trigger finger.

HALTED, his gloved hands lifting slowly, The Shadow laughed softly but grimly. That touch of strange mirth was induced by the sounds behind him, for he knew that within a dozen seconds the machete experts would be on their feet again, the knives in their hands.

They'd follow the usual rule, those fellows, of striking first and inquiring afterward.

The girl's eyes told that she felt no mercy toward an unannounced intruder. Small wonder, therefore, that The Shadow laughed. Unless his wits could prove quicker than a gun trigger, or the strokes of deadly knives, this would be the last time he would ever phrase his famous mirth.

Often, The Shadow's tone had sounded as a knell to dying men of crime. This time, seemingly, it was the preface to his own death.

CHAPTER XII. THE COURSE AHEAD

FRIENDS of The Shadow!

Such, by rights, should be the dwellers in this mansion; instead, they were proving the deadliest of foes. Only a Spanish girl's rigid adherence to custom was prolonging The Shadow's slim opportunity to live.

The senorita preferred that the servants should give death to the cloaked intruder, since it was their appointed task. Her stern gaze assured The Shadow that no ten-second argument could save him.

Perhaps the girl expected a voluble plea in Spanish; she was certainly steeled to ignore it. Nevertheless, The Shadow spoke.

His words were in English. That made no difference. A plea in any language would be useless. However, The Shadow did not plead.

"Good evening, Senorita Peridor," he said. "I mistook your servants for Castenago's men. I bring a message from a certain friend."

The Shadow took just ten seconds for that speech, and his emphasis upon the word "friend" carried just the needed touch. The widening of the girl's eyes, the slight parting of her lips, told that her gun hand had relaxed.

Already, the servants were beginning a new lunge; there wasn't time for time girl to call to them, even had she chosen. It was The Shadow who supplied the needed action.

He jabbed his left hand for the girl's gun, caught it, hand and all, finishing with a twist as he lurched her through the curtains. The revolver clattered away and The Shadow's speeding grip slid to the senorita's wrist, whirling her full about.

The Shadow had her safety in mind, along with his own, for in turning her as a human shield, he carried her beyond the reach of the driving machetes.

The servants tried to flank The Shadow - too late, for he was through the doorway, where they couldn't reach him except by tearing the girl from his grasp. They never went through with such a plan, for by then, their attack was fully balked. The Shadow's right hand had pulled a gun from beneath his cloak.

He hadn't actually drawn the automatic; he'd done something even swifter. The holstered gun was pointed toward the hallway at the time of his grab, and he wheeled his body away from it.

Practically where it was, the .45 was pointing across the shoulder of the dark-eyed senorita, whose efforts to break from The Shadow's grasp were nudging the weapon from left to right, so that it confronted each of the servants in successive turn!

"From a certain friend," repeated The Shadow, in the girl's ear, "named Colin Nayre."

"You've seen Colin?"

"Yes. He is still alive -"

As The Shadow paused, his eyes still on the servants, he had to move the gun of his own accord. The girl's struggle had become a tremble, which ended only when The Shadow added:

"And safe."

The girl's happy sigh was drowned by the clash of machetes against the tile. The servants had recognized the futility of further struggle against The Shadow.

Relaxing his hold upon the girl, The Shadow let her turn to speak to them. They bowed when she used the term "amigo" to define The Shadow as being a friend.

Then, before the girl could question him further, The Shadow announced:

"My message is for Professor Peridor."

The girl turned and led the way to her father's room. When she knocked at the door, her tap was recognized. A kindly voice inquired in Spanish:

"What is it, Mariquita?"

"I must see you, father," the girl replied. "A friend is here, bringing word from Colin Nayre."

THE door opened, instantly, and Mariquita ushered The Shadow into a room where Professor Peridor stood ready to greet him.

Dark eyes, as kindly as the voice that accompanied them, peered with amazement from a mild, white bearded face. Then, recovering from his surprise, Peridor spoke:

"La Sombra!"

Peridor had heard of The Shadow by that title from times when the black-cloaked stranger had visited

other Caribbean countries, in the interests of justice.

Mariquita's lovely face became more and more bewildered when she saw her father and The Shadow seat themselves beside a table and begin an immediate conference. For the things that Professor Peridor broached were his true opinion of Luis Castenago, expressions which would mean death in Centralba, should they reach the wrong ears!

"I was a fool to believe Castenago," Peridor's tone carried bitter sorrow. "All my efforts to better conditions in Centralba have been twisted to justify Castenago's evil deeds. Instead of improving matters, I have placed myself in a predicament where I am helpless, and my country totally unable to shake off a tyrant's misrule!"

Finding The Shadow's interest complete, the elderly professor gave a brief summary of events in Centralba; valuable, because it was the first-hand story of a sincere man. Peridor had undergone the ordeal met by all right-minded persons who have sought, by ordinary measures, to restrain a dictator's rise.

Peridor had criticized the Castenago regime from the start, advocating a policy of passive resistance. Peridor's claim, that right could triumph over might, had even seemed to win the dictator's respect, but it had merely slowed, not halted, the growth of Castenago's tyranny.

At least, it had caused Jose Durez, champion of open revolution, to seek Peridor's support. Though Durez was by no means unselfish, he promised to improve the government if he came into power. Since Peridor was opposed to violence, Durez agreed to hold his own strength in the background, as a threat in case Castenago would not accept Peridor's terms of justice without revolution.

"How cleverly Castenago solved the problem!" exclaimed Peridor, facing The Shadow. "He showed willingness to compromise, if we told him our terms. Hearing them, he met our separate desires. He promised me that he would improve the government; while to Durez, he offered wealth.

"Thus dividing our power, he further specified that I should remain in Centralba, while Durez must leave. My patriotic sentiments, and Durez's lack of them, produced our separate accessions to his terms."

Obviously, Peridor had become enmeshed in an intrigue which produced a dilemma in his honest mind. Durez was definitely a case in point. Peridor had been glad to see him go, yet knew that his own life was safe only so long as Durez might return. The day after Durez's departure, students had demonstrated against Peridor, alleging that he had helped Durez rob Centralba.

Of course, the demonstration was instigated by Castenago's agents, but it had been sufficient pretext for the dictator to insist that Peridor seek retirement under what Castenago termed "protection."

A sad travesty on the truth when Castenago, the tyrant who styled himself "liberator," could be regarded as the defender of Peridor, the one man most loyal to Centralba!

Hard upon that had come the news of Durez's death. While alive, and away from Castenago's reach, Durez was a protection to Peridor. His death meant that Castenago could dispose of Peridor whenever he so chose.

"Castenago bides his time," declared Peridor, "only because he would prefer to see sentiment grow against me before he arranges my assassination. In a way, it is unfortunate that the student demonstrations have ceased, for it will shorten my life span. If I perish, the cause for the redemption of my country will be at an end."

FROM the door, Mariquita was impatiently waiting for The Shadow's news concerning Colin Nayre. Catching his daughter's eye, Peridor promptly turned to that subject.

"One ugly rumor," declared Peridor, "is the claim that our good friend Colin Nayre betrayed Jose Durez, in Miami."

"It is more than a rumor," returned The Shadow. "The police have proven that Murk Wessel and the other killers were established in the Hotel Equator when Durez and his friends arrived there. Someone must have sent the word ahead, so suspicion rests on Nayre."

"Then the evidence is all against him?"

"Not entirely," interposed The Shadow. "I, personally, am sure of Nayre's innocence. I have come to Libertad to find the real culprit."

Peridor mistook the words for an accusation against himself. Rising, he lifted his right hand.

"In my daughter's presence," he avowed, "I swear that I revealed the plans of Jose Durez to no one!"

"Your statement is unnecessary," spoke The Shadow. "I have already discovered the traitor."

"Then tell us who the culprit is!" exclaimed Peridor, as Mariquita drew closer. "I shall find him, wherever he may be, and denounce him to his face! Name him!"

"You will find him in the presidential palace," affirmed The Shadow. "His name is Luis Castenago!"

Peridor and Mariquita couldn't believe their ears. They knew that Castenago had granted amnesty to Durez, which was why The Shadow's charge seemed at variance with fact. It wasn't until The Shadow explained the double game, that they began to understand.

Leniency was known to be Castenago's new policy; to display it he had merely banished Durez. In keeping with his real character, Castenago had designed death for Durez, through the aiding hands of American mobsters.

Even then, The Shadow's listeners doubted.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Peridor. "Castenago would never risk the consequences of letting such assassins remain beyond his reach. If captured by American authorities and forced to tell the truth, their testimony would bring intervention to end Castenago's regime!"

"They are not beyond his reach," explained The Shadow. "Castenago sent Durez away to find false security. He had the murderers come here to gain real protection."

One person would have accepted that statement without question: namely, Margo Lane. It explained the matter of the missing mosquito boat. The speedy craft in which Murk Wessel and his lieutenants had fled Miami was identical with units of the mosquito fleet, and had been mistaken for such a boat.

It couldn't have been otherwise, as The Shadow reasoned it. With ten million dollars to lose, Murk and his pals wouldn't have trusted a boat that could be outraced by anything else on Biscayne Bay.

Twelve mosquito boats had gone out by moonlight; only eleven had returned by day, a discrepancy forgotten by everyone save The Shadow. Margo's count stood justified, though she didn't know it.

Not having heard about the mosquito fleet, Francisco Peridor still had a question for The Shadow. He put one, right to the point:

"You have seen these men - Murk Wessel and the other assassins - here in Libertad?"

"Yes. By day, they are workers on the grounds of the Casino Internacional, where they pass unrecognized. At night, they are at Castenago's service. Their duty, this evening, was to assassinate me, as they did Durez. They failed."

The Shadow's statement ended with a whispered laugh induced by the gazes with which Peridor and Mariquita acknowledged his words. He had convinced these friends that his theory was correct. The course ahead was plain.

The very stratagem whereby Castenago had disposed of Durez was the weak link in the dictator's armor. If revealed as the dabbler in international crime, the dictator would find himself an outcast. The unmasking of Luis Castenago was the deed The Shadow sought to accomplish.

Upon it depended the freedom of a nation!

CHAPTER XIII. GONE WITH THE BLAST

ONLY The Shadow could have found the weak link in the chain with which Castenago fettered Centralba. Visualizing the case from every angle, Francisco Peridor was fixed in that conclusion. Strange how the trail had reversed itself under The Shadow's logic!

Leading directly away from Castenago, it had come right back to the man itself, but what to do about it was a very moot problem.

Peridor, himself, was powerless and the same applied to Mariquita. What they had learned aroused their hopes, but equally increased their danger. Should Castenago even suspect what they had learned, their lives would be snuffed on the instant. Both felt that whatever aid they might supply, would be too feeble to assist The Shadow's cause.

To their surprise, The Shadow deemed otherwise. First, he was counting upon Peridor to supply him with needed information regarding Castenago. Details of the presidential palace could help, so Peridor supplied them. Names of persons who might oppose Castenago could also be of use, but Peridor shook his head at the mere mention.

No one dared oppose Castenago, he said, though many would relish the chance. That, in itself, bore one promise. Should Castenago be exposed as an international plotter, any witness to the fact would so testify, if assured of safety.

In brief, Castenago was not surrounded by a council of plotters, for he trusted no one whose craft might even approach his own. Instead, he depended upon human tools who were subject to intimidation. It would be a case of turning a lot of worms against the early bird.

During that discussion, The Shadow dropped the detailed information that Mariquita wanted. He mentioned Colin Nayre and the fact that he had escaped by plane to somewhere in the Caribbean.

Though The Shadow did not definitely state that Nayre planned an immediate return to Centralba, Mariquita's eyes glistened with eager hope. It was after she had gone that The Shadow told her father that Nayre might even now be around.

"Nayre's safety, of course, depends on secrecy," declared The Shadow. "Should his path cross mine, I shall acquaint him with the facts, though he is one person who might learn them independently. Our main issue, however, is Castenago."

There was a solemn nod from Peridor. He was racking his brain for a way to trap the dictator.

"If I could only gain more time -"

"That is easy enough," interrupted The Shadow. "Play into Castenago's hands through unwise statements. Offer to eulogize Durez, as though you took Castenago's amnesty at face value. It will give Castenago opportunity to instigate a new demonstration among the students."

Wearily, Peridor smiled. He was tired of intrigue, but the suggestion pleased him. It would be a duel of wits between La Sombra and Luis Castenago. Peridor was glad that he had found a friend who could supply the strategy at which the professor himself had failed. This particular stroke was so in keeping with Peridor's natural style, that Castenago would never suspect its subtlety.

"It will help," Peridor agreed. "But to what end? Granted that Castenago has afforded refuge to assassins, why need he ever admit it? If Wessel and his friends are discovered at the casino, Castenago can blame their presence on Pierre Treban, the manager, who is a man of very questionable repute."

"The blame will fall on Castenago personally," assured The Shadow, "If he is found in company with the assassins themselves."

"But Castenago never visits the casino."

"I know. That is why I was more interested in the presidential palace. We shall wait until the assassins visit Castenago there."

"Impossible! Why should Castenago ever invite them to the palace?"

"To settle certain unfinished business," explained The Shadow. "So large a matter, that Castenago cannot ignore it. Ten million dollars is a large sum, professor, even to Castenago."

THE point struck home. Until this moment, Peridor had almost forgotten the Durez money. Now, he realized why Castenago had been so generous toward the Durez faction. The dictator had merely entrusted them with funds that he had already arranged to reclaim through Murk Wessel.

It fitted perfectly with the schemes of Castenago. Well did he, the master plotter, understand the workings of the criminal mind.

Castenago had chosen Wessel as a man who would be satisfied with a fraction of the ten millions involved. To a certain point, Murk would want all he could get; beyond that he would sacrifice the rest for protection, the sort that only Castenago could supply.

It was a certainty that the stolen wealth now lay in the security of Castenago's secret vaults, which were so deeply hidden that even Peridor did not know their location in the palace.

Whatever percentage he had promised the assassins, Castenago would offer less, now that the work had been accomplished. In his turn, Wessel would want more.

Such was the significance of the laugh that Peridor heard, softly uttered by The Shadow's hidden lips. Nor did The Shadow need to mention the logic that lay behind it. In fact, The Shadow himself was responsible for the situation, because he had thinned the ranks of Wessel's crew in the battle at Miami Beach.

It would be the invariable story. Castenago, as the brain, would argue that since there were less crooks to share the profits, they could afford to take a smaller percentage.

Contrarily, Wessel would claim that crime's hazard had proven greater than anticipated, therefore warranting a bonus. The settlement would require a meeting, and a long one.

"I shall watch Wessel," The Shadow told Peridor. "When the right time comes -"

This wasn't the right time; it was the wrong time. The door of the room was thrust open by one of Peridor's servants, who exploded a streak of Spanish, including the name "La Sombra," which he emphasized by gesticulating toward The Shadow.

It wasn't necessary for Peridor to interpret. The Shadow understood, even though the servant's outpour was thick with Centralban dialect.

Patrolling soldiers had found the gatamontes lying in the shrubbery. They were coming in to search the mansion, to learn if it contained a lurker. As he finished, the servant drew his machete, brandishing it bravely, to indicate that this time he would use it in The Shadow's service. Peridor was opening a table drawer to bring out an old-fashioned pistol.

The Shadow stopped them both.

"My visit must not be known," he told them. "Show me a quick way out. Afterward, claim that you did not see me. You can do it best by doubting that I even exist."

Peridor nodded. Though honest to a fault, he could carry through that bluff. It was possible in the case of La Sombra, who came and vanished like the night itself. He told the servant to show The Shadow the short route to the patio.

Lights were bobbing all about when The Shadow crept out through a forgotten door beneath the balcony of Peridor's mansion. The patio was alive with police and soldiers, some on the balcony itself.

The other servant had opened the main door, but the search of the house had not begun because someone had stumbled upon the sentry, who lay near the end of the balcony. Excitement over the new find produced a new excitement.

Barely escaping the sweep of lights, The Shadow was weaving out through the patio. He was near the gate before he revealed his presence, with a challenging laugh that brought a quiver even from the crinkly palm branches just above his head. Lights swung wildly; when one beam caught The Shadow, the others copied it.

IN the focused glare, a score of men saw The Shadow, half turned toward the gate, as though he had given up all thought of entering Peridor's mansion.

He turned and backed his challenge by prompt stabs from a pair of guns. Those shots picked flashlights from the hands that held them. Other lights went flying through the air, flung by their owners.

There wasn't a shot in return. Police and soldiers were diving for shelter before taking chances with The Shadow.

The echo of the strident laugh was fading from the courtyard; for a few seconds, the only sound was the hollow, plunking tune of the marimba outside the gates. Then came the crack of many guns from all about the patio.

Castenago's uniformed men were gunning for The Shadow, only to be taunted by the laugh that they couldn't find. He was cutting through the patio while they were aiming back where he had been.

As he sped, The Shadow delivered quick spurts from his guns, clipping foemen who huddled in the shrubbery. Their return shots were badly wide, for The Shadow's mirth persisted.

Officers were howling orders, and by luck, someone struck upon the right one. Deep in the patio, The Shadow's only outlet was the balcony. An officer yelled to seize him when he reached the steps, and men were on hand when The Shadow arrived, but they hadn't bargained for the fight he gave them.

Changing tactics, The Shadow flung himself into the cluster of uniforms, slugging right and left.

Through the sprawling group, he reached the steps. Soldiers found their feet and stumbled after him. Along the balcony, The Shadow's path was clear, or would have been if two police hadn't popped out suddenly from within the house itself.

Slugging one, The Shadow met the other in a grapple and flung him toward the steps. Spinning like a toy top, the man in uniform lost his balance and floundered downward, spilling the stumblers who were coming up.

With The Shadow on the run, men in the patio took new chances with their flashlights. Spreading beams showed The Shadow at the far end of the balcony. He was on the rail, reaching for the roof above. The flashlights followed him, but guns were late. The Shadow had reached the roof, where he was protected from those who aimed from below.

From the roof, his next goal was to be the wall. Men at the patio gate were shooting wildly, while others yelled The Shadow's destination. Two men heard it; they were the gatamontes, coming up the steps to the balcony, thrusting the bewildered soldiers aside.

Real sharpshooters, the gatamontes were following the balcony, sure that they could clip The Shadow in midair when he sprang from roof to wall.

It was a question whether he could complete the leap before the gatamontes could reach the end of the balcony and aim past the inner corner. The Shadow was depending upon that corner as a delaying element.

If anything, he had the advantage, for he was launching from the roof when the sharpshooters reached the center of the balcony. It might depend upon his landing when he struck the wall.

The question was never quite settled.

Timed to The Shadow's leap, something came scaling through the air from the direction of the gate. Briefly, the flashlights caught an elongated object that couldn't be identified before it landed on the balcony. It struck in front of the gatamontes, who were well ahead of the soldiers.

The thing exploded with a tremendous burst. It settled the gatamontes permanently, for they disappeared with the explosion, along with a great chunk of the balcony. The rest of the balcony caved in, sliding a flattened row of soldiers down into the patio, where they landed in a heap, to be showered by a tumble of debris.

STRIKING the wall just as the explosion ripped, The Shadow never paused. As if the outward concussion gave him impetus, he used the wall as a mere stepping-stone for a further leap beyond it.

So quickly did he travel, that the men in the patio, momentarily numbed by the bomb burst, couldn't believe that it all happened in so short an interval.

To their eyes, The Shadow simply vanished. The explosion couldn't have harmed him, for the wall where

he landed was intact. But it was quite as incredible to believe that he still existed. They'd seen him leaping, they'd been dazzled by a great blaze of light, and The Shadow was gone with the blast!

A result quite to The Shadow's liking, for it would back the story that Francisco Peridor would tell. Dramatic in itself, The Shadow's departure had been intensified by the timely bombshell that might have come from nowhere.

Around the corner from the esplanade, The Shadow paused and peered along the sidewalk. He could hear a babble from the patio, and its excitement carried out beyond the gates. The fiesta was over and the few remaining students were scurrying away, as frightened as the pigeons. The marimba player was packing up his gourds, anxious to get away from this dangerous vicinity. Very rapidly, the scene was becoming deserted.

Turning, The Shadow glided away from the wall and blended into darkness. As he went, he gave a strident laugh that he knew would carry to the patio and increase the bewilderment there. Such mirth, carried on the still night air, would add to the elusive reputation of La Sombra.

Tomorrow, all that had happened, and more, would be credited to a creature of blackness, with superhuman prowess. A being who could clear a high wall at a single bound, blasting balconies behind him as he vanished in midair, with a laugh so distant that it could have come from the crater of a smoking volcano miles beyond the city of Libertad.

They believed such things in Centralba, if given enough evidence to stir the native imagination. The Shadow's own efforts, coupled with the arrival of the mysterious bomb, had supplied evidence in plenty.

Such talk would spread, and grow. Nothing could stop it, not even if Castenago issued a manifesto saying that such rumors must cease.

The Shadow knew!

CHAPTER XIV. CASTENAGO'S COURTESY

CASTENAGO didn't issue any manifesto the next day; nor did Peridor decide to make his speech. Each was wise in his way. Though Castenago's iron make-up was immune to superstition, he had enough of the Indian in him to know the native mind. He was willing to hear the name "La Sombra" whispered by awed voices, even among the palace servants.

Out of the maudlin reports that police and soldiers gave him, Castenago heard enough to assure himself that The Shadow was no myth, which was all he wanted to know.

As for Peridor, he saw that his inflammatory speech could be reserved for a later occasion. The bomb blast had accomplished enough for the present. In Centralba, bombs, no matter who cast them, meant one thing definitely: that the recipient was unpopular.

Since the bomb had gone off in Peridor's patio, it was plain that he had enemies. No one ever threw bombs at soldiers. It wasn't customary. Sniping at them with rifles was a popular pastime during a revolution, and might be applied in peaceful times. But, bombs - never!

As for the gatomontes, no one ever did anything about them. They were a comparative novelty, and no technique toward their disposal had yet been invented. Nor was anyone likely to brood over that particular problem, since the gatomontes were the especial pets of Luis Castenago. They were good to leave alone, hence it was regarded as quite accidental that two of them should have been at the exact place where a bomb exploded. Too bad for the gatomontes, and even worse for the bomber, if

Castenago ever found out who he was.

The guests at the Imperial Hotel heard some of the queer rumors, but only Margo Lane took them seriously. She knew that "La Sombra" meant The Shadow, and she asked Kent Allard what he thought about it.

His attitude was one of complete indifference. He had other matters to worry about, so he said, though he didn't specify what they were.

Margo dropped the hint that Lamont Cranston might be in Centralba, but Allard only shook his head. He was quite sure that Cranston would have joined the party, had he arrived in Libertad. There, the subject rested.

Early in the afternoon, Margo had an inkling of what troubled Allard. An imposing car stopped in front of the hotel and two palace guards came inside. When they went out, Allard was with them. Obviously, he had been summoned by Castenago.

Margo decided that it must have something to do with the continuation of the air cruise. Perhaps Castenago didn't like strangers dropping in from the sky, unannounced.

WHEN The Shadow reached the presidential palace, he was conducted farther than the reception room, which pleased him, because it offered him a chance to check, firsthand, on information supplied by Peridor.

Everything tallied perfectly, even the dimensions of the various apartments which The Shadow saw. When he was conducted along a side passage in an extensive wing, he knew where they were taking him. Peridor had specially mentioned this passage. It led to an elevator that went up to Castenago's private council chamber.

The elevator was of the self-operating type. The man who guided Allard pressed a button and the car came down, with absolute silence. Bowed into the elevator, Allard found himself alone, but he didn't have to press a button, because the car went up automatically. When it stopped, the door slid wide, revealing the council room.

Behind a long council table sat Luis Castenago, alone. He was busy going over papers, hence his eyes were lowered. Behind him were murals flooded with his own figure, painted in life size.

One showed Castenago taking the oath of office; another depicted him delivering his inaugural address. The third was Castenago casting the single ballot that made him president of Centralba for life.

No other faces appeared in the panels. Hence, there were four Castenagos in the room - the one at the table and three portrayed upon the wall.

The living Castenago was as motionless as the painted ones, but there was no question as to his reality. He must have known the exact time that it took the silent elevator to go down and up, for he spoke, without glancing from his papers, the moment that The Shadow approached the table.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Allard," he said politely. "We have an apology to offer you. It concerns the search that was made in your room while you were absent last night."

Castenago's own eyes were searching as they finally looked up. They met a gaze equal to their own, the steady one that The Shadow provided as Kent Allard. After a prolonged stare, Castenago turned away and sorted the papers, picking the ones he wanted.

"You knew that your room was searched?"

"I had no reason to suppose so," returned The Shadow coolly. "Everything was exactly as I left it."

"Two of my best men did the work," acknowledged Castenago in a pleased purr. "One moment, please, senior, while I mark recommendations on their reports. I shall tell them that they owe thanks to you. You are sure that you noticed nothing?"

"Nothing except that the room smelled bad. But that didn't surprise me. The windows were open and the wind was blowing from the general direction of the palace."

The cold glint that flashed in Castenago's eyes turned to a reflective stare. He happened to remember that the palace lay in a direct line between Mount Lotomoro and the Imperial Hotel.

The volcano had been very smoky shortly after sunset, sending a drift of sulphur fumes toward Libertad. Maybe Allard was allergic toward sulphur; but, from the look that Castenago finally gave him, he might learn to like it, along with brimstone, if he wasn't careful.

"I haven't told you the reason for the search," continued Castenago. "It happened that you left for the casino earlier than the other members of your party."

"Quite so," resumed The Shadow. "I understood there was a fiesta, so I took a stroll around town. I met a pair of your gatomontes, by the way."

"There is no report to that effect."

"They didn't see me. They were chasing fireflies at the time. I suppose they caught the fiesta fever."

ALLARD'S statement was so direct, that Castenago made a note of it. His gatomontes had one weakness, as a rule. They tried to impress the señoritas, even when on duty. Since the belles of Libertad liked fireflies for their combs, Castenago didn't doubt Allard's statement.

It happened that the dictator lacked a report from the gatomontes who had mistaken The Shadow's flashlight for a firefly. The bomb that blasted Peridor's balcony had blotted them off Castenago's pay roll.

"My followers sometimes mistake my suggestions for commands," proceeded Castenago, narrowing his smudgy eyebrows. "After the banquet, I suggested that you take your friends to the casino. When you left, it was presumed that you had violated a command."

"A search was therefore in order, according to a recent regulation. Had I been notified, I would have countermanded it; but I was busy with a council meeting."

The Shadow knew that Castenago was covering the facts of the search. It had actually begun while he was at the casino, for it was over when he reached the hotel, to observe the car that had followed the cab.

Evidently Castenago was trying to learn if Allard had returned to the hotel at that time, so The Shadow didn't oblige him with any indication of the fact.

Adroitly, Castenago shifted the subject. He dropped the matter of the preceding night and referred to plans for the coming evening, at the same time introducing subtle reminders of the things he had already said.

"I understand that your friends enjoyed the casino," declared Castenago. "You will be there again this

evening all the evening."

"At your suggestion?" queried The Shadow. "Or by your command?"

"Neither, Senor Allard. Let us say, at my request. It is sometimes dangerous to move about in Libertad after dark. Last night, something serious occurred - an explosion at the home of Professor Peridor. Now, in your case, senor -"

As Castenago paused, The Shadow inserted a statement in Allard's clipped tone:

"You told me that you would arrange for me to see Professor Peridor. I am still waiting, your excellency. In fact, I supposed that you called me here to arrange that particular matter."

"I did, senor!" The eyebrows were moving in accompaniment to Castenago's triumphant tone. "I want you at the casino, so that I can reach you promptly as soon as I arrange the Peridor meeting. The bomb incident makes it imperative to use caution in such a meeting. Not only for your safety, senor, but for mine; and, particularly" - his stress was heavy - "for the safety of our good friend Peridor."

Very cute of Castenago, sugar-coating everything in such smooth style. Noting Allard's nod of acknowledgment, the dictator's thick lips stretched a smile above his undershot jaw. His eyes held their fixed glitter, as he added:

"I am holding a council meeting this evening. A usual session, but there is no way of knowing how long it will last. One hour - two - perhaps more. Which is why I wish to have you available, senor. I shall call the casino immediately after the council meeting."

Castenago arose. He stiffened into a Napoleonic pose. When standing, he matched to an absolute degree the life-sized portraits in their gilded frames. Perhaps he was practicing for another picture, which would portray him issuing a decree. The Shadow had risen, also. He, too, was standing stiffly, until Castenago said:

"The audience is over. My secretary, Estaban, will escort you to your car, Senor Allard."

ESTABAN, small and sallow, stepped right up to the desk and bowed. Castenago was watching Allard's face intently, to see if it showed surprise at the secretary's sudden appearance.

Not a flicker came. The Shadow had already observed the silence of Castenago's private elevator, and had known that at any time someone might step surreptitiously into the room.

It was typical of Castenago, to have things fixed that way. In an emergency, he could have an assassin dispose of an unwanted visitor by coming from the noiseless elevator, cross the heavily tufted floor, and deliver a knife thrust in the back.

Probably Castenago had secret push buttons beneath the desk, where he could press them with his knee to summon such creatures as Estaban, or others more formidable.

Since Castenago's own chair faced the elevator, he alone could see the solid door slide open. His plans, The Shadow took it, would be so well arranged that Castenago wouldn't even have to signal. The mere pressure of the correct knee button would bring the proper person for whatever he wanted. In this instance, Castenago had merely required his secretary, Estaban.

Despite his crude exterior, Castenago used subtlety in everything he did. The Shadow considered that point while Estaban was conducting him downstairs. Castenago hadn't needed to bring the secretary, for he had let Allard come upstairs alone.

Unquestionably, the dictator was trying to impress the point that a slinky assassin, or a pair of hefty gatamontes, could have entered in place of the frail secretary. In brief, Castenago could have done with Allard as he chose. Murder, arrest, or safe-conduct from the palace - all were the same to Luis Castenago, dependent purely upon his policy, or even his whim.

Unquestionably, the demonstration hid a deeper purpose. Analyzing the case, The Shadow saw what it could be. Castenago was assuming, of course, that Allard might be The Shadow. He wanted Allard to be at the casino this evening. Therefore, it was logical that Murk Wessel and his fellow crooks would be absent from their luxurious hide-out.

That prospect fitted perfectly with what The Shadow had told Peridor: namely, that Castenago and Wessel would have to hold a get-together. It also jibed with Castenago's mention of a council meeting, a perfect cover-up for a parley between the dictator and Murk's outfit. Foreseeing such arrangements, The Shadow intended to act accordingly.

The driver of Allard's car gave a sudden start. Though it was broad daylight, he fancied that he had heard a faint echo from the distance. A strange sound, no louder than a whisper, but it was grimly mirthful, matching the mysterious laugh attributed to La Sombra!

Anxiously, the driver peered toward the smoking cone of Lotomoro and hoped that the reviving demons of Indian lore would be content within their sulphurous abode!

CHAPTER XV. GAME WITHIN GAME

IT was still daylight when Kent Allard arrived at the Casino Internacional. A mild play had started at the roulette tables, and Pierre Treban, the dapper manager of the casino, was on hand. He gestured Allard to a place, only to receive a negative headshake.

"I came to find out if the casino had opened," said Allard. "Also to learn if my friends could dine here."

"As you see, senor, it is open, and we serve dinner on the terrace."

"Good! May I telephone the hotel?"

Treban bowed toward a far door, saying that it was his office and that a telephone was available there. So The Shadow went there, called the hotel, and spoke to Margo Lane.

Using Allard's tone, he asked her to tell the others that the casino was open. Then, formally, he added:

"I should like to have you dine with me, Miss Lane, here at the casino. If you wish, I can come back to the hotel to meet you."

"That won't be necessary," assured Margo. "I'll come to the casino. Where will you be? At the roulette table?"

"Not this early. Suppose we meet in the gardens."

The call was finished and The Shadow was opening the office door, when Treban appeared. What the dapper man said convinced The Shadow of what he had already guessed: that the office telephone was tapped.

"Ah, Senor Allard," spoke Treban. "So you have called your friends. Perhaps, while you await them, you would like to see our gardens."

Escorted by Treban, The Shadow started his tour of the extensive gardens. It was only too plain that Treban was conducting him through the finished sections keeping strictly away from places where workmen were planting new shrubs. Amidst his polite gesticulations, Treban kept glancing at the sun.

He was trying to stall until sunset, when the workers quit; but his scheme failed. As Treban pointed to a gorgeous bed of poppies, Allard looked the other way, through a miniature forest of thin bamboo that screened the rest of the garden.

"Look, senor. So beautiful -"

"Very beautiful. Too beautiful to be kept waiting."

With that, Allard started by path around the bamboo thicket. Treban shouted after him, causing a group of workmen to look up.

The Shadow saw their faces, those of Murk Wessel and kindred rats, before they could duck away. However, he ignored them; turning at Treban's shouts, he was in time to score again.

Treban was trying to shoo the phony workmen toward the casino. He stopped when Allard looked his way. Hurrying up, Treban inquired:

"You saw someone, senor?"

"I thought I saw Miss Lane." The Shadow glanced about. "Yes, there she is."

He'd timed things neatly. Margo had actually arrived in the garden. Hurrying to greet her, The Shadow was there ahead of Treban. In an undertone that suited Allard, he said:

"Keep watching those workmen, but don't let Treban notice. Try to see where they go."

Treban joined them, and kept watching Allard to make sure he didn't look the wrong way - which made it easy for Margo. Suggesting that Margo might like to see the flowers, Treban conducted them on another short tour through the finished part of the gardens.

Finally, they arrived back in the office. Treban left them in order to reserve a dinner table.

Allard's gesture stopped a question that was on Margo's lips. The Shadow knew that the entire office might be wired to pick up conversation there. He proffered a cigarette; then lighted his own. He strolled to the wall and examined a framed floor plan of the casino. He'd finished when Treban returned to conduct them to a secluded table on the terrace.

There, Allard's nod assured Margo that she could speak.

"They went into a little door at the inner corner of the wing," said Margo. "But they didn't look like natives. They reminded me of American mobsters. Are they?"

"Very probably. Some ugly customers followed me when I left the casino last night. That's why I wanted to check among the workmen."

"But what would foreign crooks be doing here?"

"That's what I'm going to find out."

THE waiter had arrived to take the order. The Shadow gave him a steady look and decided he was all right. Probably Treban was playing safe, hoping to lull any suspicions.

Margo saw Allard draw a gold piece from his pocket and drop it on the table. The coin flipped over; it had two heads. That was the way with all gold coins in Centralba. Castenago's image was stamped on both sides.

"If I like the dinner, this goes double." Apparently, Allard thought the waiter had stepped away. "What's more, we'll dine here again tomorrow night, and call for the same waiter, if he proves a good one. I like discreet waiters: the kind who never remember what they see or hear."

Margo caught the idea and helped by giving an embarrassed gesture. Allard looked up to see the waiter. Pocketing the gold piece, as if for future reference, Allard let it clink against another in his pocket and exchanged smiles with Margo.

The waiter bowed in a manner that indicated he would be utterly discreet. He went away as soon as the order was given.

"That fellow won't say a word to Treban," assured Allard. "But keep an eye out while I'm gone."

"You're going to look for those crooks?"

"I'm going to find them!" Allard's manner was emphatic. "From what I saw of the floor plan, I won't have any trouble getting to the place where you saw them go."

The Shadow had no trouble, despite the fact that he was making his excursion as Allard; not as a figure cloaked in black.

It was dark outside and the gloom had pervaded the casino, except where brilliant chandeliers shone upon the gaming tables. Moreover, the coolness that always came from nightfall had brought a great many more players to the place.

It was easy for Allard to sidle through the edges of the throng and reach the pillars that supported the surrounding balcony. There were promenades behind those pillars, dimly lighted and deserted. Easing along, The Shadow paused briefly at each pillar, until he reached the door he wanted.

It led to a passage, where The Shadow reached a side stairs. Going down, he picked his way about, through the passages and rooms on the floor below, using his tiny flashlight in the probe. He was narrowing the quest to a room shown on the floor plan, which had been marked "respiradero de mina," signifying an air shaft.

Much too large for an air shaft, the marked room had struck The Shadow as a likely hide-out for Murk Wessel and the other fake workmen.

Halfway across a storeroom, The Shadow halted, then took a swift turn toward a cloth-covered bulk in the corner. The thing was a shrouded roulette table, reserve equipment for the gambling hall upstairs.

Crouching, The Shadow was gone from sight when a metal partition slid open at the end of the room. Pierre Treban stepped into sight, plain against the light behind him. He was coming from the so-called air chamber.

Letting Treban go by, The Shadow approached the partition and slid it open, just a crack. Through the space he saw Murk Wessel and the other crooks, sitting on the edge of cots under a hanging lamp. They'd just begun to discuss the news that Treban had brought them.

"So Castenago wants to see us," Murk was saying. "I told you we'd be hearing from him soon enough."

"Yeah," put in a crook. "But he didn't say anything about giving us the cut we asked for."

"Why should he?" demanded Murk. "Treban is only the go-between. Castenago is going to talk to us, personal. Don't worry about us getting ours. I'll make him boost the ante, if anything."

"How'll you do that, Murk?"

"By playing up this Shadow business. Maybe His Nibs is worried. Those monkeys of his met up with The Shadow last night, and didn't do a thing about it. We're the guys Castenago needs."

There were mutters of doubt. Murk's followers hadn't forgotten what happened to their pals in Miami Beach. They were figuring that Murk was playing into Castenago's probable argument that less money would be satisfactory, if each man received a larger share. Maybe there would be larger shares, if thugs met up with The Shadow. Larger, for those who survived. Understanding the grumbles, Murk silenced them.

"That's only the line I'm going to hand Castenago," he assured. "What we asked for, with a bonus later, when we nick The Shadow. When we get the dough, we can forget the bonus."

IN the pleased responses, The Shadow caught references to "a million bucks," which indicated that Castenago had promised a straight ten percent to Murk for knocking off Durez and bringing the funds back to the dictator's treasury.

It wasn't surprising that Murk had settled for so little. A million dollars was probably far beyond any of his crooked dreams. Besides, ten millions wouldn't have been worth ten cents, had he stayed in the United States after his crime, or even fled to any country other than Centralba. Murk was marked; safe only through Castenago's aid.

"Get ready, guys," declared Murk. "We're due at the palace soon. We'll sneak out and give a flash to Treban. He'll flash back from his office when everything's ready. The gatomontes will be along the route, signaling if it's clear.

"Treban says we'll have an hour before the council meeting. Castenago wants to have a session with us first, and let his regular stooges wait. An hour's enough. It won't take us long to sell our idea to Big Chin Face. I'm telling you, Castenago is worried!"

The partition had closed. The Shadow was returning upstairs. Margo had finished her first course, and the next was waiting, so Allard told the waiter to serve it and bring the rest along. As soon as the waiter had hurried away, The Shadow said to Margo:

"I'll stay about twenty minutes. After that, if anyone asks you, just say that I'm still around. I found those fellows, and they're going to the presidential palace. Somebody has to do something about it."

Margo gained the impression that "somebody" was The Shadow, and that Allard intended to inform him of the brewing trouble. She still believed that Lamont Cranston had come to Libertad and had established contact with Kent Allard.

Twenty minutes later, Allard was on his way and Margo was finishing her desert alone. As she left the table, she saw Treban approaching, and walked straight past him, looking toward the roulette players as though expecting to see Allard among them.

Treban cocked his head, looked at the table that Margo had left, and promptly went back to his office. Margo hoped he wasn't going to call Castenago. Allard hadn't had much time yet to contact Cranston.

Margo wouldn't have worried had she been able, at that moment, to see them both - Allard and Cranston, rolled into one personality: The Shadow. He was in the back room of the little shop which he used as headquarters, and had just finished putting on his cloak and hat.

Something rolled from the shelf, and The Shadow caught it before it fell, to turn his flashlight on it. The thing was a hollow wooden egg, that broke open slightly, to show a smaller egg within it.

A novelty of Japanese manufacture, popular years ago in America, and probably something new today in Centralba. The Shadow laughed softly as he replaced the wooden egg upon the shelf.

It made him think of the coming situation: a game within a game. Perhaps it would have been better had The Shadow let the wooden egg fall to the floor. He'd have remembered, then, that there were still more eggs within it, a whole nest of them, that would have cracked apart, down to the smallest egg that formed the tiny core.

When Luis Castenago played a game with a game, there were apt to be games inside that game, and many of them.

The Shadow was to learn!

CHAPTER XVI. WELCOME - THE SHADOW!

IT was a very swift and easy trip to the presidential palace, for The Shadow took short cuts, through narrow passages between buildings and even across plazas.

Last night, there had been gatromontes lurking among the buildings, and merry-makers thronging the plazas, making both courses difficult.

This evening, the gatromontes were watching the streets, to make sure that a certain car coming from the casino was neither followed nor intercepted; while the plazas were deserted because there was no fiesta. In fact, The Shadow didn't have the slightest bother, until he reached the palace itself.

There were soldiers, palace guards, around the fountains above the great marble steps. They had hired a strolling marimba player to entertain with his music, and the mellow notes of the instrument were blending with the tinkle of the illuminated fountains.

There was too much light for entry by that route, but the presence of so many soldiers pleased The Shadow. It meant that there would be less inside the palace, and probably none around their own headquarters, the presidio. So The Shadow skirted the palace, scaled the low roof of the rear building, and took a look at a large courtyard within.

The yard was a cement parade ground, very dim in the darkness behind the palace. Footsteps would clatter a warning if they arrived there, so The Shadow calmly stretched to the nearest window of the palace and gradually worked it open.

Once inside, he worked his way through darkness, with the occasional use of his tiny flashlight. He took a look from a side window to make sure that no cars had yet arrived, bringing the members of Castenago's so-called "council."

Seeing no cars, The Shadow took his time. He was quite sure that Castenago and Wessel would prolong their business meeting to the limit.

However well Murk's offer impressed Castenago, the dictator would try to chisel on the price, because if he didn't, Murk would try to raise it. If they did come to terms, Castenago would want Murk to detail

just how he would go after The Shadow, and in turn, Wessel would have to stall over that particular question.

With fifteen minutes still to go before the hour when the regular council met, The Shadow had enough time; indeed, too much.

The Shadow was playing for the perfect moment. It would come when Castenago was ready to end his present conference, to make ready for the next. Bold though it seemed, The Shadow intended to hold one group until the other arrived, thus placing Murk Wessel Co. on exhibit for the members of the Centralban national council.

It was something that Castenago would never wipe off, and the stroke was possible. The Shadow intended to accomplish it by a system of swift surprise.

Through the almost-deserted palace, which he knew quite well from Peridor's information, The Shadow reached the elevator leading up to the council room. He'd seen a few secretaries, like Estaban, but had easily glided from sight behind the filigreed pillars and fancy doors so prevalent throughout the palace.

The Shadow made a quick search with his eyes, to make sure that no one was near the elevator passage; then pressed the button that brought the silent car.

Stepping into the elevator, The Shadow waited while the door slid shut. The car started its upward trip, and during the ride, the cloaked invader produced his automatics. He was at the very front of the elevator when it stopped, and as the door slid aside, he made a quick twist through the opening into the lighted council chamber

As he came, The Shadow issued a sinister laugh that left no doubt as to his identity. There were figures about the great table, but all were turned away except one: Luis Castenago.

It was straight for the thick-necked dictator that The Shadow directed one bulging gun, giving it an upward gesture. The move brought Castenago to his feet, hands half raised, making it impossible for him to use the knee buttons that would summon aid.

Meanwhile, The Shadow's other gun was circling the table, ready to explode if a single person defied him. The piercing burn of the eyes beneath The Shadow's hat brim were meant for all to see. Rats like Murk Wessel couldn't take a chance, now that The Shadow had cowed Castenago in the tyrant's own lair.

The Shadow knew. Yet, with such knowledge, his next laugh faded on his lips as frightened faces met his eyes.

The game had gone one layer deeper.

These men with Castenago weren't Murk Wessel and his brood of murderers. They were dignified Centralbans, half a dozen of them, some with dark-bearded faces; others with sallow countenances that had taken a curious pallor.

They didn't exclaim, "The Shadow," as crooks would have. The name they uttered was:

"La Sombra!"

RIVETED, The Shadow understood. He had broken right into the middle of a bona fide council meeting. Stooges or not, these were the men who represented the law in Centralba, and The Shadow had mistakenly disclosed himself in a manner that would cause them to regard him as an armed malefactor.

These were the very men to whom The Shadow had intended to reveal Castenago's masquerade, by unmasking the dictator as the real head of a group of international murderers.

How neatly had Castenago called the turn! The smile on his evil lips was an answer to the simple riddle that The Shadow had already solved.

Castenago had called the council meeting early. The Shadow hadn't seen the cars, because they had come and gone. Positive that Kent Allard was The Shadow; sure that the mysterious crime-hunter would check on the movements of Wessel's crew, Castenago had bluffed regarding a meeting with the crooks, to place The Shadow in a false light.

It was, indeed, a false light, but with it, The Shadow recognized a true one. Murk Wessel and his cronies had certainly come to the palace, for Castenago knew that The Shadow might have chosen to trail them all the way. If so, where were they? The smiles of Luis Castenago told.

Three smiles, all painted ones, on the life-sized portraits that filled the walls behind the dictator's chair. The Shadow noted narrow cracks between the portraits and the side of the frames. There were six such side frames, in all, and one hadn't been pushed aside. Castenago had probably wanted it that way, as an index from which The Shadow would refer to the other frames.

Each of five cracks showed the slight gleam of a gun muzzle, signifying that Murk Wessel and his four target-shooting friends were the men on duty behind the paintings.

Remembering that Peridor had mentioned an old council room adjoining the new one, The Shadow understood the rest. Castenago had probably left the council before the crooks arrived, and smuggled the newcomers into the old room.

Quick were The Shadow's mental flashes. Murk and his men weren't shooting; therefore, they weren't going to start until Castenago gave the word, which he wouldn't, unless the pinch became absolute.

He might excuse the fact that killers were hidden behind the portraits, on the pretext that they were protecting the council meeting. Good enough, if the councilors never learned who the marksmen were.

There was a stronger reason why Castenago hadn't ordered immediate gunfire. Castenago was personally on the spot. He had to be. Without Castenago at the council table, The Shadow would have suspected something wrong and wheeled back into the shelter of the elevator. To really trap The Shadow, Castenago had to be present, and therefore was.

If shooting started, Murk's marksman would riddle The Shadow, but never fast enough to prevent his delivery of a few shots, too. The first of those would be for Castenago. Ridding a nation of a tyrant would be a triumph for The Shadow, even in death. It was even possible that he would voluntarily make such choice, and start the shooting first.

That was why Castenago had another card up his sleeve; or, more correctly, a pair of them. He looked toward a front corner of the room, which formed an alcove that couldn't be sighted from the elevator door.

"Please step forward," said Castenago in Spanish. "You, Professor Peridor, and your daughter."

THEY came forward, Peridor and Mariquita, only to halt when they caught a quick glint from The Shadow's eyes. Peridor's own gaze was sad, Mariquita's pleading. They wanted The Shadow to know that they had no part in this.

Castenago had ordered them brought to the palace, presumably to answer questions when the council

investigated last night's bombing. There had been no way for them to get word to The Shadow.

Fortunately, they understood that The Shadow wanted them to halt where they were. Thus, he prevented them from blocking his aim toward Castenago, who still held his rigid, hand-lifted pose.

Looking again toward Castenago, The Shadow wanted them to halt dictator's manner. Castenago's own life was safe, because The Shadow would desist from suicidal action that would produce the deaths of Peridor and Mariquita, as well as his own. Safe, at least, if he dismissed those gunners behind the portraits.

"Ah, Senor Sombra," spoke Castenago smoothly. "We have heard that you, too, were witness to events last night. You have come here armed, perhaps because you do not trust us. It would be better if we could talk as friends."

He was making slight backward gestures with his hands. One by one, the gun muzzles were retiring, the portrait frames sliding back in place. The Shadow was lowering the automatic that covered Castenago, so the dictator continued his motions.

When the last of Murk's guns had disappeared, The Shadow placed both automatics on the table and turned to the council members.

"You have the words of El Piojo." Speaking in fluent Spanish, The Shadow was referring to Castenago by the official title which the dictator had assumed as supreme ruler of Centralba. "I now call upon you to bear witness that I have accepted his terms. Disarmed, I surrender to this council, not to El Piojo. I am ready to abide by your decision in my case."

A strong stroke on The Shadow's part. He had definitely curbed the menace of hidden guns. Castenago couldn't recall Murk and the other crooks if he wanted. Even in Centralba there were distinctions between law and murder.

It was through the nicety of those distinctions that Castenago held the support of this council. Though he could have eliminated them individually, by mere snaps of his fingers, taken altogether, they were too strong a bundle to break.

Professor Peridor, himself, had assured The Shadow on that point; therefore, The Shadow was acting on a friend's advice. But Peridor had added a strong warning, one that The Shadow had evidently forgotten, much to the old professor's horror.

Very definitely, Peridor had stated that Castenago, so long as he operated by stated regulations, could sway the council to any decision that he desired.

Thus, The Shadow, in removing a menace that Peridor hadn't seen, had placed himself in the pathway of another that Peridor recognized only too well.

Watching Castenago, Peridor saw the big-jawed dictator take The Shadow's guns and toss them carelessly into a table drawer, as a symbol of good faith that wasn't in Castenago's mind. The broad smile on Castenago's lips gave real evidence as to his sentiments.

It was no longer a duel between Castenago and The Shadow. The game had reached another, inner stage. This game was fixed the way Castenago liked it. Stepping from behind the table, Castenago spoke in cunning style, first gesturing to Peridor and Mariquita as he addressed the council.

"THESE worthy friends of ours," he said, "are still with us only because they escaped a bomb planted in the patio of their home. That bomb caused the death of two gatamontes. I, your leader, El Piojo, have

sworn that I shall find the man responsible, and bring him to trial for his crime before this council."

The approval of the council was unanimous. They rose to their feet to express it. Peridor and Mariquita knew what was coming next. Their words drowned out by the council's chorus, they sprang to The Shadow's side to clutch his folded arms, hoping to turn him toward the elevator.

It was then too late. The door was sliding open. Castenago had pressed a button before leaving his chair. Four palace guards strode into the council room; at Castenago's command, two of them drew Peridor and his daughter away, while the other pair gripped The Shadow.

"I have kept my promise!" boomed Castenago to the councilors. "Every witness who saw the bombing at Peridor's has borne testimony to the presence of a single stranger, commonly regarded as the culprit. I refer to this prisoner, who calls himself 'La Sombra.' It is right that he should be the first man to come to trial!"

Peridor and Mariquita heard the final words as two guards led them into the elevator. As the silent door slid shut, they heard an answer to Castenago's accusation.

It was a strangely whispered laugh, that mocked the pretense that was known as justice in this realm where Castenago stood supreme. A challenge to the dictator and his power, that mirth that was The Shadow's.

A futile laugh, it seemed, coming from a man on trial for his life before a tribunal governed by a human fiend who could force his dupes to echo the one word: "Guilty!"

CHAPTER XVII. BEFORE DAWN

THE Shadow's trial was worse than a travesty on justice. It was so filled with precedent and citations of existing laws, that the average prisoner would have believed himself guilty.

It made The Shadow understand why so many Centralbans had accepted the yoke of Castenago. For the dictator, in every word and deed, declared himself an upholder of right.

He was using the old, time-honored laws of his country in this trial; not recent regulations of his own device. Castenago knew those laws by heart; evidently he'd spent months going through the statutes, picking out every legal oddity that would benefit his iron-handed regime.

By Centralban law, a prisoner was considered guilty until he proved himself innocent. This, Castenago argued, was much preferable to the reverse system established by English law. It meant that the judge, himself, became an advocate in behalf of the prisoner, which Castenago promptly proceeded to do.

He suggested that La Sombra might have an alibi; if not, that he might be able to accuse some other person of the bombing. When The Shadow offered no help along these lines, Castenago obligingly tried other ways to help out the prisoner.

Always, Castenago used the title: "La Sombra." He did so for a reason that he tactfully did not mention: namely, if The Shadow proved himself other than a citizen of Centralba, he could demand an appeal to the consul of his own country, which would automatically postpone the trial.

Castenago didn't want that to happen. Hence he talked of La Sombra as an established fixture in Libertad.

Castenago almost struck a snag when one of the councilors suggested that La Sombra remove his hat and reveal his features, on the chance that someone would recognize them. Castenago rode over that one

by citing a law which stated that all prisoners must be tried under their chosen names.

The thing went back almost to the time of the Spanish conquest, when the Indians had objected to having their names reduced to pronounceable form. Nevertheless the law still stood, and it settled the entire problem.

Should The Shadow unmask, he would no longer be La Sombra, which was unquestionably his chosen name. Thus did Castenago prevent the council from identifying The Shadow as Allard, a man whom most of them had met. In turn, it further prevented them from learning that he was an American.

As usual, Castenago was working subtly.

He had The Shadow in a dilemma. To reveal himself as Allard, in defiance of Castenago's legal interpretation, he would be disclosing the true identity of The Shadow, thereby rendering it useless in the future. Contrarily, by keeping his identity concealed, The Shadow was placing himself beyond redress from local law.

Either way, Castenago would win.

He could order Allard's deportation; he could demand the execution of La Sombra. From Castenago's viewpoint, it was unfortunate that two paths were open to the prisoner, for he would prefer to dispose of The Shadow for all time.

But Castenago, in his own neat way, was working to close the first path, that of banishment, and make death the positive verdict.

Since The Shadow offered no defense, Castenago decided to call in the witnesses. In accordance with a law dating from the eighteenth century, this was never done in the presence of the accused. So Castenago summoned more guards and commanded them to take La Sombra to the presidio.

"You will be detained there," Castenago told The Shadow, "until the trial is ended. I shall deem it my especial privilege to inform you of the verdict."

EVERY member of the palace guard was along The Shadow's route to the presidio. The fancy soldiers totaled more than fifty, and nearly a score of gatamontes supplemented them. Castenago was taking no chances on The Shadow performing another whirlwind escape.

Crossing the cement courtyard, The Shadow was marched into a cell block and placed in immediate confinement.

The cell chosen for him was the strongest in the block. Its barred door was so heavy that it took two soldiers to swing it shut, and it had three strong locks.

Having incarcerated the prisoner, the guard captain took the keys personally. He put four men on duty at each end of the cell block, but left none near the cell itself.

Castenago not only feared the guards might be bribed; he knew that The Shadow might play upon their superstitions. Hence, he had ordered that no one should have contact with the prisoner.

It suited The Shadow.

The cell had a metal cot, which could stand on three legs as well as four, provided no one lay on it. The Shadow wasn't sleepy, so he removed one of the cot legs and tried it on the barred window.

The bars were too stout, and too deeply embedded in concrete, to be demolished by the lever that The Shadow employed. Besides, the window opened into the courtyard, where any clatter on the bars would be heard.

Pausing a few moments, The Shadow stared through the bars. The night was very mild, and sounds carried far. He could hear the patter of the fountains and the music of the marimba. The local musicians generally stayed up all night, along with the rest of the inhabitants. It was all very pleasant and lulling, but The Shadow had no time for it.

Instead, he tried the cot leg on the stone wall beneath the window, and found that results were easy. The cell was below ground level, and therefore damp. The stones were moldy, and mortar between them gone.

It was no trick at all to pry out a couple of stones and dig into those beyond. The Shadow amused himself with the task for a long while until his hope of an escape was suddenly terminated.

Two thirds of the way through the thick wall, The Shadow came upon an outer layer of new, and very solid, masonry. The cot leg proved about as useful as a can opener against the obstacle in question.

It was like Castenago, to bulwark his cells from the outside. Probably, dozens of other prisoners before The Shadow had supposed that they could hack their way through, only to meet with disappointment.

The Shadow tossed away the leg of the cot and sat down on the other end. He still had cigarettes, so he lighted one and considered the Castenago question. The Shadow's case hadn't yet reached the fatal stage. He could always bargain with Castenago, and the miserly dictator would certainly listen to terms that involved a million dollars.

Since Murk Wessel was willing to talk about eliminating The Shadow for a price, the thing could work the other way about.

In fact, Castenago would prefer an offer from The Shadow. Maybe he was even playing for one; another case of a game within a game.

The Shadow's price would simply be that of life, and Castenago would save a cold million cash. Moreover, he'd go through with the bargain of eliminating Murk, whereas Castenago would doubt that Murk could ever dispose of The Shadow.

A very nice arrangement, since The Shadow had come to Libertad with the rightful idea of hunting down Murk Wessel to begin with. There was just one thing about it that The Shadow did not like.

He would have to pledge that he would never again disturb Luis Castenago. To The Shadow, such a compromise would be as bad as an actual alliance with the notorious tyrant. It would be better to find another way.

Deep in thought, The Shadow listened to the sounds from outside. Softly, he laughed. His whispered mirth told that he had found the way.

MEANWHILE, within the palace, Castenago had come downstairs, after a long session with his council. He stopped in the reception room, where Peridor and Mariquita were waiting, under guard. With a profound bow, Castenago addressed Peridor.

"The council has heard the evidence," declared the dictator. "The witnesses are gone, and the case is under deliberation, with the council, itself, as jury."

Indignantly, Peridor arose. For once, he was ready to defy the wrath of Castenago.

"With you to be the judge!" stormed Peridor. "Never, during your regime, has there been justice in Centralba!"

Frantically, Mariquita was trying to draw her father back into his chair, fearing that Castenago would summarily order the guards to take him to the presidio. To her amazement, Castenago bowed again and spoke quite mildly:

"You forget, Senor Peridor, that my policy is to be lenient. I was forced to show strength only because our government was weak. Having established my regime, I seek to balance power with justice. I assure you, I shall recommend clemency in the case of La Sombra."

Peridor, himself, was surprised; half inclined to believe. He remembered Castenago's compromise with Durez, only to recall that it had meant murder outside of Centralba, according to The Shadow.

Still, there might be facts in Castenago's favor, and Peridor couldn't disregard the point that Durez, in his own underhand style, had given a false promise to Castenago.

"I swear by the name of Castenago," purred the heavy-browed dictator, "that you will hear the final verdict before you leave here, Senor Peridor; also, that you will see justice given."

When Castenago backed a pledge with his own name, it counted. The dictator of Centralba was too egotistical to let himself down. When Castenago bowed himself from the room, Peridor actually felt at ease, and so did Mariquita. Neither had caught the full interpretation that Castenago had put into his words.

MORE hours passed. Dawn was near when Castenago again left the council chamber. This time, he did not stop to speak to Peridor, but went directly to the presidio. He entered the cell block and stopped at the door which barred The Shadow's escape.

Castenago smiled when he saw the uprooted stones that told of The Shadow's futile efforts. Then the dictator's face went solemn.

"The council found La Sombra guilty," he declared. "I asked for clemency, pleading for another trial at least. Unfortunately, I was outvoted. You have only one hope: I can still reprieve the sentence. I might do so, if it would lead to the permanent removal of certain enemies who are a threat to myself and my country."

Castenago was fishing for the offer that would save him a million dollars. The Shadow did not accept the bait.

"Centralba has only one enemy," spoke The Shadow. "His name is Luis Castenago! If you give me my freedom, I shall allow you one privilege, Castenago - that of suicide for the honor of the country that was never yours."

Calmly, The Shadow was banking upon one policy of Castenago's. The dictator loved to display false friendship to his victims before their executions. It was almost a certainty that he would follow the rule in The Shadow's case. With a solemn bow, Castenago proved that he was acting true to form.

"You shall die at dawn," said Castenago, "but, meanwhile, I shall not forget that you are my guest. I have ordered caviar and champagne to be served here in this cell."

"Thoughtful of you," returned The Shadow. "But what are food and drink without music? I shall miss it."

Distant, the tones of a marimba floated through the bars of the cell. Castenago smiled as he said:

"La Sombra shall have music."

The marimba player arrived with the guards, who were bringing buckets of champagne and a tray of caviar sandwiches. The Shadow invited them to join him in the feast, which they did, since there were too many to begin an individual chat with The Shadow.

The marimba player plodded through a tune; then took time out for a drink of champagne.

By then, The Shadow was interested in the marimba.

"Those gourds of yours," he said, in a dialect that the musician would understand. "How long do they take to ripen, if planted?"

The marimba player tilted his head and laughed. The jest seemed to please him.

"As long as you wish," he replied. "Certain of them." He moved his hand along the lines of hanging ovals and stopped at the larger end. "These, for instance."

One of the guards guffawed.

"Give La Sombra one that will grow in half an hour," the guard suggested. "It must be one that blossoms in the darkness, if he wishes to see it bloom. It will be dawn in half an hour, and then La Sombra dies."

With another laugh, the marimba player continued the jest by plucking one of the larger gourds from beneath the keyboard. He fingered it, then passed it through the bars. As The Shadow received the gourd, the laughter of the guards increased.

Not to be outdone, The Shadow decided to plant the gourd. He set it in the useless hole that he had dug. Then, to the continued amusement of the onlookers, he pushed the loose stones back in place, wedging them more tightly than he had found them.

The guards admired The Shadow's sang-froid, and declared that Castenago would have appreciated it. They promised to relate the incident to the dictator. So they had another round of champagne, while the marimba player banged out more music, unhampered by the missing key.

Faint streaks of dawn were showing through the window. The Shadow drew a slip of paper from beneath his cloak and wrote a brief message. With a headshake, he tore it up and let fragments fall to the floor.

From his pocket, he produced some gold coins and reached through the bars, pressing them into the marimba player's hand as payment for the music.

The clank of a saber announced the captain of the guard. The soldiers came to attention while the door of the cell was being unlocked. The time for The Shadow's execution had arrived. There was only a few minutes more of the final half hour.

Marching toward the courtyard, between the ranks of riflemen, The Shadow glanced behind him and saw the marimba player following, with his bulky instrument. As they reached the door, they turned toward the courtyard, where the firing squad awaited.

Dawn and death. Odd that the combination should have brought a whispered laugh from The Shadow's lips!

CHAPTER XVIII. DEATH BY DAYLIGHT

CEREMONY was brief when they reached the courtyard. Guards were everywhere, with gatamontes in reserve. Faces showed at windows of the palace - those of Castenago and his council - but neither Peridor nor Mariquita were witnesses of the coming scene.

The Shadow's only approach to a friend was the marimba player, who stopped beneath an archway and set down the marimba while he rested.

It might be that he was only curious about the execution. Many enemies of Castenago had met death in this courtyard, but seldom were members of the outside public allowed to witness such events.

The captain of the guard was very polite. He marched The Shadow to a wall, and offered him a blindfold. The Shadow shook his head; he didn't want it. Looking toward Castenago's window, he saw the dictator acknowledge his glance with a bow. Castenago was always pleased when men were brave enough to face a death squad without their eyes being covered.

All the while, The Shadow was mentally counting the minutes. He still had nearly two to go before the half hour was complete. He could see the edge of the sun above the low wall, and it fitted perfectly with the next phase of his plan.

Turning to the guard captain, The Shadow transcended all tradition. He had refused the blindfold, which helped the show, but he wanted to add an unprecedented touch.

"The sun is shining in the eyes of the firing squad," he declared. "They should not be inconvenienced by it. I would prefer to take the burden. A favor, perhaps, but it is very slight, considering that I shall not be with you long."

With his gestures, The Shadow explained the words to those who could not hear them, Castenago and the council members.

Catching the inference first, Castenago passed it along to the others. The scene delighted the dictator. Never before had any of his victims accepted the firing squad with such magnificent grace. Castenago waved from the window, and The Shadow returned it with a bow.

The captain therewith gave The Shadow the privilege of choosing his spot along the wall. The Shadow deliberated, counting down to the last dozen seconds. Then, beckoning to the captain, he started for the spot he wanted. It happened to be against the wall outside the very cell where The Shadow had been confined.

Fifteen seconds to cross the courtyard. That was why The Shadow allowed only ten. He and the accompanying captain had slightly more than twenty feet to go, when they were hurled back on their tracks.

The thing that stopped them was an explosion quite as terrific as the one at Peridor's. The blast not only staggered The Shadow and his companion; it caused the firing squad to flatten on their faces, for it sounded like a sudden eruption of Mount Lotomoro.

Castenago and his councilors ducked, for the window from which they gazed came crashing back into their faces.

That damage was trivial compared with the real wreckage that the bomb produced. The blast ripped a huge hole in the center of the cell block, at the very spot where The Shadow had been a prisoner.

First to recover, The Shadow was on his feet, dashing for the jagged opening in the wall. Again, he was performing the unexpected. The Shadow hadn't managed to break out of that cell, but he had found a way of breaking into it!

Castenago was bellowing from the window, and the members of the firing squad were grabbing up their rifles. By then, The Shadow was gone through the grayish smoke that clouded the gaping wall.

They fired, and the crack of the rifles was answered by a trailing laugh: the farewell of The Shadow. A mocking tone that always came when bullets missed their cloaked target!

For The Shadow was in the cell before the guns were fired, and once in it, he was on the way out.

NO one had thought of locking the huge door again, because it was unnecessary and too much trouble. In one way, through, and out the other, The Shadow was dashing along the cell block, to the door where a surprised guard stared as though viewing a black-clad ghost.

As he went, a great clang sounded behind him. In leaving the cell, The Shadow had done the work that ordinarily took two men. He had swung the heavy door of the death cell. One of its locks worked automatically, a point that The Shadow had remembered.

Piling through the smoke-cleared hole in the wall, the members of the firing squad were stopped short by the cell door, where they gabbled like monkeys in a cage while the captain was trying to find the key that would open it!

At that moment, The Shadow was reappearing in the courtyard. Two gatromontes saw him, but hadn't time to draw their revolvers. The Shadow settled them with the rifle that he plucked when the astonished guard dropped it. He drove the butt end of the rifle against one man's chest; made a cross-swing that brought the barrel against the other's head.

Turning toward Castenago's window, The Shadow was ready to aim the rifle, but the big-jawed dictator had taken another dive.

So The Shadow sped out through the archway. He saw gatromontes running one direction, so he took the other, to a corner of the wall. There, The Shadow turned to see what was happening.

Castenago's green-clad storm troopers were chasing the marimba player, who was packing his musical instrument on a cart.

A girl screamed from a window of the palace. The voice was Mariquita's. She and her father had been awaiting the announcement of the verdict, not knowing that Castenago intended it to be the shots of a firing squad.

Instead, a huge blast had told of Castenago's treachery, but in looking for the cause, Mariquita saw only the fleeing marimba player.

She recognized him, which wasn't at all surprising, for she loved him. The fleeing man was Colin Nayre!

Before pursuers could overtake the fugitive, The Shadow's rifle crackled. Its shots spilled gatromontes as fast as they grabbed for Nayre, but the others dived for shelter where The Shadow couldn't reach them.

By then, more shots were unnecessary. Nayre was on the cart, which was starting away. He was plucking gourds from his marimba, like grapes off a bunch, and tossing them behind him.

Each gourd exploded as it struck, taking a vast chunk from the street. Nayre was quite close to the

gatomontes when he chucked the first few gourds. After that, he didn't have to worry. The disguised bombs had abolished the nearest foemen, and the rest were climbing for the palace windows, hoping they'd be safe inside.

Dragged by a pair of ardently galloping mules, the cart vanished around the corner of the palace.

Tossing away the rifle, the Shadow turned the other way. The thick green foliage of a plaza offered all the cover that he needed. Like Nayre, The Shadow was gone when guards began streaming from the courtyard.

FROM dawn on, that day became the most exciting in the whole regime of Luis Castenago. The dictator sent Peridor and his daughter back to their mansion, shipped the councilors from the palace, and began issuing manifestoes by the dozen. The national currency went up in value, because the printing presses were busy turning out proclamations.

Rewards were offered for the capture of The Shadow and a marimba player who might be Colin Nayre. As fast as the gatomontes posted one batch of bills, another was ready, offering a higher price.

It wasn't until noon that Castenago settled down. Rewards, no matter how great their promise, wouldn't bring results. Having gone beyond a reasonable limit, Castenago thought it over.

He issued a new proclamation. It was addressed to Kent Allard. It stated that he was exonerated of all blame in the escape of The Shadow, but that he was advised to leave Centralba within the next twenty-four hours. His plane was waiting at the airport, fully gassed, and nothing would be done to impede his departure.

Word of that order passed among Allard's friends. Following their afternoon siesta, they gathered to discuss it. Apparently, they were free to leave Libertad whenever they chose, either in Allard's plane, or in some other manner.

Most of them preferred to leave with Allard, if he could be found. Since he hadn't shown himself, it seemed more sensible to take the night train to the coast. So they packed, with one exception.

The exception was Margo Lane. She was in an absolute dilemma. Castenago's proclamation, very oddly, backed her own opinion that Allard couldn't be The Shadow. She knew, however, that The Shadow was the main cause of the confusion, so she naturally stuck to her theory that Lamont Cranston was in Libertad.

She even had the idea that the missing marimba player might be Cranston, rather than Nayre. On that account, Margo dined early at the hotel, and stayed around the extensive lobby, hoping that The Shadow would appear. Naturally, Margo roamed at large, looking for marimba players.

She was gazing hopefully from a corner of the veranda, when she saw a strolling cluster of mariachis, with their oddly shaped guitars.

One musician paused to serenade the American senorita. Finishing a short tune, he looked about, then undertoned in English:

"Hello, Miss Lane. Remember me - Colin Nayre?"

Margo gave a gasp; recovering, she leaned across the veranda rail.

"Then you weren't the marimba player!" she exclaimed. "The one that Castenago seeks."

"Unfortunately, I was."

"But" - Margo faltered - "but what about The Shadow? Who... where is he?"

"I don't know," confessed Nayre. "He wrote a note, and gave me a piece of it when he tore it up and threw the rest away. He passed it to me along with some money. Here it is."

The note consisted of three words. It said: "See John Smith." Margo showed it to Nayre, who smiled.

"You won't find many John Smiths in Libertad," he said. "I'd advise looking in the telephone book."

Margo went back into the lobby and consulted the thin directory. She found but one John Smith. His address was near the center of the town.

She rejoined Nayre and told him about it. He suggested that she go ahead; that he would follow, quite safely, in his disguise of a mariachi.

"It's after dark," declared Nayre, "so everything is safe, unless Castenago suspects. If you run into trouble, signal me and I'll help you out."

TROUBLE threatened as soon as Margo reached the address given in the note. It wasn't a residence; it was a store, though the floors above might be apartments.

The store itself was a Japanese shop, which worried Margo all the more, for she knew how Japanese had infiltrated into Caribbean countries.

Nevertheless, Margo entered. Behind the counter she saw the bowing Japanese proprietor, who gave her an inquiring gaze. No one else was in the place, but through the front window Margo could see Nayre, in his mariachi disguise. He was already coming across the street, suspicious of the shop that Margo had entered.

"You buy something, senorita?"

At the Jap's question, Margo turned. She nodded, at the same time giving the signal that she knew would bring Nayre. Holding the Jap's attention, Margo stated:

"I would like to see John Smith."

Before the Japanese could answer, Nayre was springing through the doorway. He wasn't carrying his guitar; he had left it across the street. Instead, he was aiming a very sizable revolver.

The Jap saw it, but wasn't startled. Reaching across the counter, he took Nayre's arm and turned his dive into a headlong sprawl.

Not only did Nayre somersault across the counter, to sprawl behind it; he left the revolver in the hand of the Japanese.

It was all so sudden that Margo hadn't time to even shrink away. She was under the muzzle of the gun, without a chance for life, should the Jap pull the trigger. Instead, he merely laid the gun behind the counter and gave another bow.

"I am John Smith," he said in perfect English. "I presume, however, that you really wish to meet a friend of mine. I shall call him."

Margo simply stood astonished, while the Japanese stepped to a door at the rear of the shop. He opened

it and spoke to someone in the darkness beyond. Still staring, Margo saw the storekeeper step aside, smiling, as he still looked toward the inner room.

Blackness took form. It became a cloaked shape that moved into the light. Burning eyes met Margo's amazed gaze, and a whispery laugh gave welcome - from The Shadow!

CHAPTER XIX. THE COUNTER-STROKE

COLIN NAYRE looked up. He reached for the bandanna handkerchief that should have been around his head to conceal his light-hued hair. It was gone, and Nayre could feel a lump where his head had struck something.

Still somewhat dazed, he thought that he had been captured, his disguise penetrated. He thought the voices in the dull light around him belonged to Castenago's men, until he heard a whispered laugh.

Staring at moving blackness, Nayre recognized The Shadow; then, as his swimming senses steadied, he saw Margo Lane beside the figure in black.

They'd taken Nayre into the back room of the shop, to revive him; but Nayre was really puzzled when he saw a companion with them. The man was the very Japanese who had overthrown Nayre's attack!

The Shadow introduced John Smith.

He looked like a Japanese, but he was actually an American, for his family had lived in the United States through four generations. His great-grandfather had come to America nearly a hundred years ago, soon after Commodore Perry established the "open door" trade treaty with Japan.

The family had changed their name to the English equivalent, and with each succeeding generation, one or more members had studied international law, in order to assist American trade policies in the Orient.

John Smith was the current example, and he smiled, in broad American style, when The Shadow told Nayre why John was in Centralba.

There had been so much talk of Japanese military penetration under the guise of business, that Washington officials had sent John Smith to the Caribbean to report what was really happening there.

He'd opened a Nipponese shop of his own, and lived in an apartment above it. He had the phone upstairs, and no one linked the apartment dweller with the proprietor of the store below.

No one, except The Shadow. He had known all about John Smith. So Margo took it for granted that The Shadow had been staying here, as Cranston. She didn't recall the package that Allard had "sent back" to a shop just before they had started to Castenago's banquet.

Actually, that package had contained The Shadow's hat and cloak, with a coded note to John Smith, requesting him to have the garb available.

Of course, The Shadow didn't mention that point. Instead, he stated that John Smith had found any Japanese menace entirely absent from Centralba. Nevertheless, he had stayed because of Luis Castenago. The dictator was the sort who would sell out wholesale, if the bid came high enough; therefore, Centralba might at any time be turned into a cat's-paw for some un-American power.

While that possibility remained John Smith would have to stay; which meant, in so many words, that he would be in Libertad so long as Castenago retained power.

"That will not be for long," declared The Shadow in a strange, prophetic whisper. "The rule of Castenago shall end, this night!"

The announcement brought amazed looks from all the listeners. The Shadow turned to Colin Nayre.

"I should have contacted you last night, when I first saw you outside the palace," said The Shadow. "I had recognized you at Peridor's, and understood that you were there to protect the girl you love. I saw the gourd come over the gate, and knew that only the marimba player could have thrown it. When it turned into a bomb, I knew that the marimba player must be you, Nayre."

The direct analysis brought an understanding nod from Nayre. He'd been wondering how The Shadow had identified him.

"You were outside the palace last night," continued The Shadow, "and the fact should have told me that Mariquita and her father had been summoned there by Castenago. It happened, however, that I had dropped all other matters for a decisive stroke at Castenago. I therefore credited you with the same idea.

"When Castenago trapped me, I remembered you, Nayre. I played into Castenago's hands to remove his hidden threat: Murk Wessel and the crew of killers. When they were gone, it was my turn to produce the unknown factor.

"I was sure that Castenago would grant me the privilege of hearing marimba music before I died. Your gourd blossomed very gloriously, Nayre."

By this time, The Shadow's urge for a counterthrust at Castenago was inspiring the listeners, particularly Nayre. However, intrepid though he was, Nayre shook his head. It was no longer safe for him to travel as a marimba player; therefore, he was handicapped in the matter of bombs.

Furthermore, The Shadow had made it plain that he wanted to trap Castenago and Wessel together, as evidence of the dictator's double dealing. Such would require a policy of waiting; for a few days, at least.

"A few days will be too long," declared The Shadow. "It must be done tonight. I have learned something not stated in any of Castenago's manifestoes. This evening, Castenago is giving a banquet in honor of Professor Peridor and his daughter, Mariquita. A twelve-course banquet, Nayre!"

The Shadow had to block off Nayre before he could reach the door. Frantic, Nayre's only thought was to reach the palace and have it out with Castenago. Finally calming the excited man, The Shadow reached to a shelf and plucked down a wooden egg. He opened it, to show another egg within.

Casually, he reviewed his own moves and those of Castenago, illustrating each by opening another inner egg. He came to the core of the nest, a tiny solid oval.

"This is ours," he told Nayre. "The innermost of all the games involving life and death. The only one" - The Shadow's laugh was pointed - "that cannot be cracked! We shall proceed with it at once! The first move is yours, Nayre."

Nayre stared.

"But how?"

"You must visit certain persons," explained The Shadow, "who had unfinished business with Luis Castenago. We have played through every weakness, without success. This time, we shall do the utterly unexpected and play through strength."

HALF an hour later, Nayre and some genuine mariachis were strolling through the unfinished gardens of the Casino Internacional.

From his window, Pierre Treban saw them and merely shrugged. They would soon give up hope of gathering a crowd of music-lovers in the garden. People in the casino were too intrigued with the melody of the spinning roulette wheels.

Treban forgot certain persons quartered downstairs in the casino. Murk Wessel and his crew had no roulette wheel, and they were sick of playing poker with chips that were based on a million dollar I O U. They recognized a tune that was nothing but discord to the ears of Treban, who thought that all music began and ended with opera.

"Get a load of that!" exclaimed Murk to the others. "Those monkeys are banging out the 'Sidewalks of New York'! Maybe some tourists taught it to them. Let's find out what else they know."

Poking from the hide-out, Murk gave a low whistle that stopped the music. Murk beckoned, and a lone mariachi approached, a bit doubtfully. Murk didn't see the figure that simultaneously emerged from a car parked in semi-darkness.

It was the cloaked shape of The Shadow. From the car, Margo Lane and John Smith watched the black-clad form blend with the darkness of the shrubbery. Both were pleased.

Murk gestured the mariachi into the storeroom, indicating that he could bring in the other musicians. The mariachi saw the light from the air chamber and strolled curiously toward it. Murk grinned, deciding to let the fellow get acquainted with the rest of his audience.

Stopping on the threshold, the mariachi saw the other crooks around the card table, and turned questioningly toward Murk, who told him to step inside. Murk followed, and slid the panel shut.

The musician's glance had shown him vague blackness entering the outer door. Looking about, he noticed the panel move. A gun muzzle was coming through, indicating that The Shadow was reversing the trick of the portrait frames. This was the signal for the mariachi to take the all-important plunge.

He whipped off his bandanna headgear, revealing a shock of straw-hued hair above his dark-tanned face.

"You chaps should remember me," he said in English. "I'm Colin Nayre! We met in Miami Beach."

With a loud growl, Murk Wessel gestured his pals back to their seats, and turned to the ex-mariachi.

"What's the gag, Nayre? Spill it!"

"No gag," returned Nayre bluntly. "I just don't like to be double-crossed, any more than you do."

"Yeah? Who double-crossed you?"

Nayre gave Murk an almost contemptuous glance and turned to the others, as though seeking corroboration. Addressing the entire throng, he said pointedly:

"There's only one double-crosser in Centralba. He'd get by anywhere. He gave me the run-around, and now you're getting it!"

Murk snapped back into style.

"You mean Castenago made a deal with you to knock off the Durez crowd?"

"What else?" retorted Nayre. "I was the right man to handle it. The trouble was, I knew Castenago so well, that I was waiting for the cash first. Finding that I wasn't a sucker, he called you fellows into it. I came back here to square accounts with Castenago. Maybe I can get him to settle yours, too."

The thing didn't entirely register with Murk.

"A funny way to start out," he gruffed, "helping The Shadow the way you have."

Nayre gave one of his pleasant laughs.

"Helping The Shadow! That's funny! All I've been doing is chucking bombs at The Shadow, figuring that if I get rid of him, Castenago will pay up plenty! That's the way I was supposed to knock off Durez and his friends - with bombs.

"The trouble is, Castenago thinks I'll toss one his way, so he faked a story that I helped The Shadow escape. The Shadow never will; not while I carry this!"

Lightly, Nayre tapped his guitar, indicating that he had a bomb inside it. That touch convinced the crooks. They believed the very logical yarn that The Shadow had devised for Nayre to tell them. Murk put a shrewd question.

"How about us working together, Nayre? Got any ideas about making Castenago come through with the dough he owes us both?"

"That's what I came here for," Nayre answered. "I used to be the captain of the palace guard. I can get into the place without Castenago knowing it. But I can't demand a showdown all alone. Castenago can summon aid too easily.

"With you chaps, it's the other way about. You have the numbers, but you can't reach Castenago. You had your chance last night, but he bluffed you. If you helped him trap The Shadow, he certainly didn't pay you for it."

"No, he didn't," growled Murk. "He said he'd talk about that later, on any terms we wanted. We're waiting to hear from him after the banquet."

"You wouldn't by any chance be hearing from The Shadow, instead?" Nayre's query was artful. "Castenago would be sure of saving a million dollars, that way -"

Nayre didn't have to finish. The mobsters were on their feet, demanding that Murk line up with Nayre. Silencing the outburst, Murk gruffed a suggestion.

"Slide outside, Nayre," he said. "Get rid of those mariachis. We'll be along, and you can show us the way."

AFTER he was sure that Nayre had gone outside, Murk turned to his crew. Shrewdly, Murk had guessed that his hold on his outfit was slipping. He had a way to tighten it.

"It figures this way," stated Murk. "We're going to get ours - double! We go to the palace with Nayre and put the heat on Big Chin Face. We'll get our dough, and so will Nayre. But when Nayre lams along with us, we'll rub him out and keep his gravy, too.

"Don't worry about the getaway." Murk was waving his hands to silence questions. "Remember that proclamation telling that flier, Allard, to get out of Centralba? If Castenago thinks Allard is The Shadow, it fits right with what Nayre said. Castenago wants The Shadow to knock us off, and call it quits.

"The Shadow isn't going to find us here, because we'll be at the palace. Before he wises to what's happened, we'll get to the airport and take that plane ourselves. All tuned up and gassed, that ship, just waiting for us to take it. We can buy up a banana republic for ourselves, with our dough and Nayre's."

Murk Wessel was turning toward the sliding door. It had gone tight shut. Outside, a swift-gliding figure reached the courtyard, where Nayre was waiting alone. Briefly, The Shadow told Nayre what he had overheard. It fitted even further with The Shadow's well-laid plan.

The counterthrust was on its way, directed by The Shadow!

CHAPTER XX. PAID IN FULL

CASTENAGO'S palace was ablaze with light when Nayre and his new companions circled it. The dictator had declared a special fiesta in honor of Francisco Peridor; but, as usual, there was a catch.

Citizens, stationed around the palace steps, had greeted Peridor's arrival rather coldly; then had turned themselves into a clique favoring Castenago.

It would spread all through Libertad that Castenago was honored and Peridor disowned. Within a few days, no one would be shocked to learn that Peridor had died. If he didn't accept the invitation to suicide, Castenago would take a hand.

Very easily, in Peridor's case. Probably, the system would be another bomb blast, that no one would ever attribute to Peridor's protector, Luis Castenago.

Meanwhile, Castenago, with Peridor seated at his right, was doing everything to honor his esteemed guest. Having called for the best of wine, Castenago sampled the bottle that arrived. For the first time, his face registered disapproval. He turned to the shaky servant who had brought the wine.

"This is not the best!" stormed Castenago. "Fool! Why didn't you bring what I ordered?"

"He would not let me." The servant's quivering tone was low. "He said that he must speak to you, alone. El capitan, the former one. He is in the wine cellar."

Castenago smiled at the reference to Colin Nayre. He excused himself from the table and stepped through a curtained doorway, where he found two gatomontes. He told them to follow him, and on the way to the cellar, Castenago beckoned to another pair. They would be sufficient to handle Nayre.

As for The Shadow, he wouldn't even be about. Castenago had two reasons for his supposition. First, The Shadow wouldn't have allowed so crude a summons from the wine cellar. Again, The Shadow was banking on trapping Castenago when Murk Wessel was present.

It didn't occur to the dictator that Nayre might have arranged that latter point.

Pacing the wine cellar, Nayre was listening to a growl that came from behind a big cask set beneath shelves of bottles. Murk Wessel was arguing that the scheme wouldn't work, and his companions, also hidden, were echoing his sentiments.

Coolly, Nayre responded that it would. He reminded them that this cellar wasn't a trap, for they could go out the way they came in - by the loading entrance.

Castenago had neglected that means of entry to the palace, because it led only to the wine cellar, which was always locked. He'd overlooked the fact that the rule didn't apply on banquet nights, when he sent a servant to the cellar with the key.

Still arguing that Castenago would come, Nayre suddenly motioned for silence. A door opened above a short flight of steps and Castenago peered down into the dim cellar. He saw Nayre, costumed as a mariachi, except for the bandanna headgear.

Without looking around, Castenago gestured for his gatomontes to wait, pair by pair, in the passage behind him. Bluffly, the dictator stepped down into the wine cellar.

Promptly, Nayre produced a revolver and covered him. Castenago merely smiled. If Nayre assassinated him, nothing could block the double death warrant that the dictator had already signed for Peridor and Mariquita. He'd lull Nayre, Castenago would, and then summon the gatomontes to capture the fool. Castenago still believed that Nayre had come alone.

He lost that idea, when five men slid out from behind the wine casks. Murk Wessel, as commander of the squad, used proper tactics. He dispatched two gunners to cover the door that Castenago had entered, and kept the other two in reserve.

Nayre turned to Murk and gestured for him to do the talking.

"WE'VE come for the dough," declared Murk. "Nayre for his, the same as us. He told us how you ditched him on the Durez proposition. Let's see the cash and get this over with."

Real understanding spread across Castenago's big-jawed face. He saw how Nayre had talked Murk into an alliance, but he still mistakenly regarded the scheme as Nayre's own invention; not The Shadow's.

Farsighted enough to know that Murk would double-cross Nayre later, Castenago cagily pretended that he owed Nayre money, too. He turned and indicated the stairs.

"This way," he said. "I shall take you to my private vault. There, you shall both be paid in full."

Prodded by guns, Castenago started up the steps. His gatomontes hadn't shown themselves, for which he was glad. He still wanted them to stay out of sight, so he spoke to his captors as he moved along. His words, however, were addressed ahead.

"No one will block the way, I assure you," declared Castenago. "Look for followers, if you wish, for you will see none."

He was indicating that he wanted the gatomontes to trail from a distance, keeping strictly out of sight. Turning into another passage, Castenago went down a flight of stairs. At the bottom, Murk told him to wait.

Deep in another section of the palace cellar, Castenago paused in front of a wall formed by great stone blocks. He probed a crack so thin it was scarcely visible, and his fingernails found the hidden catch.

The wall opened; it was a great, irregular door that operated upon smooth, noiseless hinges, so perfectly balanced that mere finger pressure could have swung the barrier.

Below, an automatic light had turned on, revealing Castenago's treasure vault. Huge piles of American currency lined the shelves; gold coins were present in dozens of high, glittering stacks. There was silver in the form of bars, along with gold bullion.

Murk's men did exactly what Castenago expected. They forgot their prisoner and plunged into the vault, to see if the wealth could actually be real.

Only Murk hesitated; then, seeing that Nayre was covering Castenago, Murk succumbed to the lure. He

started into the vault, too, only to halt as he heard Castenago's cold tone:

"This vault needs guardians. Dead men are the best! Mere mention of their presence will frighten away the living!"

Murk caught the meaning too late. He heard a clatter as he wheeled, accompanied by a wild gunshot. Castenago had swung upon Nayre, driving his revolver wide.

Powerful as a bull, Castenago was hurling Nayre straight toward the vault door. If the strugglers merely grazed it, the smooth-hinged barrier would clamp upon Murk and his companions.

They were to be the dead men who would serve as guardians of Castenago's wealth!

Only one thing could stop the fatal finish. It came: the laugh of The Shadow!

Involuntarily, Castenago wheeled, and Nayre wrenched from his clutch. At the entry where the gatromontes should have appeared, Castenago saw The Shadow, dominating the square cellar room outside the vault of doom.

From that very vault, other men were lunging: Murk Wessel and his crew. Apparently, The Shadow considered them more dangerous than Castenago, for he was driving toward them. The entry cleared, Castenago darted toward it, howling for his gatromontes. He didn't stop to see what happened behind him.

Nayre had hurled himself upon The Shadow, taking the cloaked fighter from the flank. Bowled backward, The Shadow was stabbing wild shots, that only spurred Castenago.

As he ran, the dictator heard The Shadow's laugh as well, trailing to an abrupt halt. The sudden finish meant nothing to Castenago, but it did to Murk and his crew.

The laugh stopped as Nayre made a hard swing with his revolver. Blackness collapsed in Nayre's clutch. Half crouched above The Shadow, Nayre turned and gestured with his gun, to hurry Murk's crowd after Castenago.

"I've handled The Shadow!" voiced Nayre. "Leave it to me to fill him full of bullets! Get Castenago! Hurry, before he can reach the guards, or we'll have a whole army fighting us!"

The crooks started after Castenago, and it was well they did. Had they lingered, they'd have met with instant death. Nayre's gun was actually covering them, and so were two others: The Shadow's.

He was motionless, but his hands were pointing up from the floor, each with a ready automatic. Nayre's gun swing had stopped short of The Shadow's head; the black-cloaked fighter's sprawl was just another detail of the pretense.

Giving Murk's band a short start, The Shadow and Nayre followed them. They could hear Castenago's shouts far ahead, and the bang of futile gunfire supplied by Murk and the other pursuers. Along the route The Shadow pointed to passages, where Nayre saw gatromontes bound and gagged.

Earlier, The Shadow had silently disposed of Castenago's bodyguards, but he didn't specify whether he had handled them individually, or in pairs.

The trail suddenly became very hot, for it was leading to the place where Castenago expected sure refuge; the banquet hall.

Out of breath, the bulky dictator staggered into sight of the astonished guests, panting for guards to save him.

For the benefit of the guards about the banquet hall, Castenago turned and gestured toward the door, gasping for the guards to hurry and block off his enemies. He hadn't finished the words before the enemies, themselves, appeared.

Murk and his men saw Castenago, and they also spied the guards, who were grabbing for rifles. Murk didn't wait for any ceremony.

He fired straight for Castenago, and the other thugs copied the act. As swiftly as they had murdered Durez, the quick-triggered assassins disposed of Castenago. They were turning away while the bulky dictator still was swaying on his feet. A moment later, Castenago toppled, lifeless when he struck the floor.

The crooks were starting back to the treasure vault, hoping to rifle it and get away amid the confusion. From the very passage that they needed came a challenging laugh, that they thought, at first, was ghostly: the laugh of The Shadow, the fighter that they regarded dead!

AN automatic spoke. Its stab proved that The Shadow was alive. The shot felled one of Murk's gunners. Backing The Shadow's fire came a report from Nayre's revolver, staggering another of Murk's men, who managed, however, to turn with the rest as they fled.

Guards from the banquet hall saw The Shadow and started to aim his way, but he flourished an automatic toward the fleeing crooks and gave the cry:

"Vengeance - for Castenago!"

The guards didn't recognize the irony behind the order. They were Castenago's men, taught to rally at mere mention of his name. People in Centralba switched factions so often that it wasn't surprising that even La Sombra should do so.

As The Shadow sped for the door where Murk and his henchmen had fled, Nayre accompanied him, and the guards followed.

Outside the palace, Murk and his crew were fighting their way into a car. Murk saw The Shadow and pointed him out to the guards who were giving the crooks trouble. Those guards wheeled, to aim for The Shadow, who hooked Nayre's arm and carried him beyond a fountain before the rifle fire could begin.

Leaving the two groups of guards to explain things to each other, The Shadow took a path across a veranda, to another waiting car.

John Smith was at the wheel, with Margo Lane beside him. The Shadow and Nayre sprang into the rear seat. They didn't have to tell John where to take them. There was only one place where Murk and the assassins could have fled: to the airport.

The crooks reached their goal first. They drove their car right to Allard's plane, and sprang on board it unhampered by anyone, for Castenago had ordered that the plane be allowed to go.

Seeing another car approaching, the airport guards rushed out to block it. As the car halted, Nayre poked his revolver from the window, but The Shadow reached and drew it back.

"Our work is accomplished," spoke The Shadow. "We cannot attack the airport guards. They have made a mistake, that is all."

"But unless we get through," returned Nayre, "Murk and the other killers will escape!"

"Let them," decided The Shadow. "Perhaps they deserve the opportunity."

Lights tilted as the ship's nose lifted from the field. Another instant, and the plane was gone. Gone with a blast that scattered chunks of metal hundreds of feet about!

A bomb, more powerful than a whole row of Nayre's marimba gourds, had blasted the plane and its occupants: Murk Wessel and all his tribe, save one.

That one was the wounded man back at the palace. The Shadow had specially dropped him, knowing that someone would be needed to testify, first-hand, regarding Murk's alliance with Castenago.

The Shadow's laugh denoted no surprise.

"I suspected something of the sort," he told his companions. "Castenago was too generous, offering Allard his chance to leave the country. It was better that Wessel should have tried the plane, to see if another of Castenago's accidents would happen."

BACK at John Smith's shop, they separated. Margo went to the hotel, where Nayre met her later, no longer in his native disguise. He was wearing evening clothes. He had called the palace and found that both he and Margo were expected there. So they called a cab.

An exciting scene greeted them when they entered the banquet hall. Behind the main table stood Kent Allard, proposing a toast to Francisco Peridor, president of Centralba.

The council had just held a meeting, and found a law which stated that the office reverted to its former incumbent, since Centralba had no vice-president. Luis Castenago had never deemed it expedient to provide a successor for himself.

The toast finished, Margo was telling Allard about the plane disaster. His responding nod indicated that The Shadow had warned him not to accept Castenago's invitation to depart. It was then that Margo noticed Francisco Peridor and saw the smile that adorned the kindly professor's face.

"He should be happy," said Margo. "He's president again, and they've found the millions that Castenago stole from the treasury."

"I think that Peridor is even happier over something else."

At Allard's words, Margo agreed. She saw the direction of Peridor's gaze, toward the two persons who were happiest of all: Mariquita and Colin Nayre.

They had hoped long for this reunion. They had obtained it - thanks to The Shadow!

THE END