



JABBERWOCKY THRUST

Maxwell Grant

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CHAPTER I

"OH MY ears and whiskers, how late it's getting!" the White Rabbit said as he hurried down the long hallway.

Alice watched him with a puzzled frown on her young, lovely face. From where she was standing she could see the White Knight out in the center of the big room. The White Knight moved his horse-shaped helmet a bit.

The Duchess, holding a piglet under her arm, stomped down the center of the room. The man dressed in newspapers walked toward the Duchess.

He said, "You dropped your pepper shaker, Duchess."

She nodded majestically. She took the pepper shaker and shook it all over the little pig.

Alice looked further down the room. At the door the Frog Footman took an invitation from the Red Queen and gestured for the Red Queen to come in.

The caterpillar sitting on a big mushroom took a big puff of smoke from his hookah. He blew the smoke out in perfect circles.

"Have to watch these little details, you know," the White Knight said, moving the box of his own invention a little higher on his hip. It was upside down and the cover of it hanging down rattled against his armor.

He looked down at it and said, "Wonderful thing, that box."

Alice took up her cue as she walked to the White Knight. "But you know everything's falling out. The cover's loose."

"My own invention, you know," the White Knight said and then looked at the box. "Keeps the rain out—carrying it this way, you know."

"Then all the things must have fallen out!" The White Rabbit looked impatiently at the box. "The box is no good with nothing in it."

The White Knight was about to toss it away when he suddenly noticed a desk nearby. He placed it there. He said to Alice, "You know why I do that, don't you?"

"No."

"In hopes some bees may make a nest in it." He smiled. "Then I should get all the honey!"

The Red Queen came up in great agitation. "What's the French for fiddle dee dee?"

"Fiddle dee dee's not English," Alice said.

"Whoever said it was?" the Red Queen asked impatiently.

Alice said, "You tell me what language fiddle dee dee is and I'll tell you the French for it."

The Red Queen drew herself up haughtily. "Queens never make bargains!"

Tweedledum and Tweedledee who were standing next to what seemed to be a well sat in the center of the floor, looked down into the well. A sign on the side of it said in big letters 'Treacle'. Tweedledum turned the handle that let a little pail go down to the fluid at the bottom of the well and said, "I hope it isn't really treacle."

"It better not be," Tweedledee said. "I've stood about as much of all this as I can."

It wasn't treacle. It was instead a lovely combination of stout and champagne. This is a drink sometimes called, euphoniously enough, black velvet.

Tweedledee and Tweedledum were both drinking deeply when there was a commotion across the room. They spun as one man and saw the White Knight falling face down in the center of the room.

Tweedledee and Tweedledum dropped their glasses and ran to the White Knight. The man on the floor gasped. "Ugh..."

Tweedledum asked, "Is this some of this tomfoolery or is this legit?"

"I don't remember it in the holy writings." Tweedledee said and removed his mask. Lamont Cranston's thin aquiline face looked oddly incongruous staring out of the fat costume of Tweedledee.

He dropped to his knees next to the White Knight. The armor, Cranston realized with a start of surprise, was real. In the book it was tin, of course.

The White Knight pulled his mask off and his face was strained. He gestured Cranston away and said in a low voice, "Send me the White Rabbit."

Dropping his gloves with excitement, as though he were in reality the White Rabbit, the man dressed so bizarrely took Cranston's place next to the fallen man.

Cranston was to regret his instinctive politeness. For he stepped back and did not hear the whispered colloquy between the White Knight and the White Rabbit.

Standing to one side as he was, he saw a bread knife lying on the floor. The handle was about two feet away from the blade proper. An ugly crack showed with what strength the knife had been jabbed at the armor-plated White Knight.

The White Rabbit walked away from the man on the floor and, picking his gloves up off the floor, went out of the room. Alice watched him go, and again her lovely forehead wrinkled in thought. She was completely at sea.

Cranston helped the White Knight to his feet. The man who had been attacked looked at the broken knife lying on the floor and a twisted smile crossed his face. His visor was pushed up and the horse-shaped helmet was on the back of his head.

He said, "A little invention of my own. Armor... real armor."

He was not hurt, Cranston realized. It was the force of the blow from the knife, so strong as to break the knife, that had thrown him off balance. Once down, the weight of the armor prevented him from getting up.

The White Knight whispered to Cranston, "You see, I was not having hallucinations of persecution. That's the fourth time!"

Remembering how unbelieving he had been, Cranston nodded in accord. "I certainly thought you were being a little... nervous, when you told me about that car that almost hit you, and the brick that fell off the construction job so near you..."

"To say nothing," the White Knight said, "of the time I was in the steam room of my club and the heat increased so unbearably... And the 'bad' sea food I ate that put me to bed for a day..."

It certainly added up. But truly, thought Cranston, this was the first murder attempt that could not be passed off as an accident. This was real. This should give him something to get to work on.

But it didn't.

Investigate as he would, question all the people in that strangely conducted ball, press pryingly into where who was at the time of the abortive stabbing, blank walls rose at every side.

No one remembered who was near the host, the White Knight, let alone saw the arm come down with the knife in the hand.

The girl dressed as Alice did remember, and said so when questioned, that the White Rabbit had been near. But so, for that matter, had the man dressed in newspaper.

All the masks had been removed while Cranston was doing his best to get a lead to who the attempted killer was. The people's faces, white with strain, ugly, in some cases with anger at being subjected to interrogation, looked even more strange with the masks off than they had with them on.

The end result, as Cranston confided to Tweedledum, who was in reality that ace homicide man, Joe Cardona, was zero.

The White Rabbit and the man dressed in paper were the nearest. They were close enough for one of them to have been the stabber. But—and this was a big but—the man dressed in paper was Francis Royal, whose business depended on the host, Bruce Ten Eyk.

Royal said, "Don't you realize, sir, that if Mr. Ten Eyk were to die, God forbid, my contract might not be

renewed at midnight... and if it isn't, I may as well close up my factory."

There was a pause. Cranston looked at Marshall. The man dressed in paper said, "It looks more to me as if it were one of my competitors who wants Ten Eyk dead. They all know how long I've known him. They know that while he lives my contract will be renewed almost automatically. What would happen if Ten Eyk were to die, I shudder to think. The vice president of the concern certainly doesn't love me, that's a sure thing."

"Who's he?" Cranston asked.

The man dressed in paper pointed down to the end of the room where the Duchess was petting her pig. "The Duchess. That's Joe Sarren."

"Why doesn't he like you?"

"Thinks he can get a better price from one of my competitors. That's about all. He's strictly business. Friendship, or the length of time I've been dealing with Ten Eyk doesn't enter into it."

"I see," Cranston said, "any of your competitors here?"

"Only Bernie Marshall."

"How is he dressed?"

"Oh. I thought you knew. He's the one Ten Eyk talked to after the stabbing. The White Rabbit."

Joe Cardona, looking completely ridiculous as Tweedledum, looked around the room and said, "Hey, where'd the Rabbit go? He never came back!"

That brought on another search. Cranston, Cardona and the servants all combined forces and went through the house like a vacuum cleaner. But of Mr. Bernard Marshall, whilom White Rabbit, there was no sign.

CHAPTER II

TWEEDLEDEE and Tweedledum finally went back to the "treacle well". Cranston said, "For a murder in Wonderland, I suppose we should have gone to school with the mock turtle."

"Huh?" Cardona looked blank.

"Where they teach reeling and writhing. There's certainly going to be plenty of writhing before we're done with this. Look at them... men indistinguishable from women because of the costumes, no one knowing what they look like, all faces concealed behind masks; yes, we should have taken lessons in reeling and writhing."

"Oh, Lamont, cut it out. I never know when you're quoting from that blasted book and when you're talking sense."

The Mad Hatter, huge hat tilted back on his head, wandered by talking to himself. He muttered, "The time, tch tch, if only time hadn't become furious all this wouldn't have happened."

Cardona nodded at the Mad Hatter. "There, see what I mean? Is that from the book?"

"More or less." Cranston was keeping as much attention as he could on his host, the White Knight. There was some kind of an argument going on. The Duchess, pig under arm, Alice, the man dressed in paper,

and there, the Mad Hatter was joining in the argument...

Cardona was saying plaintively, "I don't dig all this. What makes?"

"Umm..." Cranston said with only half his attention, "these people are all members of the Dodgson cult."

"Hey, wait a minute. How'd a guy name of Dodgson get in this? All I even know for sure about Alice in Wonderland is that it was written by Lewis Carroll."

"Carroll was a pseudonym for Dodgson who was a mathematics professor. He was a bit off-field with his masterpieces, Alice and Through The Looking Glass, so he published them under the pen name."

"I see."

"These people at this masque ball are joined together by their love for the two books, just as the Baker Street Irregulars are by their love of Sherlock Holmes."

"Just as the Baker Street Irregulars meet to talk over and argue some fine point of the Holmes saga, so do these people of the Alice cult meet. Then once a year they have one of these balls. This is the twenty-first, I understand."

"How come," Cardona asked shrewdly, "that so many people from Ten Eyk's business are members?"

"Obvious, isn't it? They're buttering up the boss. I don't suppose half of them are really interested." Cranston saw that some kind of agreement had been come to in the argument across the hall. The host, Ten Eyk, rattling his armor, was walking off.

Cranston approached the circle where the argument had become even more vehement. The Duchess was saying, "Of all the ridiculous things, of course Ten Eyk is right. Jabberwocky begins: 'Twas brillig and the slithy toves', not 'boves'."

Ten Eyk called over his shoulder, "I'm going to get my first edition of Through the Looking Glass. That should settle the argument!"

The Mad Hatter said, "I don't know; in an obscure edition I have, it's 'boves' and not 'toves'."

Cardona wiped his forehead. Of all the silly things... 'Twas brillig...' that didn't mean anything! As for toves or boves... he made a face. At the moment he wished with all his heart and soul that he was over on San Juan Hill battling with some bad boys. There, at least, a blackjack settled arguments. And they were settled.

The Mad Hatter said, "No use arguing any further. Ten Eyk will settle it once and for all. Alice, may I have you for a partner at croquet?"

Alice smiled and joined him. "I'd be glad to, but my flamingo seems to have flown away."

As they walked out of earshot, the bewildered Cardona heard the Mad Hatter say, "Doesn't matter too much, I guess. The hedgehogs have run away, too."

The people, the fantastically dressed people swirled around Cardona's brain like a Welsh-rarebit nightmare. He shook his head wearily. This was just too much of a muchness. He looked for and found Cranston as a rock to which to cling.

At the door, the Frog Footman bellowed out the names of "The Ten of Clubs, the Jack of Diamonds, the..."

Cardona did a double-take as the footman's voice rumbled on. So long that Cardona wondered if a whole deck of cards was coming in. The first of the new guests came in and for a reeling second it seemed to Cardona that his wild guess was right. For the man was the Ten of Clubs.

Dressed so as to resemble the court card was the Jack of Diamonds. All the guests who were dressed as cards wore what could have been sandwich signs. Only, Cardona realized wearily, instead of advertising something sensible like Benny's Meat Market, these sandwich signs were painted to look like cards in a pack.

Cranston said, "Ah, now the croquet game can start. The hoops are here."

"Ah no, Lamont, don't do this to me. What do you mean..." Cardona gulped as he saw one of the men dressed as the four of clubs suddenly bend over so his back was arched. The Duchess, holding a plaintive looking flamingo under her arm, was trying to bat a hedgehog which lay rolled in a protective ball on the floor. The Duchess was trying to drive the hedgehog under the arch of the card Cardona saw.

Just as, by a wild swipe and lucky swing, the Duchess managed to propel the hedgehog toward the arch of the man-card, the man suddenly got up and stretched. The hedgehog rolled by, missing completely. The Duchess roared, "Off with his head!"

Cardona made his way back to the treacle well and gulped down some black velvet. Cranston was at his side smiling. "Too much for you?"

"Cranston, this is a madhouse. This is no masquerade, these people are as batty as..."

Alice passing by, swirling in a weird dance step with the Mad Hatter, said, "Do bats eat cats? Do cats eat bats?"

Cranston chuckled to himself. If the hard-boiled cops down at Center Street could see their Joe Cardona at this moment! His face was as blank as if he had been pole axed.

"Do bats eat cats?" Cardona said. "Lamont, does that make any sense to you?"

Before Lamont could answer his friend, the man dressed in paper brushed up to them rudely and pushed Cardona away from the "treacle well". He said, "Pardon me, but I need a drink worse than you do!"

He gulped the champagne and stout mixture as if it were water. There were spots of sweat on his forehead. He pushed his mask up and it knocked his paper triangle of a hat off.

The White Queen, seeing that he was upset, came over like a good hostess and said, "Bats, what's the matter?"

Cardona groaned inwardly. More bats. But he brightened a little as the White Queen and the man in the paper suit talked. It was clear that Bats was a nickname of some kind.

The man in the paper suit said, "There I was, going along minding my own business, a little tight, and why not? When, down at the end of the hall over there," he gestured to the left, "I saw someone coming toward me.

"I stopped. The person coming toward me stopped. I put my right hand up. His right hand went up..."

Cardona suddenly realized that Cranston, at his side, was listening attentively. Could this have some relevance? Was there some sense in this insanity?

The man in the paper suit, Francis Royal, better known as Bats to his friends, was saying, and his voice was frightened, "I don't know if I can make this seem real to you, but suddenly, as that other figure repeated every move I made, I became frightened. I turned on my heel and walked back toward the ball room. I couldn't help it. I sneaked a look back over my shoulder. There, facing me, was the man's face. Covered with the same mask as mine, it stared at me.

"Only then, so confused was I, that it occurred to me that this other figure was dressed just as I was. He was dressed in a paper suit."

Cardona, figuring it out, sneered to himself at the stupidity of this jerk. Of course, he was looking in a mirror.

Bats continued, "I ran a little, I don't mind telling you I was scared to death... and I'm no coward... then, as I took a last fleeting look over my shoulder, the explanation occurred to me and I felt like an idiot.

"Of course, I'd been looking in a mirror... I calmed down and came back here to join all of you... and then, just as I was all over my scare, I thought..."

"You thought," said Mrs. Ten Eyk, "what I have been thinking all along."

"Yes," said the man in the paper suit, and he wiped more sweat off his brow, "I suddenly realized there is no mirror there."

Cranston looked interrogatively at the White Queen who was his hostess. She nodded. "There is no mirror there. Never has been."

Cardona, the least sensitive of men, suddenly felt a cold chill trickle down his back. This was too much. This meant... what the hell did it mean?

Cranston said, "This is something I feared. If there is anything amiss here, if anyone does intend to hurt Mr. Ten Eyk, the easiest way would be to come here disguised..."

The scream, corny as the second act curtain of a bad mystery melodrama, came then. It tore at their nerves, screeched down their sensory systems like a finger nail on a blackboard. It seemed to go on and on, paralyzing them by its unexpectedness.

Then it stopped, and in some ways the silence was worse.

CHAPTER III

TWEEDLEDEE and Tweedledum, waddling figures meant for fun, ran as fast as the padding in their costumes allowed. Out into the hall, that hall where the mirror had to be but wasn't, up the stairs that led to the library, ran Cardona and Cranston.

Even then, under this stress, Cranston found time to glance at his wristwatch. Ten-forty-seven. They ran on. It seemed an endless run.

Across the balcony they ran. A man, detective written all over him, stood flat-footedly in the hall. Nearby was a chair. It was tilted back by the force with which he had leaped from it.

Cardona snapped, "Well, stupid, watcha waitin' for?"

The man gulped but didn't answer. It was clear that he was held by the same paralysis which had frozen the merry-makers downstairs.

In the room which the detective had been keeping under observation, they found the White Knight.

Held upright by the armor, his body sat perched. In front of the body on the desk a book lay open.

Behind Cardona and Cranston, the detective retched. He said, "His head... where's his head?"

There was no puzzle to that. It was on the floor where it had rolled. The horse-shaped armor helmet had fallen off it.

Hard boiled, phlegmatic Cardona said in a curiously small voice, "'Off with his head'."

Behind the headless figure, a wood fire burned brightly. Cranston, moving as though propelled from a catapult, leaped to the fireplace. Cardona watched him.

Cranston reached into the blazing fire with complete disregard for his skin and dragged out a flaming mess. He dropped it on the deep piled rug, and then stamped the fire out of it.

Edged in black, like a mourning announcement, Cardona saw what might have once been a suit. A paper suit. Nothing was left of what had been a paper hat but a folded ridge, which had resisted the teeth of the flame.

The trio, manhunters all, stared at that charred remnant of a gay masquerade costume.

Head swiveling as though pushed by an invisible hand, Cardona turned away from the head and the paper suit. He looked at the book that lay in front of the armored headless body.

He bent down over the desk, avoiding the cadaver. The book was opened at what seemed to be a poem. But it didn't make any sense.

"Jabberwocky."

"'Twas brillig and the slithy toves..." The poem went on like that. Cardona, not even thinking, let his eye race over words like 'gyre and gimble, vorpal, beamish, mimsy... all mimsy were the borogroves'.

The dead man's fingers, curled as though holding a non existent glass, rested near the beginning of the poem. His forefinger pointed to the first line.

Looking once again, Cardona said, "He was right. It's 'toves', not 'boves'."

Cranston said inattentively, "Of course, any fool knows that."

"How do you mean that? You mean I'm worse than a fool?"

That snapped Cranston out of his introversion. He said, "Oh, I'm sorry, Joe, but that business of the argument about the word struck a false note downstairs. I wonder if whoever started the argument didn't do it in an attempt to make Ten Eyk come upstairs... to his death."

"I see, you mean that any real Alice in Wonderland lover would know the whole poem by heart?"

"If not the whole poem, at least the first line. It's as famous in its way as 'the time has come, the walrus said'."

"Sure, even I know that. Something about cabbages and kings?"

Cranston nodded. There was a flurry of sound at the door. They turned. Cardona thought of something.

"Who screamed?"

The detective, Dan Downs, said, "Oh, I chased her away. She came flying out of this room as if the devil had bitten her."

Cardona sighed and said, "If it wouldn't be too much trouble, Danny, would you mind getting her back?"

"Who was she?" Cranston asked.

"One of the housemaids, I guess," Downs said as he left.

"Must have been a little shock to come in here and find that!" Cardona said, going to the phone. Cranston was standing looking at the Jabberwocky poem.

He was still staring at it when Cardona finished calling for the medical examiner and his staff at the homicide squad.

"Do you realize," asked Cardona, "that the paper suit on top of any other costume would have covered it completely? The killer could have put the paper suit on top of the Duchess' costume and done the killing, then burned the suit and rejoined us downstairs..."

Nodding, Cranston began to snoop around the room. Cardona snapped his fingers as a thought struck him. "Hey! The White Rabbit! The guy that disappeared!"

"Um," was Cranston's only answer.

The door opened, and a girl, young, rather pretty, with a white apron and a little white frilly cap on her blonde hair, came in. Her trembling hands were held up in front of her face.

"What's with you?" Cardona snapped.

"I don't want to see that... him... I can't..."

"Of course," Cranston said gently. "Cardona, let's leave this room as it is till your boys give it a going over. Not that I think they're going to find anything."

Sobbing, the girl thanked Cranston. Out in the hall, with the door closed on the grisly inmate of the room, she recovered herself. She said, "I'm sorry, but I..."

"We understand," Cranston said. "Now, take your time and tell us what happened and who you are."

"I'm the upstairs maid... ooh, I guess you mean my name. I'm Terry Lunn."

"Yes."

"I didn't remember whether I had shut the windows in the library, and Mr. Ten Eyk gets... I mean got, very mad if the windows were open. The books were worth a lot of money, I guess."

Thinking of the first edition of Alice that lay in front of the dead man, Cranston said, "Yes, they are."

"There's not much to tell. I went in to check the windows and I saw him. He didn't have any... no head." She began to sob again.

Cardona, face set, asked Downs. "How come you let her go in... and... who went into the room with Ten Eyk?"

"Some guy he knew. Hey, the guy never came back out again! That's funny, ain't it?" the detective said.

"Now he tells us," Cardona said. "Look, Downs, if you don't want to be back patrolling a beat in Queens, you'd better start talking. Speak up!"

The detective, taken aback by the fury in his superior's voice, relapsed into a curious doggerel, that strange polysyllabic way of giving a report that policemen and detectives have. He said, "Standing at my official post, keeping the door of the library under unwavering attention and constant scrutiny, I saw the man whom we were to guard come upstairs. He was dressed," the tone became less official, "in some kind of a knight's armor."

"Less comment and more talk," Cardona snapped.

"Uh, well, with Mr. Ten Eyk..."

"How do you know it was Mr. Ten Eyk? His face was masked, wasn't it? Well, wasn't it?" Cardona asked.

"No. He had his hemlet, I mean helmet, on the back of his head." Pausing, the detective looked around. There was no place to look except at Cardona's accusing face.

Cardona said, "In words of one syllable, tell us, but tell us fast, who was with Ten Eyk?"

"Oh, I dunno."

Cranston thought his friend would have an apoplectic fit, so he intervened. "How come you don't know? You saw him, didn't you?"

"Oh, sure. But he was dressed in some screwy paper outfit. A dopey hat like kids make out of paper, you know, folded paper, on his head, and this here jacket and pants made out of paper. But his face was masked. I dunno who it was."

Keeping his voice low and level, Cardona said, "Now, then, the guy in the paper suit and Ten Eyk went into the library. Then what?"

"That's all."

Almost screaming, Cardona asked, "They went in, and then?"

"Oh, I see what you mean. Maybe ten minutes went by. Then she came by. She asked me if it was all right to go into the library. I said why not, so she did. Then she screamed and came running out. Then you and Mr. Cranston came running up the stairs and went into the room. That's all."

"That's all," Cardona said. "The fact that the killer never came out of the room didn't occur to you?"

"I didn't know there had been a murder." Murder came out sounding perilously close to moider.

"You didn't know... did you think the housemaids make a habit of screaming? Did ya think they screamed to announce dinner or something?" Cardona controlled himself as he realized that he had an audience. Lining the stairs were the bizarre and varied costumes of the masque ball. The people's faces, some masked and some unmasked now, peered up at the scene.

The Mad Hatter made himself spokesman for the group. "Don't you think," he said, running his huge hat through his fingers nervously, "that we have a right to know what's happened?"

Harassed, furious at having made a show of himself, Cardona said, "Yeah, I'll tell you. Your host, Ten Eyk has had his head cut off!"

The White Queen, without a sound, fainted. But so close were the people jammed on the stairway, that she did not fall. Near her were Alice and the Dormouse.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you stupid..." groping for an epithet, Alice said, "you stupid cop! This is Mrs. Ten Eyk!"

Cardona was contrite, but it was too late. He got hold of himself and ordered a path cleared up the stairs. The Mad Hatter and the Dormouse carried the White Queen up the stairs.

It was too much for the first floor maid. She started to titter hysterically. She giggled. She pointed a shaking finger at the Red Queen, who was at the bottom of the stairs. She said, giggles erupting from the words, "There's the killer! The Red Queen!"

CHAPTER IV

FOR the first time that evening, Cardona looked happy. Here, in the middle of this madness that threatened to obscure everything, was a ray of hope. A witness, an accuser. The case was wrapped up before it started.

Cranston, seeing the expression on his friend's face, and realizing what he was thinking, felt sorry for him. He could sense what was coming. It did.

Walking toward the maid, Cardona said gently, "Did you see her do it?"

"No," the girl was still giggling. "No. I didn't. But she killed him, all right."

"How do you know? Do you have any proof?"

"Ask anyone! G'wan ask 'em!" The girl's voice went way high up into a screech. "Ask 'em!"

Cardona looked as puzzled as the people at whom he turned to look. "Tell me." He shook the girl. "Speak up. How do you know?"

Her face contorted in a rather horrid grin. With giggles punctuating her speech, she said, "Ask anybody, who was always going around saying 'Off with his head'—ask them! See if they protect her!"

The Mad Hatter said, "Come now, this is absurd. If the girl were not hysterical, she'd know that that line is all through Alice in Wonderland. That's the only reason."

Cardona looked at Cranston, who, smothering a smile, nodded in accord. Turning on his heel, the homicide man walked back into the murder room. He'd made enough of a fool of himself.

Left to his own devices, Cranston meandered off. He walked, seemingly not noticing where he was, till he got to the long hall in which Bats Royal had seen, down at the end of the corridor, a hideous simlcrum of himself.

Standing in the almost alley-like hall, Cranston could see how it would be disconcerting to see one's self repeated at a hundred feet. But of a mirror, as his hostess had agreed, there was no sign. There was a little alcove that might once have housed a mirror, but was now empty.

Cranston knuckled his eyes and walked back into the ball room. Terror had torn the gay groups to shreds. Instead of a moving mass of costumed people, there were now clumps where people, huddling

together for protection, spoke in low tones. The brightly colored costumes somehow added to the eldritch mood that had followed their host's decapitation. Horror seemed more horrible at a party than in a graveyard...

Alice, looking more than ever like the heroine of Carroll's fantasy, bright-eyed, wide eyed with fear, long hair making a frame around the pertness of her face, somehow looked younger as though fear had taken away her sophistication.

She must be, Cranston thought, at least twenty-three or twenty-four, but in her costume, and with fear a real thing on her face, she looked closer to fourteen.

"I'm afraid," Cranston began.

"So am I," Alice said.

"No, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I'm afraid that I don't know what your position in the scheme of things is."

"Oh, I'm... I was Mr. Ten Eyk's confidential secretary. I never," she said with a sudden fleeting smile, "could be sure whether he hired me because I am a good secretary or because I resemble Alice."

"He was fanatic enough on Carroll to have hired you because of the resemblance?"

She made a wide sweeping motion that included the whole panorama of the masque ball. "Yes I think so. He did this every year, you know..."

"Strange hobby..." Cranston said. "But, take the members of the Baker Street Irregulars. The lovers of Sherlock Holmes... they are not as you might imagine, all mystery story writers. The membership includes people from all walks of life."

"Really?"

She was interested in what Cranston was saying. He was accomplishing what he had started out to do. She was forgetting for a moment the whole grisly affair.

Around them, quiet voices made a background. A rustling passed by. Cranston started, but then realized that it must be the paper costume of Bats Royal.

His passing brought realization back to Alice's eyes. Cranston said quickly, to take her mind off the murder. "You know, I don't even know your name."

"Why, it's Alice. Alice Anstruther... of all improbable names. Sounds like a pen name, doesn't it?"

"It does, at that." Cranston smiled. He had to bring the subject back to the killing, and he didn't like the idea.

But she saved him the trouble. "You are Lamont Cranston, aren't you?"

"Guilty."

"And you are the man I read about in the papers? The criminologist?"

"Uh huh."

"Were you here for a reason tonight?"

"There's no reason to keep it a secret any longer. Yes, there was a reason... to keep Mr. Ten Eyk alive and... I failed miserably."

"I wondered... I saw that detective upstairs... the killer must have spotted him, too, and went ahead anyway, knowing that a detective was only ten feet away."

Cranston nodded. That, he thought, had been the reason for the viciousness of the thrust, the reason for the decapitation. The killer had to strike fast and suddenly... so suddenly that no outcry gave him away.

Aloud, he said, "To tell you the truth, after that first abortive murder attempt earlier tonight, I didn't think the killer would be nervy enough to try again."

"What was that all about?"

Shrugging, Cranston said, "The killer is an opportunist. He had a knife with him. He saw a chance, when everyone's attention was diverted, to strike. He couldn't know that Ten Eyk's hobby would clothe him in real armor... Ten Eyk wore real armor, you know, instead of tin..."

"I hadn't realized that."

"He struck, and his knife broke. I think that he was aware that that attempt might fail. I think he was prepared with a secondary method if the first failed." That was the only thing that would account for the extra paper costume. Unless, and this seemed improbable, there were two people at the ball who wanted to kill Ten Eyk.

While they had been talking, Cardona's assistants had arrived and gone to work upstairs.

"Did you like Ten Eyk?" Cranston asked.

She smiled gently. "Like him? He was wonderful to work for. He was the soul of consideration. In some ways he was like my father. Yes, I liked him very much."

"Then you want to see his killer captured?"

"More than I can say. How can I help?"

"You must know a good deal about his business..."

"Yes."

"Is there any business motive you can think of that might account for this?"

Her face hardened, and suddenly she was no longer Alice in Wonderland. "I certainly can."

Cranston waited. No use in prodding.

She went on. "If I could figure out a way that Bats Royal could have known... but it's impossible."

"You mean there is a reason why Royal would have wanted to kill?"

"The best in the world! His contract with Mr. Ten Eyk's firm ended tonight. There was an automatic renewal clause in it. If no change were to be made tonight, the contract, which Royal's company is completely dependent on, would go back into force for another three years!"

"I see. How long has this contract been in force?"

"About nine years, I imagine. But there were certain things that have come up in the past year which made it imperative for Mr. Ten Eyk to cancel the contract. That Royal is no better than a crook!"

"Without the contract, you say, Royal would have to go out of business?"

"He's been found guilty of sharp practice so often, that no one else in the business would deal with him. Mr. Ten Eyk's one fault was a virtue. He was too loyal. He held on to that crook... but, as I say, this year it went too far. He had his mind made up. Tonight was to be the end of the contract."

"That gives us the motive on a silver platter!" Cranston said.

"Don't look now," she said wryly, "but that silver platter is counterfeit. There is no way that Royal could have known that his contract was to be terminated tonight!"

"At least I guided Mr. Ten Eyk in that. I told him to keep it a secret from Royal for the best reason in the world..."

"You were afraid of what Royal would do if he knew?"

"Exactly. And, you know what made Mr. Ten Eyk agree with me? He had a funny accident in the steam room at his club... after that he made up his mind to two things, to end the contract and to keep quiet about it!"

"I see." Cranston knew of the existence of business spies... "I wonder," he said, "how sure can you be that no one might have overheard any discussion you and Mr. Ten Eyk might have had in regard to this matter?"

"I can be positive. I know what you're thinking of. Business spies, someone planted in the office to overhear. But Mr. Ten Eyk was a bug on sound. His whole office was sound proofed. No, there is no way anyone could have known about the contents of the letter."

Cranston almost did a double-take at that. "What letter?"

"Believe me, ever since that scream... I've been wracking my brain to find some way he might have gotten hold of the letter... but it's impossible."

"Tell me about the letter."

"Simply this. It was a notice to Zerres Parts, Inc., that they would get the new contract. Also, the letter explained why the matter should be kept confidential. Mr. Ten Eyk made it very strong. He said that if Royal so much as heard a whisper about the matter. Zerres Parts could forget the whole thing."

"They certainly would have kept quiet in view of that. Could the leak have been from Zerres? Perhaps the spy was there. All it would take would be some secretary opening the boss' mail."

Alice smiled. "Bernie Marshall got the letter. If I know him, he was waiting for the postman. No, it couldn't have been from there. And, as a matter of fact, I asked him about it earlier."

Bernie Marshall... he was the vanished White Rabbit. Cranston said, "Who mailed the letter?"

"I did." Alice made a face. "Now do you see how impossible it was for Royal to have access to the letter? I typed it, Mr. Ten Eyk signed it, I mailed it, Bernie received it. No, there was no way for Royal to know that he was losing the contract. And, since he didn't know, there's no earthly reason why he would have killed Mr. Ten Eyk!"

Cranston frowned in concentration.

Alice went on, "I am just lost for any other reason why Mr. Ten Eyk would be... you know... murdered."

An impossible murder. A murder with no motivation. A potential killer with no reason to kill. It was time for one more element to be added to the deadly party. This would be the element of grim justice, as motivated by Lamont Cranston, or, as he was sometimes called, The Shadow.

CHAPTER V

JOE CARDONA came down the long flight of stairs. With every step he descended his face got longer. Cranston watched, wondering if he was going to burst into tears when he reached the last step.

He avoided that, but he did look miserable. He said, "If I could only lay my hands on that... that rabbit!"

"What do you mean?" Cranston asked.

"You know, the guy that took it on the lam, the one dressed as the White Rabbit."

"Bernie Marshall. Yes, it is rather strange the way he disappeared."

"Strange? I don't think so. It's clear what happened." Cardona looked hard, as though daring his friend to debate the point with him. "He took a stab at Ten Eyk. The knife broke, and what made it worse for him, I think, was that Ten Eyk knew he had done the stabbing."

"You mean when Ten Eyk called him over and spoke to him after the stabbing? Yes, I wondered about that, too."

"I got that figured, too. I think when Ten Eyk spoke to him, he accused him of the murder try. I think that, rather than ruin the party that he thought so much of, he told Marshall to hit the road and not come back."

"Could be." Cranston had his own reservations, knowing of the contract that Marshall expected.

"Instead of beating it, I think he had some hideout here in the house, and hid there. Then, putting the paper suit on over his rabbit costume, he went into the library with Ten Eyk and killed him."

"I see."

"It all stacks up. Look: he meant to burn up the paper suit. There'd have been no evidence of it at all if it had burned all the way. But before it could be all consumed, the girl, that maid, walked in on him.

"He left the paper burning and took a Brody out the window. We found some smudges on the window sill that show someone went out there."

"Once out, do you think he kept going?" Cranston asked.

Before Cardona could answer, there was a commotion of some sort across the ball room. Everything had been so quiet, voices had been kept down so much, that when the burst of sound came, it was shocking, like laughter at a funeral.

The White Queen had slapped Alice Anstruther in the face. It had been a hard blow. Thirty feet away, Cranston could see the red welt that the irate woman's hand left on the girl's cheek.

The Mad Hatter—Cranston realized that he didn't even know who the Mad Hatter was under the disguise—was trying to quiet Mrs. Ten Eyk down. Her rage went well with the White Queen's outfit, Cranston thought cynically.

As Cardona and Cranston came closer, Mrs. Ten Eyk was saying, "That's all the soft soap I'll take from that creature. How much of a fool do you all think I am?"

"Working late at the office! And I pretended to believe it. But now he's gone, and there's no reason I should take it any more! I know what she is, the little..."

The Mad Hatter got his hand over the angry woman's mouth, but, bubbling up, made more vile by the smothering, was a bottomless well of obscenities...

Cardona whispered, "How do 'nice' women learn things like that?"

Shrugging, Cranston said, "The funny thing is that I don't believe it. She's crazy with jealousy, that's all. The murder has let down her barriers."

"I wish something would get the barriers back up again, then," Cardona said.

The Mad Hatter and the Frog Footman, who was really the butler, managed to drag the screaming woman out of the room. Alice stood statue-still, hand to her cheek. Her eyes were vacant. The attack had been too sudden. She had no defense against the unfairness of it.

So that was what Mrs. Ten Eyk had been thinking all along! And she had been so sweet... so considerate... Alice shuddered.

This time when the silence descended it was complete. No one had any desire to talk. Of course, once away from the scene, wagging tongues would build a towering edifice of scandal. But now it would be too raw. Too unmannerly.

Cranston asked Cardona, "Who is the Mad Hatter?"

"I don't know, and that reminds me..." He raised his voice and sounded like a drill sergeant. "Listen, all of you! I want those masks off. I want to know who's going around hiding under them!"

It was about time, Cranston thought. Of course, there was the problem that a lot of the people's visages were hidden under make up rather than masks, but that could be taken care of.

The door opened, and the Mad Hatter, big hat off, was fanning himself with it. Cardona yelled. "You, with the hat, who are you? Take your mask off."

"Why, of course. I wondered why that point hadn't been raised earlier."

Cardona felt tempted to yell that there had been a few other little things to take care of, but he restrained himself.

Even with the mask off—it was made of papier mache—Cranston didn't recognize the Mad Hatter.

He walked to Cardona and said, "My name is Charles Grangousier. Is it of any moment?"

"We don't know. Now, I'm just trying to get a list of who's here. What do you do?"

"You mean for a living? I have a private income. As a hobby, I am secretary of the Lewis Carroll Association."

"I see." Cardona looked over to be sure that his own male secretary was taking all this down. It was being done.

Down the line Cardona went, gathering names of people, their occupations, their reasons for being at the ball, and similar data that Cranston feared was not going to do the least bit of good as far as solving the murder was concerned.

Cranston had waited his chance, and now, with Cardona all involved with his work, seemed to be the right time. Cranston drifted to the doorway that led to the hall and out. Through a little alcove was a cloak room where his ever present brief case rested.

He had his hand on the zipper that would release his ebon cloak, when he heard a footstep behind him. He was surprised. It was the Mad Hatter, Grangrousier.

"Mr. Cranston?"

"Yes... or Tweedledee... as you prefer," Cranston said, looking down at his costume ruefully. How it was going to fit under his cape, he didn't know.

"I prefer to call you Mr. Cranston, as I cannot quite see how Tweedledee would be much help in a murder investigation."

"Do you have some information?" This, of course was the way most murders were solved. By a tipster. By someone who has seen something and is under compulsion to tell all.

It wasn't going to be that easy, however. For Grangrousier said, "It's not that I saw the killer, just that I know all these people. I know their relationship to each other, and I thought that perhaps this might be of help to you."

"It certainly would." Cranston gave up the idea of switching costumes for the nonce. He put the brief case under his arm, and walked back up the hall with the secretary of the Lewis Carroll Association.

"I don't know," Grangrousier began, "how much you know about our organization..." It was a question.

"Very little."

"Mmmm..." Grangrousier was doubtful, "you don't know that Mr. Ten Eyk left a sizable bequest to our organization?"

Oh—oh, Cranston thought, that tore it. "How big a bequest?"

"Big." A silence. "Very big. Well over a million."

"And," Cranston said after a pause, "who takes care of the money?"

"Who but our treasurer?"

"Who is..."

"Mr. Bernard Marshall."

The White Rabbit! The man who had 'taken it on the lam', in Cardona's words. The man who had been near Ten Eyk when he was stabbed...

Grangrousier went on, "Can I tell you anything else?"

"A little. Does Alice Anstruther go with anyone?"

"Un ami? Mmmm..." Grangrousier, cadaverous face in character for his disguise as the Mad Hatter, smiled an oily smile. Cranston expected him to chortle. Instead, he said, "It has been rumored that she and Marshall have been seen in various 'intime' spots around town..."

It could be very neat... Alice showing that there was no motive for Marshall killing Ten Eyk because of the contract, when all the time the real motive was the bequest...

Cardona hard-heeled down the hall toward them. "What makes?"

Cranston had Grangrousier, whom he liked less and less as time went on, repeat his story.

"That damned Marshall again! If I could get my hands on him I'd..."

The Frog Footman at the outer door twenty feet away, roared, in a stentorian tone, "The White Rabbit!" A door slammed.

CHAPTER VI

THE whole room turned to look at the door through which Marshall would make his entrance. Cranston glanced at his wrist watch. Midnight on the button.

"Oh my ears and buttons, she'll be furious! I can't find my gloves anywhere!" Marshall said. His cue was the only sound. No one picked it up. No one continued from Alice in Wonderland. No one, as a matter of fact, did anything for about twenty seconds. Then Cardona said, putting his hand in his pocket, "Gloves?"

"Yes, my white gloves." The White Rabbit nodded happily. He was completely in the party mood which had vanished with the murder.

Cardona held a pair of white gloves aloft. "These white gloves?"

"If they fit me, yes." The White Rabbit pitter-pattered over to Cardona. "I'm sure these are mine." He tried them on. They fitted him. "Yes, these are mine. I have small hands for a man. And these, as you can see, fit."

"You know where I found them, don't you?" Cardona asked Cranston.

"Uh-uh?"

"Up in the murder room. They were near the window. I think they fell out of his pocket."

"Murder room? Is that some cue I don't know? I don't remember that anywhere in Carrolliana," the White Rabbit said a bit helplessly.

"Cut it out, will you? That's the corniest act I've ever seen!" Cardona said disgustedly. All right, so the guy had committed murder. He'd tried to be smart; he hadn't been. He was caught. So give up gracefully. When you're licked, you're licked.

"I... I..." The White Rabbit looked around till he saw Alice. He said, "Alice, what's going on? Why is everyone looking at me this way?"

She walked to his side. She put her hand on his arm. Then she said gently, "They think you killed Mr. Ten Eyk... he's dead, dear."

"Very dead!" Grangrousier put in. "As dead as a man can be with his head off his shoulders!"

"That'll be enough out of you!" Cardona snapped.

"Me? Me kill... but..." The White Rabbit turned to Alice. "Did you tell them about the..." He whispered.

She nodded. "I told Mr. Cranston."

"Cranston, Lamont Cranston! Of course, I just read a feature article about him in some slick magazine... that writer we know... Vale. He wrote it."

She nodded. "Really, you came back to sign the contract, didn't you?"

"Stop that cuing." Cardona was mad again. This whole case was getting out of hand.

"What contract? What contract... you two... what are you talking about?" The man in the paper suit was as white as the paper of his costume. "Did you chisel in there? Did you?"

He was at the White Rabbit's side. He grabbed the younger man by the shoulders and shook him the way you would a bad puppy. "Answer me!"

Cardona said nothing this time. This was more like it. Maybe somebody would spill his guts. He smiled.

The man in the paper suit, Bats Royal, said, and his voice was as quiet as death, "Is that why you were here? I wondered what dragged you in from Chicago!"

Still, Marshall, looking quite preposterous in the White Rabbit outfit, said nothing. Alice, at his side, was grim faced. Finally, she said, "You don't have to take this, Bernie, tell him off."

"That's true, isn't it?" He smiled at her. Then he turned to Royal. "Yeah, I got the contract... or at least I was supposed to..."

Royal drew back his fist, but before he could swing it, Marshall threw a short jab that rocked Royal's head back on his neck. It was completely unexpected.

Before Royal could recover, Marshall swarmed all over him. He slugged his opponent in the midriff and when he grunted and bent forward, Marshall let him have it on the chin. That straightened him out and knocked him over backwards.

Lying on the floor, arms out spread, Royal looked up at the younger man. The White Rabbit, looking even sillier than before, was crouched over, fists ready. It was absurd. A rabbit isn't supposed to fight.

It was clear from the mise en scene, from the shocked faces on the bystanders, that Marshall was, in private, a bit of a rabbit. They seemed astonished at his having fought at all, let alone won.

The man who was dressed as the Duchess leaned forward and shook Marshall's hand. "Good work, son."

Bernie grinned. "Didn't think I had it in me, did you?"

"Truthfully, no," the Duchess said.

Cardona said, "Very pretty." He watched the man in the paper suit get groggily to his feet. "Very pretty, indeed. Proves that you were strong enough to decapitate Ten Eyk, anyway."

Marshall, blood aroused, adrenals working overtime, started for Cardona. Cardona said, "Whoa! You can't punch your way out of a murder rap, son."

Royal said, "A lot of good it's going to do you! There's an automatic clause in the contract. Since it wasn't signed over to anyone, my contract is in force for another three years."

"Like hell it is." The Duchess was irate now. "If necessary, I'll go to court. But you're not keeping that contract, Bats."

"Good. We'll settle this where it belongs, in court." Royal managed a fairly capable sneer.

Cranston said to Cardona, and his tone was so low it wouldn't carry, "What else did you find up there in the library?"

"Surprised about the gloves, eh? Sorry, Lamont, I didn't find another blasted thing. The medical examiner couldn't tell us anything, of course. What is there to tell when a guy gets his head cut off?"

"No fingerprints?"

"Nah. If I ever found a case solved by fingerprints, I think I'd retire. Everybody's too hep these days."

Cranston snapped his fingers. He called out to Marshall, "May I speak to you a moment?"

"Sure," the White Rabbit said, joining them. "What's up? Outside of the fact that this detective wants to fit me for a shroud?"

"I don't suppose you have the letter from Ten Eyk apprising you that you were to get the contract?"

"Think I'd let that out of my sight?" Marshall reached under his rabbit costume and handed Cranston an envelope. "Here it is."

While Cranston looked at the envelope and then the letter it contained, Cardona looked down at his ridiculous Tweedledum costume. He said, almost to himself, "If I had anything on under this but my B.V.D.'s, I'd take this costume off. How can a detective operate made up this way?"

The letter contained precisely what Alice had said it did. It told Marshall that he was to get the contract, and stressed that secrecy was of the essence.

The envelope told Cranston nothing. He wished he had a microscope near. But that was futile hoping. He handed it back to Marshall and said, "I'd hold on to this if I were you."

"I intend to; if this thing is going into court, I'll need it."

"You'll need more than that. You're going to need a magician," Cardona said. "I'm taking you downtown and booking you."

"You're making a mistake but if that's the way it's gotta be, why let's go." Marshall shrugged.

"Keep your drawers on. I'll be the one to decide when we leave," Cardona said. "What about you, Lamont? You want to come along?"

"I think one of us should stick around. I'll see you later."

"Right. See you later. Now, sonny, we'll go."

"What about all these people?" Cranston asked.

"May as well send 'em home."

"I'll take care of that."

But for two detectives who were left on guard at the library, Cardona and his entourage left. Soon after that, the house which had been the stage for the bizarre events of the evening was still.

Cranston, alone in the ball room, all the lights but one lamp out, sat in an easy chair deep in thought. Still dressed as Tweedledee, brief case on lap, he sat and stared off into space.

A family doctor had been to see Mrs. Ten Eyk. He'd evidently loaded her with bromides, for she had gone quietly to bed.

If there was only some way that Bats Royal could have known about the contract. But he couldn't have... if Marshall hadn't so mysteriously absented himself at the time of the murder... if there were not that million dollar motive...

Cranston shook his head wearily. Who had worn the extra suit made out of paper?

Words formed in his brain. He could see them. 'Twas brillig and the slithy toves...' Ten Eyk's finger had been covering the word 'toves'... did that have any significance?

Suddenly Cranston chuckled. He got to his feet.

And then The Shadow smiled... for suddenly he knew!

CHAPTER VII

SILENTLY, the macabre figure of that master manhunter prowled off toward the hall in which Royal had described the frightening event of the two men dressed in paper suits.

Shocking as a fire alarm came the clanging of a phone. It was next to The Shadow's elbow. He grabbed it, hoping that the sound hadn't awakened any of the myriad servants who staffed the big house.

Without saying anything, he waited. The phone barked, "I want Lamont Cranston!" It was Cardona.

"Speaking." The Shadow waited, listening. No sound from the house. The sound had gone unobserved... but there must be extensions of this phone; his ears were alert for a click that might signal someone listening in.

"Listen... the thing's blown wide open. That little rabbity guy put the slug on me on the way downtown, and jumped out of the squad car."

"Get away?" The Shadow almost whispered.

"Clean as a whistle! He dodged in between some stalled trucks and, rabbit costume and all, eased away like a greased pig. But we'll get him! In that costume, how far can he get? I've got a city-wide call out for him."

"I see. I'll still see you later."

"Whoa! That's only half of it! Get this! The M.E. just finished the post, and—hold on to your hat—Ten Eyk's gut had enough nicotine in it to poison half the homicide squad!"

"So that even if he hadn't been decapitated, he'd have died..."

"Exactly! But this makes it a bit better... now we've got the poison to go on! You can't just go into a drug store and get a bottle of dangerous poison like that!

"We'll trace it, and when we do, we'll have him nailed to the cross!"

"Don't be too optimistic, Cardona."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Given about ten cheap cigars, I can show you how to get all the nicotine you'd need to..."

"Oh, say it ain't so! Lamont, you can't do this to me!"

"I'm sorry to be a Gloomy Gus, Joe, but check your toxicologist, and see if I'm not right!"

"Well, get down here as fast as you can."

"No, Joe. I think this thing isn't over yet. I'd better stick around the Ten Eyk house for awhile."

"Okay, if you see it that way. But take it easy. If that Marshall guy goes on the prod, he'll be tough to handle."

"Not too tough, I hope. See you." The Shadow gently put the phone to rest.

Even knowing who the killer was, as he did, didn't help in predicting the gambit of a fiendish killer. All he could do was be on the defensive. This was a role that sat ill on The Shadow's shoulders. Better by far to be on the offensive one's self...

Overhead, he heard a bare whisper of sound. Feet? No. A tiny rasp. A window being raised? Could it be one of the servants or...

Upstairs ran the figure that had been the nemesis to so many criminals. Through the long ante room off the top of the stairs, and then, tip toe...

He stood outside what he thought must be Mrs. Ten Eyk's room, and glued his ear to the door. From here? Had that tantalizing sound emanated from here, or was he guarding the wrong place?

He eased the door open. Bright moonlight bathed the room in ambient light, so that the bed in the center of the room looked almost as if it were in the center of a stage under spot lights.

The form of Mrs. Ten Eyk was a huddled mass in the center of the bed. But what was the shadow to the right of the bed? It was moving. An arm, unidentifiable, came out into the whiteness of the moonlight.

There was a taboret next to the bed. On it were a phone, a glass of what seemed to be water, and a small cardboard box. The hand, eerie, because it didn't seem to belong to a body, came out cautiously.

The hand was not empty... then suddenly it was. Something white and granular poured down from the hand into the glass. The Shadow watched. So that was it. This was the gambit.

The Shadow hoped he could turn it into a fools mate. The only sound in the room came from the bed. The woman's heavy breathing sounded like an oxygen bag in the operating room. The Shadow hoped that the sound was loud enough to mask his own progress across the room.

Softly as a comb going through hair, he stepped forward, avoiding the patch of moonlight. The hand had finished the task that had been set it. The powder cascaded down into the glass. The hand retreated into the darkness again.

The Shadow could hear a gasp of relieved suspense. The owner of the hand was satisfied with what he had done. If The Shadow's hypothesis were correct, the hand had accomplished a deadly task indeed.

Again, the only sound was the heavy, almost drugged, breathing that emanated from the huddle on the bed.

The Shadow ended the silence that had been a momentary truce. He sprang across the ten remaining feet that separated him from the hiding place of the owner of that disembodied hand.

Hands outstretched, he encircled a body. Fright was like a terrible thing in the room. The attack had been so sudden, so unexpected, that the man—The Shadow knew from the evidence of his hands that it was a man whom he was wrestling away from the window—had no way to prepare himself.

His muscles were slack. The Shadow half carried, half dragged the man back into the center of the room, trying to get him into that spot light like patch of moonlight.

Suddenly the man seemed to realize what The Shadow was doing. Head still in darkness, he suddenly mobilized for action. He fell to his knees. As he went down, he threw his weight forward.

The Shadow went flying through the air.

Landing in a roll, the way a tumbler would, The Shadow spun in an arc, and came to his feet, arms again outstretched, so that the man could not get by him to the window.

The Shadow could see the man's shadowy silhouette against the light that was behind him. It was blurry, unidentifiable. There was one thing, however, that was identifiable, even in the darkness.

That was the massive chunk of metal that the man had pulled from his pocket. It was an automatic, and the muzzle of it, huge and threatening, was pointing at The Shadow's stomach.

Eerily, the woman on the bed slept through the fracas.

The man, pointing the gun at The Shadow's vulnerable middle, grunted, "Back!"

Pretending acquiescence, The Shadow retreated, leaving a clear path to the window. The man, gun always menacing The Shadow, paced toward his escape.

He came nearer, nearer, till he was but three feet from his dark antagonist. It had to be now or never. If he walked through the window and out, The Shadow would not be able to catch him.

There was a delicate bedroom chair, spindle legged and antique, to one side of The Shadow. As the man passed him, with the gun still promising death, The Shadow hooked his toe under the seat of the chair, and kicked it up into the man's face.

Involuntarily, the finger tightened on the trigger, proving how close the hammer had been to coming down on the cartridge. The gun spat. The bullet missed The Shadow.

Paying it no more attention than a rain drop, The Shadow pulled one of his .45's, and, using it like a club, brought it down on the badly disconcerted man's head.

In military parlance, it was a near miss. The man somehow ducked his head, evaded the blow, and

caught the brunt of it on his shoulder.

The interruption was the thing that allowed his escape. The woman on the bed, brought from some deep recess of drugged sleep, sat up on the bed and screamed.

The sound, following on the heels of that shot, sounded, if anything, louder than the gun shot. The Shadow spun on his heel and saw her sitting up in the moonlight, ultimate terror on her pudgy, undistinguished, middle-aged face.

That was all it needed, that one second of divided attention. The man with whom he had been fighting went through the window like the bullet had gone from his gun. He went through the glass. It shattered, and shards fell to the floor behind him.

The Shadow turned, too late, and raced to the window. He was perhaps ten feet from it, and yet, in the tiny space of time it took him to get to the balcony beyond the window, the man was gone, as though he had never existed.

Looking down the ten feet to the lawn that surrounded the house, The Shadow could see no sign that anyone had landed there. Upwards? He looked above him. The window on the floor above was too far above for a man to have leaped to it and jumped in.

To the right and left? That was the answer. The balcony, broad and commodious, went both ways. There were windows there. The man had gone in one of them! But which?

Momentarily undecided, The Shadow looked back at the frightened woman on the bed. Should he... it was a toss up whether he went to the right or left... and then suddenly he remembered, and it was too late to go either way.

That hand in the moonlight that had dropped the powder into the glass! He approached the bed. Pitching his voice low, he said, "Don't be frightened. And..." He reached down and took the glass. "... don't take any more sleeping powders until this is all over!"

There was no understanding on her face.

He took the glass with him as he left the room. She still sat up in bed; clothes dragged up to her chin, in that universal feminine gesture...

Out in the hall, he sighed. There was not much point in looking in the rooms that abutted on the bed room, at least not now. Nevertheless, feeling that he was locking the barn door after the horse was stolen, he took time to look in both rooms. Needless to say, he found no hiding figure. The man had had enough time to get clear of the house. That was only too obvious.

Pounding up the stairs came one of the detectives who had been assigned to guard the house. He looked all around him, wondering where the shot and scream had come from.

The Shadow drew back into one of the many splotches of black that lined the hall. He waited while the detective looked all around and then rather timorously opened Mrs. Ten Eyk's door.

Another scream tore through the house. The detective jumped as though he'd been stuck with a pin. He mumbled an explanation to Mrs. Ten Eyk, and then, while he was getting an earful from the woman, The Shadow made his silent way down the stairs.

He carried the glass of water with him.

There was no problem in getting out of the house. Walking past one of the bored beat cops outside the door, he waited till the cop yawned, and then, while the man's eyes were closed, he made his way out to the driveway behind the house.

He was soon next to a taxicab. In the cab, a sleeping man was slumped over the wheel.

A black clad arm came out and shook the sleeping driver. Shrevvie, for it was he, sat up with a start. He grinned sleepily. "Hi boss."

The Shadow handed him the glass of water. "Take this downtown to headquarters. Have Cardona give it a toxicological examination."

"Sure, boss." Shrevvie yawned. "Anything else?"

Remembering the Tweedledee disguise that had hampered him in his fight, The Shadow said, "Yes. As soon as you've handed over the glass, go home and get me some clothes!"

Holding the glass of water between his thighs on the seat, Shrevvie drove off with a wide grin on his face.

The Shadow went back into the house. Gnawing at him was the hunch that, since the whole case revolved around the house in which murder had come in masque, that the solution would also transpire within those four walls.

CHAPTER VIII

RELAXING, minus his Shadow cloak and hat, Lamont Cranston sat in a chair, tilted back, briefcase on his lap, and thought. One of the most fantastic causes of death that had arisen recently was the overuse of sleeping draughts.

Death, or... and Cranston had seen cases of this... chemical manic depression. People driven crazy by the drug... so crazy, that for all intents and purposes they are mad until the toxic effects of the drug wear off.

This, Cranston thought, was probably in the man's mind when he dropped the drug in the water glass next to Mrs. Ten Eyk's bed. She had taken a sedative to forget about the murder of her husband. It would probably have been taken for granted if she had been found dead in bed in the morning, with an overdose of barbiturate in her. It happened so often...

The killer was clever, that was undeniable. However, foiled in his attempt, would he try to repeat? Was there some reason why Mrs. Ten Eyk had to die that night?

Yes, come to think of it, there was. The nicotine in Mr. Ten Eyk's stomach. If Mrs. Ten Eyk were responsible for that, she might have then committed suicide... that was probably behind the killer's actions.

Hearing a soft pitter-patter, Cranston turned in his chair. It was the upstairs maid. The one who had found Mr. Ten Eyk... or his headless body.

She quavered, "I think..." Then paused.

"Yes?" Cranston said gently.

"I... I don't know whether..." She drew the folds of her bath robe around her, seeming to realize for the first time that it might seem a little peculiar for a pretty girl to come down to a man in the night dressed in

a nightgown. She tried again, "I don't know what to do!"

"In what way?"

"Well," She fumbled at her bodice. "It says that I shouldn't show this to the police until tomorrow. But you're not the police, not really, are you?"

"No." Cranston scowled. Had he been all wrong? The girl handed him an envelope. Scrawled across the front of it, in uneven nervous long hand, was, 'To be delivered to the police tomorrow morning.'

It was sealed, but Cranston felt no compunction, ripping it open. It read, with no salutation, "I must be mad. There is no other explanation.

"Jealousy when it goes as far as this is a disease. A dread disease. It has resulted in one death. Now there remains another victim. I am that victim. My husband was the first.

"To think, now that he is dead by my hand, that I should have been insane enough to kill him because of a cheap flirtation with an even cheaper... (the word 'tart' had been written and then scratched out)...girl. I am insane, but I will not live to see the ignominy of madhouse walls.

"Let no one be held responsible for my death. I die willingly, and by my own hand."

It was signed, this strange note, 'Marcia Ten Eyk'.

Cranston stared at it long after his eyes had communicated the message to his brain. What now for his theory... although... he frowned.

The girl said, "Did I do something wrong? I didn't quite know what to do."

"You did no wrong...no. You were quite right in bringing this to me." What was the reason for the man pouring whatever it was into the glass? But wait! "Who gave this to you, my dear?"

"No one. I found it on my dresser when I got ready for bed."

"I see. Thank you very much." That didn't clear things up any. Mrs. Ten Eyk could have, or the killer could have forged it and left it there. The writing was so nervous and uneven that Cranston was sure it didn't resemble Mrs. Ten Eyk's regular handwriting at all. It was understandable, if she had written it in preparation for death... it was understandable, too, if the killer had written it, that there would be trouble in proving it a forgery.

Going around in circles, Cranston thought.

Sensing his consternation, the girl said, "Something wrong?"

He nodded. "Just about everything." He paused, then said, "You'd better get along up to bed. You've had a rough night."

"I will, but I don't see how I can sleep."

"You're probably tired enough... try, anyway."

The phone rang. Cranston walked with the girl to the phone. She continued on up the stairs as he picked up the phone. The phone squawked, "What the hell's going on up there?"

It was Cardona. Cranston asked, "The glass you mean?"

"I certainly do. It had enough barbiturate in it to kill half the hackies in New York!"

Grinning, Cranston asked, "Shrevvie getting on your nerves again?"

Cardona swore, then said, "Where'd you get that glass?"

He couldn't say that he had wrested it from the killer. Instead, he said, "I found it on a credenza outside Mrs. Ten Eyk's room."

"Oh brother." Cardona sounded sorely beset. "That's just jolly."

"Oh, you'd better know this, too. I have a suicide note signed by Mrs. Ten Eyk."

"I see. She has a good reason to try."

"What do you mean?"

"One of my boys took along a pot he found in the garage. It has her fingerprints all over it."

"Umm?"

"The pot was used to boil down the nicotine that we found in Ten Eyk's belly."

"I see. She admits giving him the poison in her note."

"I don't suppose," Cardona said, with a tiny note of hope in his voice, "That she admits to chopping off his head, too?"

"I'm afraid not. In any event, why would you decapitate a person to whom you'd just given a whacking big dose of poison?"

"I know... I know. You can't blame me for trying."

"Anything else?"

"Just the papers. They're really going to town. 'Murder Through the Looking Glass' was the mildest headline."

"Chin up," Cranston said.

"Why? Just so as to make it easier to hit?" Cardona said, and then, "So long. You coming down now?"

"Not just yet," Cranston said, "see you later."

When Cardona hung up, Cranston dialed his friend, Burbank. When Burbank's eager voice said, "Hello?" Cranston said, "Anybody you can get hold of?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"Send someone down to Mr. Ten Eyk's office."

"At this time of night?"

"Yep. I want him to case the whole place. Nothing in general, just look it over, then report back to me here."

"Where is here, boss?" Burbank asked.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm going around in circles. The number is," Cranston gave him the number of the Ten Eyk phone, then hung up.

Thinking of Cardona, Cranston thought, rather than call this "Murder Through the Looking Glass," it should be titled the "Mystery of the Vanishing Mirror". There was certainly no evidence of any mirror in the hall. Therefore, Bats Royal saw another man dressed in paper...

He shook his head to chase the cobwebs away.

Mrs. Ten Eyk was the goat in this hunt. She was the animal tied to a stake for the tiger to attack while the hunter shot the tiger. Thinking this, Cranston went back upstairs and looked in on Mrs. Ten Eyk.

She was asleep again... if she woke on the morrow, she would probably have no memory of a shot and a blackclad man... she'd have no memory of her glass vanishing... if she woke on the morrow.

The whole case had progressed so rapidly from that first abortive attempt to stab Ten Eyk, to the drug being poured in Mrs. Ten Eyk's drinking glass, that now the next space of time seemed to drag itself out forever.

Cranston had the door open wide enough so that he'd be able to see if anyone came into Mrs. Ten Eyk's room. He sat nearby and stared at nothing. Time stretched, went on and on... he glanced at his watch. It was only three thirty.

The preceding five hours had vanished as though they had never been, but this hour that he had sat on guard seemed like a year. It was proof, if any more were needed, that time is truly relative.

He yawned. His eyes got heavy. He had had a full day and evening, he realized. He'd been on the go since early that morning. His jaw ached from trying to hold a yawn in.

His eyes watered. He stretched. He fidgeted. Finally feeling sleep descend on him, he sat up with a start. He looked around the hall. There was a vase near him. He took it off the table it was perched on, and set it near his chair. Then he drew one of his automatics, and, holding it in his hand, held his hand over the vase.

If he fell asleep, his grip on the gun would relax, the gun would fall into the vase, crash, and awaken him. He grinned at the Rube Goldbergish idea.

The house was so still that he could hear the woman's breathing coming out of her bedroom. There were little sounds, old sounds of a tired house, settling infinitesimally.

His gun felt as if it weighed a ton. His fingers were falling asleep. He tightened his grasp on the gun. No point in letting it fall to no purpose. He yawned again.

His brain was tired. He had the solution... he was sure he had... if only the facts weren't at variance with what his intelligence told him must be the answer.

The eyes that were watching Lamont Cranston were narrow. Would the man never sleep? But if he did, the gun would fall and crash into the vase... unless...

A man stepped partially into the hall. His shoulder and arm extended. His reaching fingers groped for, and then reached, the end of the scatter rug on which Cranston had placed the vase.

If he could pull the rug to him, the vase would no longer be beneath the gun... so that even if the gun fell it would not awaken Cranston.

Inch by careful fraction of an inch, the rug was pulled away from Cranston's side. If his gun had fallen at that second, it would have crashed into the side, not the mouth of the vase... then, the vase was no longer next to Cranston.

The murderer sighed a tiny sigh of relief as the vase was moved safely away from the gun. He watched and saw Cranston's long fingers relaxing on the gun.

A pillow... something to cushion the sound... something, that was of the essence; if there were a cushion there, then the gun could fall in complete safety. Looking around anxiously, the killer saw that there was a padding under the rug at his feet. He removed the padding, leaving the rug seemingly undisturbed. He ripped a piece of padding off. Then, knowing his life might depend on it, he bent over and scaled the padding under Cranston's hand.

It landed with a tiny plop. He waited to see if it disturbed Cranston. It didn't. There was no response from the relaxed man who leaned back in his chair.

Watching, the killer saw finger after finger relax, until finally the gun hung by the trigger guard from the index finger... there... the gun fell.

Would the sound... no, Cranston did not move. His hand hung down at his side.

Reassured, the killer stood up straight and walked into Mrs. Ten Eyk's room. His only thought now was murder. But it must be careful murder... disguised murder... murder that looked like suicide.

In the room, he stood over the bed and looked at the drugged, sleeping woman. His features were set. This was not going to be pleasant. He took from his pocket a safety razor blade. A double edged blade.

Putting it between her flaccid fingers, he pressed hard, so her fingers grasped the dainty, dangerous blade. Then, slowly, so as not to awaken the sleeper, he drew the scalpel sharp blade across the other wrist. It left a tiny, thin line.

Such a thin line. Like a red hair draped around the wrist, it seemed to have no danger in it...

Then the hair widened... the red got redder... it pulsed out. The man watched until the pink comforter that covered the woman was dyed a deeper shade. Then, and only then, he left as he had come, by the window.

And the stain grew deeper... and wider...

CHAPTER IX

DAWN, when it broke, was a grey and hideous thing, colorless as milky glass, dead and tired. A feeble, cold sun sent leprous shafts down through even colder grey clouds.

Grangrousier, called from a warm bed by an insistent phone, and an even more insistent message, opened the front door and looked back over his shoulder as he entered the house. The light made his face seem old and wicked. His mouth curled in a sneer at the cold sun.

The sneer ironed out as he walked down the long hall that led to the ballroom, where, he had been told, a meeting was being called. His mouth a straight hard line, frown lines in his forehead, he opened the door from the hall and went into the ballroom.

He had heard voices from the hall. The voices, connected now to the throats from which they had come, resolved themselves into a curious coterie.

The people sat slumped, straight backed, relaxed, and intense, along a line of chairs that was drawn up school room fashion, in the center of the room.

Lamont Cranston, face immobile as an Indian's, sat in a comfortable chair, looking half asleep. His eyes were heavy and sad looking. To his right, sat Alice Anstruther, trim body clad in a business suit that could not deny her femininity. To her right and in front of her was Francis "Bats" Royal. His face was set and angry looking.

Joe Cardona, weary, face empty, sat nearby. His arms were folded. A curious eye might have detected a protuberance on his chest on the left side. His folded hands allowed his right hand to rest near the opening of his jacket...

There were still empty chairs galore. Grangrousier went to one that was near the butler; who had last night been dressed as the Frog Footman.

On the other side, past the butler sat some people whom Grangrousier did not know. Last night they had been dressed as cards from a deck of playing cards.

Deprived of the colorful costumes, unpadded, unwigged, they were a nondescript group of people. You can see their like coming out of a theatre at intermission.

Only the man who had last night played the part of the Duchess had an air of distinction about him. He looked a bit like a clothes horse, or the gentleman holding a glass of liquor in the ads.

Cranston, watching the assemblage through half closed eyes, realized that the Duchess of the night before was, in reality, Joseph Sarren, the vice president of Ten Eyk's concern.

Seeing that Grangrousier was the most puzzled of the people there, Cranston was about to speak to him when the door opened again, and a funereal looking gentleman poked his head in the door.

"Uh... ah..." He seemed willing to let it go at that.

Before the uh-ing or ah-ing could go any further, Royal stood up. He was furious. He said, "Instead of rousing us out of our beds, I think the police could find something a little more constructive to be doing!"

"Really?" Cardona said, in a bored tone.

"Yes! Have you found the killer yet? That dirty little..." He went off into a rather stupid series of obscenities. "You know who I mean, don't look at me like that!" he yelled, pointing at Alice Anstruther.

"I presume you mean Bernie."

"Yeah, your boy friend." He made it sound like an insult.

The man at the door, face even longer, said, "Ah, I hate to interrupt, but I must know. Is this to be a double funeral? Are they to be buried side by side, or what is the arrangement?"

That caught Royal in mid stream. His mouth hung open. The word he'd been about to shout fluttered on his thick lips.

"What do you know about the plans?" Cranston asked the vice president, Sarren:

"What plans? What are you talking about? What double funeral? Have you all gone mad?" Sarren said.

"I thought you knew," Cranston lied. "I thought you knew about..."

Cardona broke in. "The case is all over. Mrs. Ten Eyk killed herself... last night. She left a suicide note that covers everything."

In spite of herself, Alice said, "You don't mean that she cut Mr. Ten Eyk's head off?"

"Ummm... she didn't confess to that, but she admitted poisoning him..." Cardona said.

The blood drained out of Sarren's face. "Mrs. Ten Eyk... I can't believe it."

"Jealousy can do weirder things than that," Cardona said.

"Is that why you had all of us come here this morning?" Grangrousier asked.

Cranston nodded. "Now about the funeral, Mr. Sarren, would you take over with the undertaker, or is that in Mr. Ten Eyk's lawyer's province?"

"I don't know... this never occurred to me. I'd better check with the lawyer," Sarren said, and left with the undertaker.

Cranston was perfectly willing to allow the silence to do his work for him. What a mad rat-race the killer's brain must be going through! What addition and subtraction... was everything all right... was there any slip? Any clue? There was no discernible indication on the killer's face, but it would have been beyond humanity if the killer hadn't been in a stew.

Unfortunately, Cardona broke the silence. He said, "What about the killer?"

Thinking about it afterwards, Lamont Cranston saw that the jarring interruption, coming on the heels of what must have sounded to the killer like the accolade of success, must have acted like a depth bomb. On one hand, a moment ago it had seemed that the plot was finished, that the deceased Mrs. Ten Eyk was to bear the burden on her dead shoulders, and then, seconds later, this... this jolt.

Grangrousier sputtered, "Killer? But you just said she..."

"Did I?" Cardona sounded bored. "If I did, I must have told a fib...tch, tch."

"You mean," Royal said incredulously, "that the case still is not ended? Then I was right, Marshall is the killer!"

"Could be." Cardona agreed laconically.

Then there was another silence. Alice looked beseechingly at Cranston. Her eyes signaled her silent plea. Answering her, Cranston said, "Do you know where Mr. Marshall is?"

"Certainly. Don't you?" she asked.

He nodded. "Tell him to come in."

The girl sprang to her feet and ran to a window. She slammed the window open, while Cardona's eyes opened wide at the window. She called, "Bernie! Bernie, come in now."

Looking sheepish, as though he'd been caught with his hand in the jam jar, the young man stepped in

through the window. Cardona slapped himself on the forehead.

"Don't tell me you been out there while my men have been tearing this joint apart?"

"No, I just got here about ten minutes ago. I must say I've been enjoying what my good friend Mr. Royal had to say about me."

The two men exchanged glances. Sparked by the glare in the younger man's eyes, Royal got up, pointed his finger at Marshall, and said, "Put the cuffs on him!"

Cardona sat statue still. His hands were still crossed in front of him. He murmured, "Why doesn't everybody sit down and listen to my friend, Lamont Cranston. Smart boy, that Cranston. Generally knows what he's talking about!"

The door opened, and a considerably shocked man came in. It was Sarren. By his side was the young upstairs maid. She was white and shaking. He was guiding her in. He said, "Listen... listen... I don't believe in spiritualism, or any of that bunk... but listen to her story!"

Cardona said, "Don't tell me she's found another headless stiff!"

"Worse than that," Sarren said, and his ashen face showed he meant it. "Speak up girl, tell them what you saw in that double damned hallway!"

CHAPTER X

CRANSTON gestured to the butler to get some water. While the man was going for it, he spoke to the girl and got her calmed down a bit. When the butler returned with the water, and the girl had had a gasping sip of it, Cranston said, "Take it easy, and tell it slowly."

The girl had an audience that a professional actor would have enjoyed. Every eye was glued to her. Every bit of attention in that room was riveted to her.

She said slowly, her voice low, almost a whisper, "I... I was going down the hall... you know, the long one... outside the door..."

"The place where I saw the other man wearing the paper suit," Royal interjected.

She paid no attention, but continued, "Down at the end of the hall, I caught a flicker of motion... I looked again... and it was a woman!"

There was a complete silence.

"I stared, not believing my eyes... the woman was Mrs. Ten Eyk!" She sobbed. "And that can't be, because... because she's dead! Dead!"

Royal leaped to his feet. "What kind of nonsense is this? The dead don't walk!"

He ran to the door. He ripped it open. He left it open as he stepped into the hall. He didn't scream. But if the frozen stiffness in his back was any sign, he wanted to.

He turned back into the room. His hands were shaking. "She... she is down the hall... she's walking toward this door." He shook all over. "Can't you hear her footsteps? Can't you hear her, you fools? Listen!"

He edged away from the door. There were footsteps. They came closer, closer, ever closer.

A shifting, shadowy presence in the doorway, and then, face illumined by the wan rays of the tired sun cutting in through the windows, Mrs. Ten Eyk slowly walked into the room.

What followed was quite unpleasant.

When comparative sanity ruled again, Cranston said, "Now, then, some explaining would seem to be in order."

"I say amen to that," Cardona said. "What made a tough character like that break up into little pieces?"

"Let's hold that off a moment. Mrs. Ten Eyk," Cranston turned to the widow of the dead man. "Will you tell us what you remember of your husband's dealings with Mr. Marshall?"

"They were all quite pleasant as far as I ever knew. The only objection I ever made, was when he willed all that money to the Lewis Carroll club. It seemed to me that a million dollars was a lot of motive to dangle under a young man's nose."

"You had no reason for saying that?"

"None," the widow agreed, "but the fact that I know how potent a money motive can be."

"There were," Cranston said, "three big money motivations in this case, and one even more terrible motive... jealousy!"

"Four potential killers!" Cardona said. "That's sweet."

"They were, as I saw it," Cranston interrupted himself, "Mr. Grangrousier. Let us suggest a hypothetical case. Suppose that Mr. Marshall killed Mr. Ten Eyk just so he could get his hands on the handling of that million dollars... and let us suppose too, that the police then found that Mr. Marshall were the murderer. What would happen to the funds? Mr. Marshall is the treasurer. Who would take over for him if he were in durance vile?"

"Umm... well, I'd have to look it up in the club charter... but I imagine..."

"Imagine hell," Sarren said, "you know as well as I do, Grangrousier, that if Marshall were to die, no matter how, you'd take over the treasurership until a new election... and that's a full two years away."

Cranston held up his hand and bent his forefinger into his palm. "Mr. Grangrousier. Suspect number one. Mr. Marshall. Suspect number two. The problem with Mr. Marshall is, would he sacrifice the new contract that Ten Eyk was about to sign with his, Marshall's company, for a million dollars...

"Suspect number three. Francis Royal. If he could have humanly known that he was to lose the contract, he would have a good motive for killing Ten Eyk in order to continue the contract that was still in force."

"And the fourth?" Alice asked.

With nothing but thumb projecting from his closed fist, Cranston said, "Mrs. Ten Eyk. No money there. But jealousy... murderous jealousy.

There was a long silence. Then Cranston said, "Four people with suspicious motivations... and two killers!"

That came as a surprise to most of the people there. Four suspects and two killers? But before they could think any further about it, Cranston went on, "Two killers, one actual and the other averted. You see, Mrs. Ten Eyk had poisoned her husband before he lost his head..."

"Lost his head!" The man who sat with his wrists handcuffed laughed, and said again, "Lost his head! Very funny! Ho, ho..."

"With a mix-up like that, four suspects, a bizarre murder, and an attempted one... and even so, you've solved it within twelve hours!" Alice looked at Cranston admiringly.

"This is not getting us a picture of the mechanics of the murder," Cardona said, rather stuffily.

"You're right," Cranston agreed. "Very well. The killer picked up the white gloves which Bernie Marshall, in his role of the White Rabbit, was supposed to drop all over the place. Picking them up, he hid them on his body, and somehow managed to get an argument started, as to whether the first line of Jabberwocky ended with the word 'toves' or 'boves'. It was idiotic, but it served its purpose. Mr. Ten Eyk went upstairs to the library with his killer.

"All the detectives waiting on guard could see, was the White Knight and a man dressed in a paper suit going into the library. Once inside the library, Mr. Ten Eyk opened his copy of 'Alice' and checked the spelling of 'toves'. While he was bent over the book, the killer ripped his throat open... hid the knife on him... dropped the white gloves that would incriminate Marshall... tore off his paper suit... dropped it in the fireplace and set fire to it... set fire to it in such a way that it would not all burn... then, out the window and down, off the balcony!"

There was no question from anyone, so Cranston went on. "With Ten Eyk's last conscious gesture, as the knife drove into his throat, he left the name of his killer for all to see!"

That did get questions. Everyone asked as one, "How?"

Cranston shrugged it away and said, "It did me no good at the time. Let's hold it for its proper place in the scheme of things. The killer dropped off the balcony and made his way back into the ball room.

"Concentrating our attention on the fact that he was there by telling that wild story about the mirror that was not a mirror, he made sure we'd remember he was in sight when Ten Eyk's body was found."

Cranston had a drink of water. This was drying on the throat. "The killer had committed a perfect murder. It was one which was almost impossible to prove. He had left a glaring red herring in the form of the white gloves. He was probably very well satisfied with himself. Until, as murderers will, he began to brood. Marshall had made his escape. He might have some kind of an alibi for the time that he was missing. So, cunning overcoming intelligence, he tried to strike again..." Cranston could say nothing about The Shadow's preventing the overdose of sleeping powder, so he went on, "He attempted to murder Mrs. Ten Eyk in such a way that it would look like suicide."

"He knew of Mrs. Ten Eyk's jealousy?" Cardona asked.

"Have you forgotten the little scene when she slapped Alice in the face last night?" Cranston asked. "That scene played into the killer's hands. For all we know, it may have given him the idea. He wanted to be terribly sure... and so, of course, he ruined himself."

"What did happen last night?"

Cardona asked. "How come this guy here," he gestured with his thumb at the handcuffed murderer, "thought that Mrs. Ten Eyk was dead?"

"He did his best," Cranston answered. "Mrs. Ten Eyk, would you mind showing your wrist?"

Wordlessly, Mrs. Ten Eyk pushed her hand farther out of her long sleeve. This revealed the bandage on

her wrist.

Looking at it, Cranston remembered with wry amusement what had happened the night before, when he'd been sitting, nodding, almost asleep... the stunned surprise he'd felt when he saw the vase gradually move away from him, as though of its own volition. He had almost played possum too long, he thought. He had wanted to catch the killer with the goods... then, when he had finally gone into the bedroom, the killer was gone, and Mrs. Ten Eyk was in a wide circle of blood.

But the wound had been a simple one. One transfusion had taken care of the lost blood. Mrs. Ten Eyk, if anything, looked better than she had the night before. The narrowness of her escape from death had evidently given her a new set of values.

Aloud, he said, "The killer slipped a razor in her hand, and then, holding the hand, cut her wrist with the blade. She was under an opiate at the time, and felt nothing."

"You certainly were right in sticking around last night," Cardona said.

"It was just a hunch," Cranston said. "And a good one at that. By the way," He turned to Bernie Marshall. "Where were you last night? What did Ten Eyk whisper to you after the killer made that wild stab with the knife in the ball room?"

"Simple." Marshall grinned, an arm around Alice. "He said that the contract he had prepared for me to sign had vanished from his desk. He told me to go down to his office and get the other one."

"You did?"

"No. That was the beginning of my comedy of errors." Marshall made a face. "I knew what you'd all think when I fanned out of there, but I had to get that contract... then when I got down to his office, the night superintendent wouldn't let me in without a note. I phoned Ten Eyk, and he wrote a note and gave it to the butler, Mr. Heubner."

"Is that so, Bud?" Cardona barked.

"The name, sir, is George L. Heubner," the butler said, with dignity. "However, what Mr. Marshall says is true."

"So I came fanning back from downtown, got here, got the note, and started to leave when I was arrested."

"You knew then it was all over," Cardona said. "What good was an unsigned contract to you? Why'd you clout me and take it on the lam?"

"I knew with Mr. Ten Eyk dead, that this was going to turn into a cat and dog fight in court with Royal. I wanted even the unsigned contract as proof of the intentions of Mr. Ten Eyk."

"I see," Cranston said. "You got the contract the second time?"

"Sure," Marshall said, and waved it in the air. "Here it is."

"Does that take care of the red herring, Joe?" Cranston asked his friend.

Cardona nodded. "Go on with the way the thing was laid out. I still don't have a clear picture in my mind."

He looked at the handcuffed killer, sitting disconsolately, chin in hands. "I thought you proved that this

creep couldn't have seen the letter, couldn't have known that Ten Eyk meant to take the contract away from him!" Cardona said. "And furthermore, if the guy couldn't have had that as a motive, why'd he kill Ten Eyk?"

"Because," said Cranston in answer. "Francis 'Bats' Royal is not only a ruthless killer, he is also a very shrewd thief. He stole a letter from the U.S. Mail, and no one knew it!"

CHAPTER XI

"THAT'S impossible," Cardona said flatly.

"I ruled it out as impossible too, until I had Ten Eyk's office checked." Bless Burbank for having that taken care of. "The office building, like nine out of ten today, has mail chutes. You've seen them. They're glass and brass. They run from floor to floor. A letter, dropped in the chute on the top floor, drops by gravity straight down into an armored brass mailbox."

"You can't open one of them without breaking the glass! That would be reported!" Cardona said.

"Precisely where Royal's cleverness came in. He got the letter without breaking the glass." Cranston turned to Alice. "My dear, you led me way off the trail without realizing it. You remember, you said you mailed the letter? I pictured you dropping it into a mail box... but you didn't, did you?"

"Why no," Alice gulped, "I dropped it in one of those mail chutes you just described! But how..."

"Yeah, how?" Cardona said belligerently, "Even if he's got some way of hoccussing the chute, how'd he know which letter to take?"

"You remember, Alice," Cranston said to her, "that you said that even if there was a spy in the office, they wouldn't be able to hear anything from Ten Eyk's office?"

"That's right. I didn't accidentally mislead you there; that's the truth."

"But a spy, a girl or man in your office, would have seen you come out of Ten Eyk's office with a letter in your hand with Marshall's name and address on it, wouldn't he... or she?"

"Yes. And before Mr. Ten Eyk got frightened, there may have been some office gossip about giving the contract to Bernie."

"Uh huh. I can't picture Royal waiting, days on end. He must have had some clue that a letter was being sent to Marshall that day. The way I see it, Royal had his spy drop a string out the window. The string went down one flight, to the floor below. The signal just be a tug on the string... that would mean you were going to mail a letter..."

"Then..." Cranston folded a piece of paper in a Z shape. "All Royal would need is a piece of flexible metal or plastic shaped like this.

"If he put it in the aperture that you're supposed to drop the mail in, he could then wait for the letter to come zooming down to him. He'd pull up and out, pressing the bottom of the Z against the letter, and then be able to weasel the letter out of the chute."

"But suppose some other letters came down?" Cardona asked.

"So what?" Cranston shrugged. "Any other mail that he got out, he'd just drop back into the chute." Bernie Marshall looked startled. "My god, all he did was open the letter, read it, reseal it, and send it on to me!"

"Sure," Cardona said. "I see it now. No wonder there was no sign of any mail theft. He just delayed the mail..."

Royal shook his handcuffs irritably. "Do I have to sit here all day and listen to you idiots meander?"

"You'll be alone soon enough," Cardona said. "Soon enough and long enough... all the rest of your life."

Sneering, Royal said, "You don't think that any jury will listen to that mess of lies and guesses?"

"I think so," Cardona said decisively.

"You dolt! Why would I throw suspicion on myself by wearing a second paper suit?"

"Precisely because it would be the last thing to be suspected," Cranston said. "If you'd been anyone else; if, let us say, the Mad Hatter had put the paper costume on top of his own, he would have made sure that the paper suit went up in flames... but you had to make it too good... you set fire to it, but only on top so that it wouldn't burn too fast, and, even if it did, the ashes would retain their shape!"

"That was the point of that lying story about seeing another man dressed in a paper suit in the nonexistent mirror!" Cardona said.

Cranston nodded. "It was very subtle... the last thing that would occur to you on finding the burnt paper suit would be that, moments before, it was covering another paper suit..."

Royal moved impatiently. Cardona spun on him. "That's about enough out of you. Have you forgotten already the way you fell apart when you saw Mrs. Ten Eyk come in here, not fifteen minutes ago? You spilled your guts, kid, and there are plenty of witnesses to that!"

"Knowing that he was losing the contract gives him the motive. His little scene a while ago, when he thought a dead woman was walking after him, shows him up; and, parenthetically, Joe, I hope that the way Mrs. Ten Eyk helped us with that macabre scene will be in her favor when she comes to trial."

"It should... I wish she didn't have to, though," Sarren said, "she was obviously out of her mind when she did it."

"I'll spin the tale to the D.A.," Cardona said. "Come to think of it, I don't know what the law will have to say about the position she's in... after all, she didn't kill him... it was attempted murder... I'm sure her lawyer can make a big deal about the fact that Ten Eyk might have been saved if Royal hadn't decapitated him..."

"How charming! All this consideration for a killer!" Royal said, lips twisted. "Don't worry about the charming widow, nobody ever hung a million bucks yet!"

"Even if you've got a million, creep, you ain't gonna hang, you're gonna fry! C'mon." Cardona yanked Royal to his feet.

Sarren and Grangrousier stood to one side and got farther out of the way as Royal was led out of the room. Royal practically spat at them as he passed. "Afraid you'll dirty yourself on me? Don't worry, I'll be out and back in business before you get over this! They'll have no case!"

He was still saying that, three months later, when he was having his head and legs shaved. He was saying it when they put the electrodes on and threw the switch. He may still be saying it... wherever he is...

But that was three months later... That grey, dull morning, Cranston looked around for the package that

held his Tweedledee costume. The butler held up a parcel. "This what you're looking for, sir?"

"Yes, thanks." It had felt so good earlier when Shrevvie had brought some civilized clothes for Cranston to change into.

Cranston was all set to leave the house where tragedy had left its ugly tracks, when Marshall and Miss Anstruther came running to him. Grangrousier and Sarren were behind them.

Before the young couple got to him, the butler leaned forward confidentially, and breathed, "I can't thank you enough, sir, for what you've done for me."

"Done for you?" Cranston asked in some surprise.

"Yes, sir. You know, in all the detective movies the butler is always the guilty one... I had a bad night, sir... a bad night! I expected to feel the chill steel around my wrists at any second! Thank you again, sir!" He was gone.

Cranston was still smiling when the four people came up to him. He asked, "What's all the excitement about?"

"You didn't tell us one thing..." Alice said.

"What's that? I thought the whole thing was all wrapped up in a neat parcel for the police."

"You said earlier that Mr. Ten Eyk left some kind of sign that pointed to Bats Royal! How could that be?" Marshall asked.

"He didn't point it out... he spelled it out..."

"With his head off his shoulders?" Grangrousier asked, incredulously.

"That's right."

They all looked at him as if he'd gone out of his mind. He clarified. "You remember, he went upstairs with Royal?"

They nodded.

"He knew who was with him... they were going up to check on the last word of the first line of Jabberwocky."

"Yes?" Alice asked.

"Bats let him open the book to the proper page, and it was then he struck. In the fraction of time left of his life, Ten Eyk pointed his hand at the first line... he put his finger over the last word; 'toves'."

"That was the word the phony argument was about," Marshall said.

"That's right. Now," Cranston smiled as he headed for the door, "you're the Alice in Wonderland experts. See if you can find the message there!"

They stood and watched him go out the door. The sun was brightening up. The clouds were scudding away.

Marshall said, more to himself than anything else, "'Twas brillig and the slithy toves..." He shook his

head. "So he had his finger over 'toves'... that leaves only 'Twas brillig and the slithy'... I don't get it! Do any of you?"

The other three shook their heads, and then, as Marshall began to run to the cab that was waiting for Cranston to enter, they all followed his lead, Alice, Grangrousier, and Sarren.

Shrevvie said to Lamont Cranston, "Gonna be a nice day after all, boss."

"Sure is," Cranston said as he got into the cab. Shrevvie slammed the brakes on as the four people ran across in front of the cab. "Hey boss, what goes? A fight?"

"No, Shrevvie. Relax. They want a puzzle solved."

"Mr. Cranston," Alice said, "tell us the riddle, or I'll never rest again!"

He looked at all of them and said, accenting one certain word and certain letters, "'Twas brillig and the slithy..."

Alice gasped, "'Twas Bats'!"

As the cab drove off, Cranston put his head out the window and said, "That's right..."

The four people stood in the sunlight and watched the cab drive off. Alice smiled for the first time in fifteen hours. She said, "My, it is going to be a nice day, after all."

Sarren said to Marshall, "You know, my boy, that I am willing to do everything in my power to get that contract made over to you, despite what has happened?"

Bernie Marshall grinned. Yes, sir, it sure was going to be a fine day...

And Grangrousier? He suddenly realized that he was free of suspicion. He was a free man. He was not in jail like Royal... There was a lot to be grateful for. It certainly was going to be a swell day.

THE END