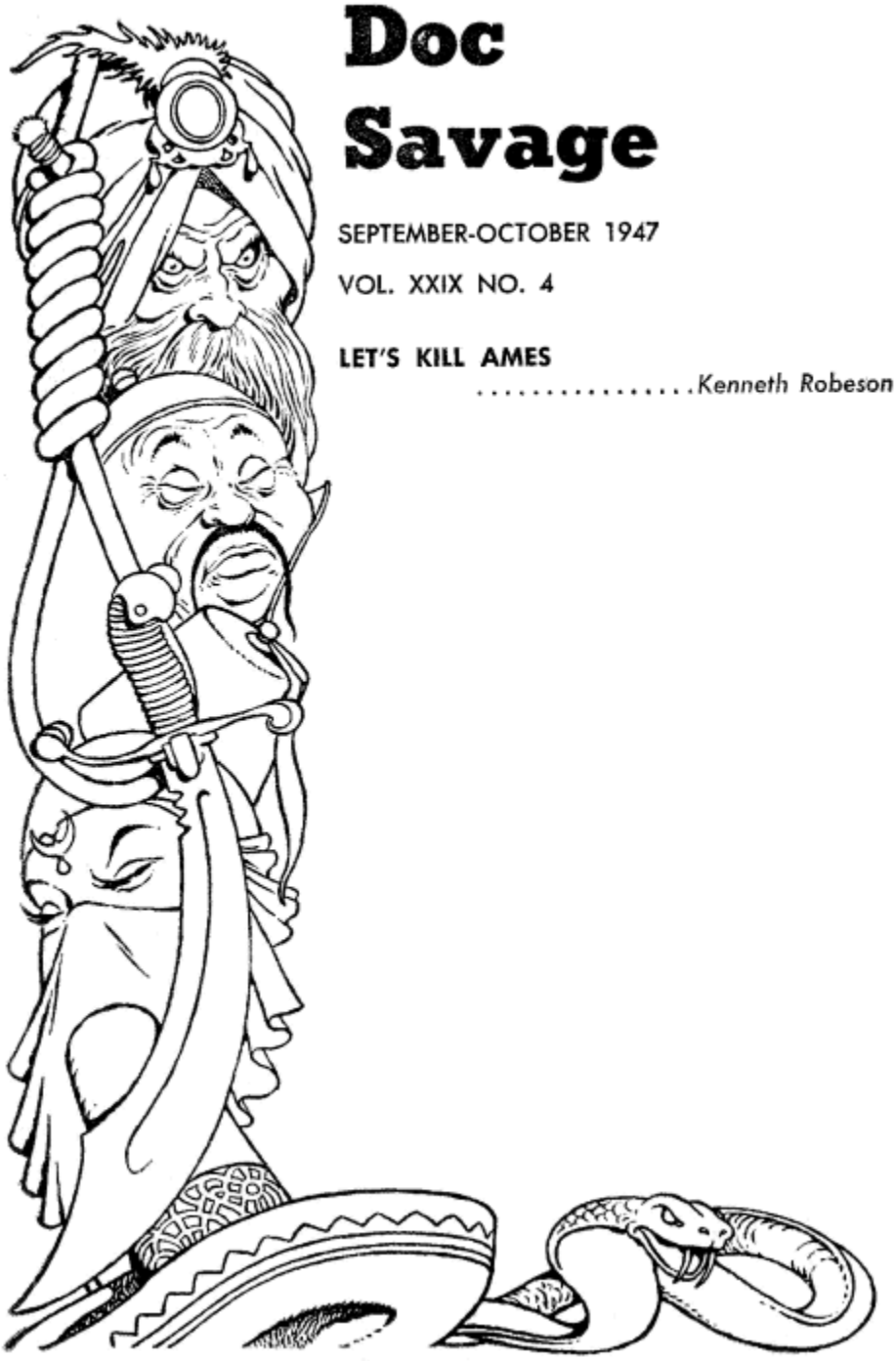
LET'S KILL AMES

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

Originally published in *Doc Savage Magazine* October 1947



Doc Savage

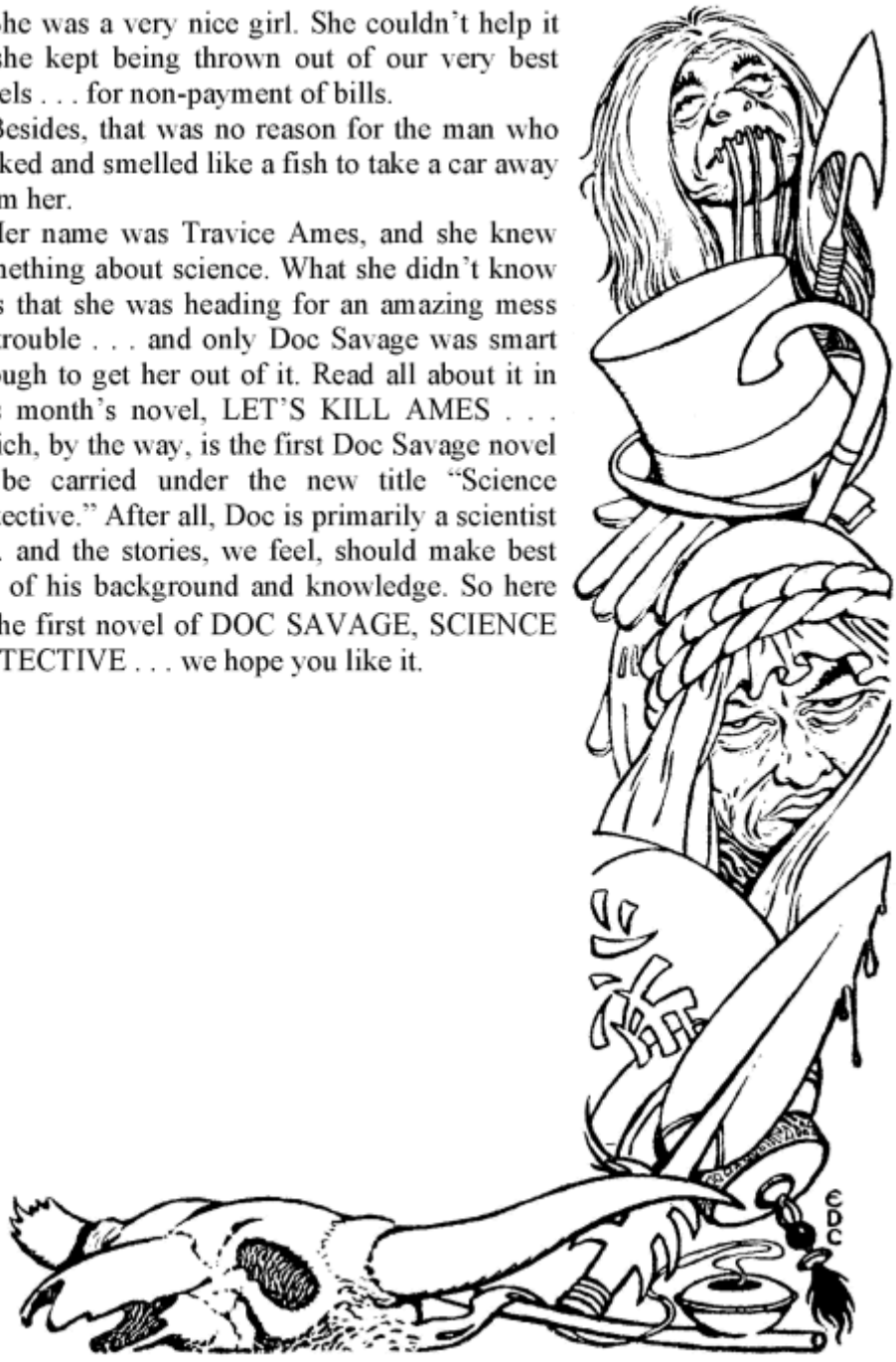
SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1947

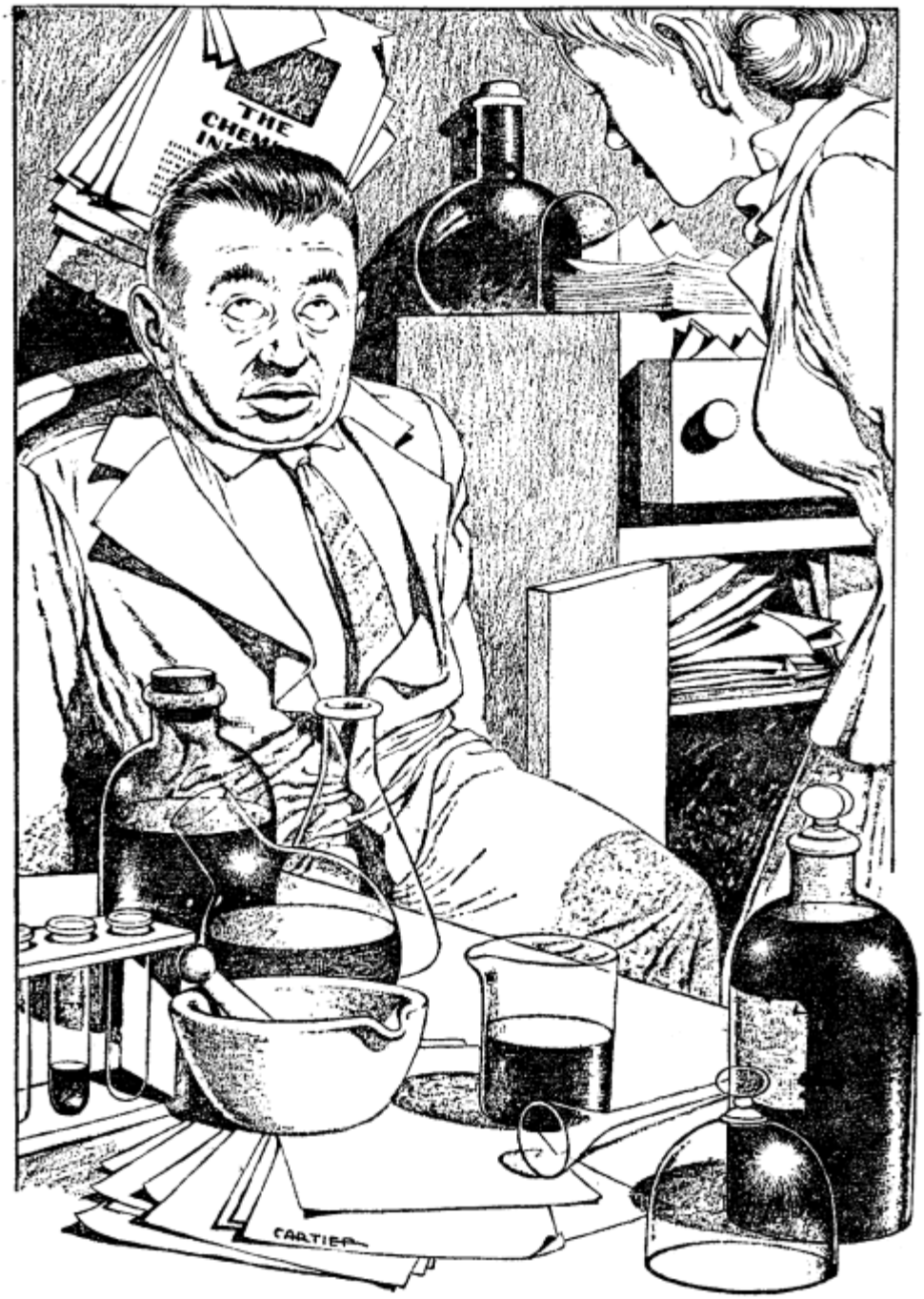
VOL. XXIX NO. 4

She was a very nice girl. She couldn't help it if she kept being thrown out of our very best hotels . . . for non-payment of bills.

Besides, that was no reason for the man who looked and smelled like a fish to take a car away from her.

Her name was Travice Ames, and she knew something about science. What she didn't know was that she was heading for an amazing mess of trouble . . . and only Doc Savage was smart enough to get her out of it. Read all about it in this month's novel, LET'S KILL AMES . . . which, by the way, is the first Doc Savage novel to be carried under the new title "Science Detective." After all, Doc is primarily a scientist . . . and the stories, we feel, should make best use of his background and knowledge. So here is the first novel of DOC SAVAGE, SCIENCE DETECTIVE . . . we hope you like it.




THE
CHEM
IN
CARTIER

LET'S KILL AMES

by Kenneth Robeson

Chapter I

I'LL never forget the man with the dirty face.

The least they could do, you'd think, was send a clean man. One with enough pride to wipe off his chin, anyway. It was his chin that got me. There was a piece of his breakfast on it, a bit of something that was probably oatmeal, and there is nothing quite like a two-hour-old chunk of oatmeal for chin decoration.

He wore a tan suit of which the coat was a slightly different tan than the pants, and both halves fit him about equally poorly. As if, a couple of days ago, someone had peeled a banana and hung the peel on him. He was not a big man, and he did not look as if he had been constructed for any useful purpose. The only large thing about him was his mouth, wide-spreading, round-lipped, separating his flattish head in two parts like a clamshell.

He looked as determined as he could, which still left him looking like something you'd prefer to rake away with a stick.

He said, "Miss Ames?"

"Yes."

"Miss Travice Ames?" he said.

"Yes."

He unfolded a paper that was, considering that he had been carrying it, remarkably clean. "You wants look at this, baby?" he mumbled.

I saw what the paper was, and said, "No, thanks."

I knew who and what he was. But they still could have sent a clean man.

"You don't wants read it, huh?" he said. "I guess you know what it is, don't you? I guess you been expecting this, haven't you?"

I moved around to the windward side of him. His breath smelled like a can of fish that had been open too long, or maybe it was just him.

"Let's skip the personal touch," I said.

"You want," he asked, "to do anything about it? In cases like this, if—"

"Never mind."

"Are you sure—"

"I'm sure," I said. "I was never surer of anything. What do they pay you for? To give me an argument?"

He nodded. "I thought probably you wouldn't," he said. "When they're as good-looking as you are, they don't usually give a damn. You take a homely one, they don't get things as easy, and they got a different attitude. They value things more."

"What is this?"

"What is what? Whatcha mean?"

I said, "Skip it," in a tired voice. And he looked at my car, at my beautiful car. It was a roadster, a convertible, one of those convertible station wagons. It was not two months old and there was not a flashier job in town, not in the whole city. Only it wasn't my car any longer. I was beginning to see that. And he said, "You got anything personal in the iron? Anything you want to get out?"

Calling a car like that an iron was a sin.

"No," I said.

So he got in my car. He drove it away. He was from the finance company. But at least it seemed they could have sent a clean man.

That was the first of two bad things that happened. The second bad thing wasn't long following—my hotel suite door had a trick gadget in the lock. The hotel had put it there. It was one of those gimmicks they put in the lock of a guest's room when the guest hasn't paid. A French key.

I remembered that the elevator boy'd had a funny look on his face as I rode up.

And I was a little surprised at the Afton House. The hotel was, although Afton House wasn't a fancy name, one of those luxury places. I was paying—or wasn't paying—forty-six dollars a day for parlor-bedroom-bath suite. The minimum single rate was, I understood, fourteen dollars. And these had been the Afton House rates back during the depression and the pre-war days, which gives an idea. So I was surprised that they would be so *hoc genus homme* as to put a French key in a guest's lock. It was not only old-fashioned, but it was worthy of a three-fifty-a-day hotel.

So I was locked out.

THE desk clerk was named Gilrox. He was a slick article, just long enough from New York that he liked to show it. His cheeks were pink, and his hair looked slick enough to have a coating of airplane dope on it. But his hands were thin and colorless, as if he washed them with Drano.

He expected me to walk up to the desk and give him hell. He got all set for it. He gave the gardenia in his lapel a sniff. He looked as if he was going to have fun.

I fooled him and went to the main desk. There was a windowed hotel envelope. I didn't open that. There were four telephone message envelopes. I opened those, and they all said the same thing in slightly different ways. They said: Nat Pulaski had called. He had called at 2:00, at 3:10, at 3:45, and at 4:20. One said, *Planning on dinner date tonight. Love.* Another one said: *Date tonight. Urgent. Love.* And still another said: *Call at five. Important.*

None of the notes smelled of a chemical laboratory, but they should have; and my imagination easily added a faint odor of chemical reagent to them. They sounded like Pulaski. Everything was urgent with Pulaski. The sap.

The clerk, Mr. Gilrox, had stopped sniffing his gardenia. He was standing with his fingertips resting on the desk, like a student typist waiting for the speed test to begin.

"What about this?" I asked him.

"Yes, what about it?" said Mr. Gilrox. "Yes, indeed. What about four hundred and eighty-six dollars?"

"Is that what I owe?"

He nodded. "Add a matter of forty-one cents, and we have the exact total."

"And you want it?"

"We feel we would be happier with it," Mr. Gilrox said.

"I should like some of my baggage."

"No doubt."

"You mean," I asked, "that I'm being locked out with the clothes I stand in?"

"They're very lovely clothes, Miss Ames," he said. "I've frequently remarked on that to myself. What fine and expensive clothes Miss Ames has, I've said to myself. And just a while ago I said it again: Miss Ames is wonderfully dressed this evening, isn't she?" He was as polite as if he was petting a kitten, and he was enjoying himself.

"Legally," I said, "I suppose you know what you are doing?"

"Hotels usually do. You see, this isn't entirely an unusual situation." He smirked and added, "I don't imagine it's unusual with you, either, Miss Ames."

"What do you mean by that nasty crack?"

Mr. Gilrox was all ready for me. He slipped an envelope from under the desk, and he slapped it down before me as if it was a plate of caviar. He said, "Item one: The Beach Colonial hotel in Miami, Florida, a notation to the effect that you are not to be permitted to register in the future. Also a rather puzzling addition that it was necessary to replace the management of the hotel upon your departure. I take it somebody there underestimated you. . . ." There was curiosity back of his large smug eyes. He waited hopefully for an explanation.

"What a big curiosity you have, Grandma Gilrox," I said.

He scowled. "Item two: The Atlanta, Georgia, police department states you are hereafter unwelcome in Atlanta, Georgia. No details. I gather somebody there also underestimated you."

"You find this interesting?"

"That I do," he agreed. "That I do indeed. So did Mr. Coyle, the manager here."

"And you and Mr. Coyle decided?"

"That if you have four hundred eighty-six dollars and forty-one cents, you may pay it to us, and we will see that a porter delivers your bags to the street with our best service."

"I don't have four hundred and eighty-six dollars and those cents."

"How much have you?"

"Not that much."

"Have you enough to interest us in a compromise?" he inquired.

"I doubt it."

"That's very sad," he said. "I regret it greatly."

"I can see you do regret," I said. "But if I paid up, you would still throw me out. Am I right?"

"Exactly."

"Why?"

"We feel that you're a—" He let it hang. He chopped it off as if he had unexpectedly come up against it, and it had thorns on it. He stood there and remembered what he could about the slander laws. He said, "Let's put it this way: We feel that you've been underestimated in the past. We wouldn't like to underestimate you, Miss Ames."

"You're not calling me a tramp, by any chance?"

"Oh, no indeed," he said. He meant that.

"Or an adventuress?" I added.

With his look, he said yes, that was it exactly. With his voice, a voice that sounded as if it wrapped things in velvet each time it spoke, he said, "Don't quote me on that. I didn't say it."

"Anyway," I said, "I believe we understand each other."

He said he hoped we did. And then he asked, "What are you going to do?"

He listened to me tell him how much of his business it was, but if his ears burned the glow didn't show. It might be possible to insult him, but a hotel guest couldn't do it. Too many had tried. He smiled and adjusted the flower in his lapel and probably enjoyed it.

I went over and sat in a chair in the lobby. I wanted to think about it. It needed thinking about, because I had in the whole world something like five dollars in cash.

That was how I happened to decide to let Nat Pulaski buy me a dinner after all. Pulaski was a sucker and for two days I had been giving him the boot, but getting locked out of my hotel, having my car taken back, put a different light on it. Hello, sucker.

Chapter II

PULASKI arrived with more than one thing wrong with him. He came in acting as if there was a rattlesnake in his clothing somewhere and he couldn't find it.

I detest short men, and Pulaski was a short one. He had moist full lips, but otherwise his face wasn't bad, although now it was redder than it usually was.

He had a go-around with the revolving door when he came in. He was a little too slow on his feet, and the door batted his rather ample rear, causing him to stumble, and then he got his topcoat caught in one of the leaves, and stood jerking foolishly at it. The coat came loose and he stumbled back on legs that bent at the knees at the wrong times.

Oh, fine! I thought contemptuously. Pulaski has to be tight. Pulaski sober was no bargain.

When he spied me, his round face got the expression that the riders to the hounds get when they sight the fox. I thought he was going to shout, "Tally-ho!" But he just cried, "Oh, ho! Oh, ho!" And then he came over carefully enough to be walking on golf balls,

and wanted to know, "What have I done? Why do you do these things to me?"

"What things?"

"These cruelties," he cried. "These diabolical moods of yours! These refined mistreatments you inflict on poor old Pulaski! A pox on you, woman!"

He was usually that way, but not always as bad. There was evidently a little of thwarted ham actor in the fellow.

He rocked back on his heels, then forward again, stopping the tilting each time just before he upset. He continued his complaint.

"Two days!" he shouted. "Two days, fair lady, and you have ignored my humble supplications. Ignored—hell! I haven't even been able to get you on the telephone." He paused dramatically, registered what he evidently thought was stricken grief, and then forgave me. "But your loveliness overwhelms me. Such beauty wipes all rancor from my mind. I am reduced to a carpet, a slightly rum-soaked carpet, and you may walk upon me if you wish." He hiccoughed. "Walk on me if you wish," he repeated, and it appeared for a minute that he was going to lie down so that I could.

That was Pulaski. Ham actor, amateur wolf, and—this evening for a change—rum pot. He did not customarily drink, and he was showing it.

There was something on his mind that was driving him to drink.

I was sure of it before we were halfway through dinner.

He asked where we should dine, and I paid him off by naming the most expensive place in town.

"Hmm!" he said. "I kiss twenty bucks goodbye."

He would be lucky to get out with a check under thirty dollars. I ordered oysters Rockefeller, the sole *marguery,* a green salad, planked steak, crêpes Suzette, and café diablo. I ordered a daiquiri first, a white wine for the fish, then champagne. He stuck to bourbon and a steak, and did not eat enough of his steak to give the bourbon a fight.

I saw that the waiter kept the bourbon coming. My idea was to get Pulaski mellow, then touch him for my hotel bill. Probably he would have to be pretty mellow to stand still for a touch like that.

Pulaski was a chemist employed, he claimed, by himself. I did not know that there were self-employed chemists, and I still was not sure of it, but that is what Pulaski had said he was. He had a laboratory at 130 Washington Street—he said—and he lived at 720 Ironwood Drive, in an apartment. He said. I was pretty sure about the last, because I had telephoned him there a couple of times.

He was nothing much. A fellow I had met in Palm Beach, Florida, had been with this Pulaski in the army. The other fellow had been a sergeant and Pulaski had been a second lieutenant, and the man in Palm Beach had spent a lot of time saying what he would like to do to Pulaski, and what he would do to Pulaski if he ever got to this city and had a chance to look him up. He had several things in mind for Pulaski, including a stroll over Pulaski's face. The sort of a man who had made that kind of a second lieutenant in the army sounded like an easy mark and I had given Pulaski a ring when I got to town.

But I hadn't come to town to find Pulaski. I had come concerning a business opening with a very sharp and clever woman named Carolyn Lane, who was calling herself Lady Seabrook, and who had thought up something nice and lucrative in cosmetics. She had an angel for it, but it was supposed to be turning out so well that she was going to work the racket and not the angel. Just supposed to be. The D.A. told the Grand jury about her the day I got there. They even put the angel in jail with her.

This town was a desert. Nothing had turned up, I was broke, and I didn't like Pulaski, but he was running after me. That was all right. Pulaski was the kind you would enjoy trimming. He wouldn't sit on your conscience.

I ordered Pulaski another bourbon.

Pulaski continued bragging to me. He liked to boast to me, I think, because I spoke his language. When he talked about fluxing and reducing reagents, saponification numbers, Elliot apparatus and molecular weights—why do the simpleminded ones always talk about their business with big words?—I could understand what he was talking about.

In college, I specialized in chemistry. Afterward, I worked at it for a couple of years. I worked for the American Union Chemical Foundation until one of their dopey chemists perfected an improved production method for

penicillin and was going to just hand it over to our employers. I had just about persuaded him to take the idea and go into business for ourselves when they fired me. They had a lawyer with bright ideas, too, but all they made stick was firing me.

Anyway, that was why Pulaski liked to brag to me. It wasn't why he liked me; it was just why he would brag to me. But there was something eating him tonight.

I had merely thought I would stick him for an expensive dinner, and maybe for the hotel bill, although I doubted he even had that kind of money, but now I was beginning to wonder what was eating him. Whatever it was, it was taking big bites out of his courage.

Pulaski was scared. It finally dawned on me. Pulaski was so frightened of something that he couldn't keep his mouth still. He wore it like a garment. It oozed out of his pores. They say animals can smell fear in a person, and Pulaski would certainly have been a bouquet tonight.

"What," I asked him, "is bothering you?"

"Nothing," he said. "Bothering me? Nothing at all, baby. I'm just made breathless by you, is all."

Men seem to be like that. Ask them a question, and they back away, and they either want to be begged and are being coy, or they downright don't intend to tell you and will pretend that it's preposterous to think anything is nipping on them. Pulaski belonged to the latter bracket. He didn't intend to tell me anything, and was made more frightened than he had been by the fact that I had spotted something amiss.

Men are suckers. I haven't met one who isn't. They can be played like a violin if you have the right kind of a bow and know how to use it. I had discovered this several years ago, when I was about fourteen. Pulaski was an easy fiddle to play, and that was what he was, just a fiddle. The music that came out of him probably wouldn't have much quality.

AN hour and fifteen minutes later, I had him giving out information. We were in a night-club now, the fanciest one the city had—there is something about extremely fleshy surroundings that makes some men want to boast. That, I had decided, was the way to get Pulaski's information out of him. Get him to take enough liquor to weaken his fences, then goad him.

I led him into making a pass or two, then gave his amour a cold reception. He complained about this.

"Listen," I said. "I'm not saying I couldn't fall for you, Pulaski. You're not bad looking. But it just happens that I have certain ideas about small-timers, and I'm not going to get all involved with some fellow who uses nickels when he should be using dollars."

He flushed. "You're mercenary."

"You think so? I call it practical."

He said angrily, "You think I'm a small-timer, huh?"

"I didn't say so."

He batted his eyes, rubbed his hand over his face as if to remove the rum film from his eyes, and complained, "You're cold-blooded."

"Pulaski," I said, "you'd be surprised. I'm not as cold as you'd think. But the kind of a man that arouses me must be a man. I don't mean he has to roll in money, but that would go with it. My kind of a man has to be one who does things—big and clever things in a big and clever way. . . . You're nice-looking, Pulaski. But you're not extraordinary. There's nothing exciting nor adventurous about you. If there was, well . . ." I let him get what he could out of some eyelash-fluttering.

This was pretty broad stuff, but the alcohol had him foggy enough that the only thing that would make an impression on him was a club. It worked, too. He got a little purple, and hit the table a lick.

He said, "Listen, baby, you're underestimating old Pulaski."

"Words," I said, "don't make it so."

"You're just a dollar-chasing wench."

I looked at him and said, "Penny-chasing."

"Huh?"

"I'm sitting here with you, aren't I?"

He blew up. "Listen, you! Don't call me cheap! I'm going to grab off twenty thousand bucks in the next two weeks. What do you think of that?"

I thought he was a liar. And pretty soon I didn't. There was the way he had said he would have twenty thousand dollars in two weeks, the way he tied the words up in fear like red ribbons, that made it convincing. And puzzling. Pulaski's type didn't get twenty-

thousand-dollar fees. Not honestly. And if it was honest, if he had stumbled on some chemical formula or process, he wouldn't be this scared.

So I told him not to be ridiculous, that I was in no mood for bragging, and to finish his drink and take me home. That made him madder, and the angrier he got, the more determined he was to prove his importance.

It took another hour to get the story out of him.

It raised my hair.

THERE were three men named J. X. Smith, Sonny Conover and James L. Like. There was another man—unnamed—who hated the three. This other man—if it was a man; it may not have been; Pulaski called the individual "person" throughout—had hired Pulaski to furnish an unusual poison. The poison *was* unusual. It would lay in the body tissue several months before it killed the victims. In the meantime, it could be neutralized and rendered harmless by a treatment which only Pulaski knew about. Pulaski, of course, had sold the treatment to the "person" along with the poison.

"This person I'm talking about," said Pulaski, "is going to administer the poison to the three, then demand plenty of dough for treating them. And they'll pay, too. That's the only way they can save their necks." He made a fist and added, "For furnishing the stuff, I get paid twenty grand." He hit the table again, and demanded, "Now, what do you think of that?"

"You're drunk," I said.

"Huh?"

"Or crazy as a gooney bird."

He batted his eyes at me in an owlish rage. He did that for a long time, nearly a minute, and then he said in a loose-mouthed foolish way, "Sure. . . . Sure, Ames, I was just talking."

I knew what had happened. It had finally come into his rum-sodden head that he had talked too much. He was closing his mouth, and moreover, trying to take back what he had told me.

"You're just bragging," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "Sure. . . . I just made up that stuff."

"You should fix up your stories when you're sober," I told him. "When you're tight, you think of some pretty zany ones."

"I guess you're right."

It had dawned on me by now that Pulaski's tale of three men being hated by a fourth person who was going to give them a freak poison and demand extortion money for saving them was true. If it had been a lie, Pulaski wouldn't have admitted it.

I said, "If there was such a poison, there would be no way of convincing the three they had been doped with it and would die if they weren't treated. It's ridiculous."

"The hell it is!" he said.

"Oh, don't be dumb, Pulaski. I'm getting tired of such stupidity."

The urge to brag got the best of him again, and he said boastfully, "Suppose the stuff could be detected by a Geiger counter or an electroscope?"

I think I just stared at him for a while. I was floored. He had something. It was practical—except that, as far as I knew, there was no cure for poisoning by any one of the several compounds that could be used, once they were present in the body in fatal amounts.

"There's no cure for anything of that sort," I said.

He snorted. "Oh, if it was insoluble in a salt, and there was a treatment that would cause the body to eject the salt from its tissue, it could be done."

"Ridiculous."

It wasn't, though. I was chemist enough to know that it wasn't.

He rubbed his face with his hand again, and got a fresh hold on his caution. "Sure. . . . It was just something I said to impress you."

He wouldn't drink any more. And, as he grew sober, his fear crawled on him with colder feet. He wouldn't talk about it any more, and I was careful not to pry too obviously. I pried in subtle ways, but got nothing more. I would have liked to know who was paying him twenty thousand dollars, but I didn't find out. Maybe it wasn't twenty thousand; perhaps he had lied about that. But I believed someone was paying him something, and that there really was a scheme.

Pulaski was feeling rather thwarted. He had tried to make himself out quite a bigtimer, and it had flopped on him, and he was embarrassed. He still had that urge to be big in my eyes. It was, if anything, stronger. He needed to redeem himself, he felt.

I used the way he was feeling to take him for five hundred.

I said casually, "I'm in an embarrassing position. Mr. Clark, the manager of my plant in Tulsa, was supposed to wire me some money. But Mr. Clark is in Mexico, and won't be back for a week, and it's going to leave me awfully short."

I complained about that for a while, making a picture of the little girl in distress, and presently Pulaski had his hand in his pocket, and was asking, "How much do you need?"

"Oh, a measly five hundred would tide me over," I said.

The dope handed it over. He did it with a great air of what's-a-stinking-five-hundred-bucks, but his eyes stuck out a little.

Parting with the five hundred must have made him a little sick, also, because I had no trouble getting rid of him in the taxi outside my hotel. He didn't even come upstairs with me.

He just sat there and watched me walk away from the taxi with his five hundred and the story of poisoning-for-profit that he'd told me.

Chapter III

THE pink-cheeked slick Mr. Gilrox was still on duty at the hotel desk. Whether he was working overtime, or hanging around to make it his business to see that I didn't get back into my suite, I didn't know. If it was the latter, the insulting I had given him earlier had had more effect than apparent at the time. At any rate, he got an I-expected-this look when he saw me.

"What, no evening dress, Miss Ames?" he inquired nastily.

"Mr. Gilrox," I said. "You can file that smirk under the heading: To be enjoyed in private. Or you can get it slapped off your silly face."

"Indeed?" he said. "I'd love to see you try that."

"You would call a cop?"

"Exactly."

"I've come for my luggage," I said. "And I can guess exactly what you will say to that."

He nodded. "You did guess it, tutz."

"Don't call me tutz."

"Very well, Miss Ames."

I got out Pulaski's five hundred, counted two hundred dollars off it and laid that on the desk under his nose.

"My, my," he said. He had watched me count it. "What do you think that will buy you?"

"My luggage."

"Oh, no. The amount you owe, Miss Ames, is not two hundred bucks. It is four hundred and eighty-six dollars."

"You refuse to give me my luggage upon my offer to pay two hundred?"

He felt pretty highly of himself. "That gentle silence you heard," he said, "was our best refusal."

I said, "Sonny, do you have a copy of the state statues handy?"

"The what?"

"The statutes. The laws of this fine state. They are printed in three volumes for the year of 1947."

"Of course not. What do you think this is, a lawyer's office?"

"Sonny, you'd better look up the law. The statutes of this state, Section thirteen thousand eighty nine, reads: 'The keeper of any inn, hotel or boarding house shall have a lien on the baggage and other property in and about such inn brought to the same by or under the control of his guests for the proper charges due him from such guests or boarders not to exceed two hundred dollars.' . . . You get that? *Not to exceed two hundred dollars.* Now, here is two hundred dollars. And you had better have my baggage down here and quick."

His face got the pulled look of a man whose collar was too tight.

"What are you trying to pull?" he blurted.

"You'd better call the hotel lawyer, Mr. Gilrox, and learn something."

"I never heard of such a thing!"

"This isn't New York, Mr. Gilrox. I imagine that's going to be quite a problem for you."

He did some cheek-blowing and some eye-narrowing while accustoming himself to the idea of consulting the hotel attorney. Then he picked up the telephone. The lawyer was named Mr. Bartlett, I noticed. He and Mr. Gilrox had an extended discussion which injected considerable color into Mr. Gilrox's face. He hung up and yelled, "Bellboy!" And then, "Bring Miss Ames' baggage at once. All of it."

I said, “Don’t forget the two hundred dollars, Mr. Gilrox. And I think I’d like a receipt.”

“I never heard of such a damn law!” he yelled.

“You’ve now heard of it.”

“Yes, indeed,” he said bitterly. “By God, a man never gets too old to learn. Twenty years, I’ve been in this racket, and for the last ten of them nobody has foxed me.”

I took the receipt he filled out, indicating the hotel had received two hundred dollars on payment.

He said, “You recall that earlier I mentioned that several people in other cities had underestimated you, Miss Ames? . . . Well, just add the name of Gilrox to the list.”

I told him I’d already put him on it several days ago, and the last I saw of him he was looking like a tomcat with someone standing on its tail.

Chapter IV

THE Congress Hotel wasn’t as luxurious as the Afton House, but it would do, and they hadn’t heard of me—I was somewhat surprised that Mr. Gilrox hadn’t thought of calling all the other hotels in town to warn them. He might think of that later. Or he might be the sort who would keep quiet hoping to get a perverse pleasure out of seeing someone else get trimmed. He was probably the latter kind.

I got the best suite, eighteen dollars a day, and was nasty about the green drapes—I detest green, of all colors—and they said they’d change them promptly. The first thing in the morning.

I can go to sleep instantly anywhere. Sleep is merely a matter of bringing the subconscious to the proper tranquility, and my subconscious, like my conscience, has never been stubborn.

But tonight I didn’t sleep at once. I gave some consideration to Pulaski’s story about three men and an enemy.

It now seemed pretty wild.

I knew, or had heard of, the three victims Pulaski had mentioned. They were local men. All were prominent financially.

J. X. Smith was an architect. He was a dark-skinned soulful-eyed man put together with lengths—long arms, long hands, long fingers, and everything else long, eyes, nose, mouth and body. These long men are usually the inward types, and he was. A thinker, a dreamer, a man who lived within himself and was perhaps a little afraid of the world and afraid of people who knew what they wanted and went after it.

Before I had been in the city long, I had learned that J. X. Smith had money, and I had given him a survey. I had gotten invited to a party where he was the guest of honor, and spent most of his time finding a corner to crawl into. The verdict: A man who frightened easily, who had to think out everything six ways from the middle before he acted. And afraid of women. He would be too much of a waste of time.

Sonny Conover, a thick-wristed, thick-necked, thick-walleted man of forty-five or so was a man I knew by sight, and I think we had been introduced once. For some reason or other men named Sonny are supposed to be scions of wealth and usually no-goods, but if Sonny Conover was a scion of anything, it was the school of hard knocks. He was clearly a self-made man, and as far as the financial part of the constructing was concerned, he had done an excellent job. Sonny Conover, was owner of the Conover Ready-Mixed Concrete Company and the Conover Lumber Company.

I had met James Like once in passing. I had bumped into him leaving the Central National Bank, which should have been named the Like National Bank. He was a perfectly prosaic-looking man of less than fifty, with, I understood, a family as conservative as he was. He was a pillar of society, the town’s leading moneybags, and belonged to all the clubs which had dues of over fifty dollars a year. He had made his roll, I understood, in the construction business.

These three men, I saw, had one thing in common. They all were, or had been, connected with the building business in one way or another. Smith was an architect, Conover was a lumber and concrete man, and James Like had been a builder and financier.

These were the three Pulaski’s trick poison was going to be used on.

The poison thing still seemed pretty wild after I had thought it over, and I didn’t know whether there was anything to it or not.

But it gave me an idea.

I’m very allergic to being broke. And in my book, being whittled down to three hundred dollars—what I had left of sucker Pu-

laski's money—is the same as being strapped.

A MINK COAT and a confident manner were enough the next morning to get me about a hundred dollars worth of chemicals from the Cumberland Chemical Supply Company. It also got me, on rental, a gadget that the plants which manufacture certain radioactive chemical products use to check their employees regularly to make certain that they do not have a dangerous amount of undesirable radiotoxemia in their bodies. The gadget was worth over a thousand dollars. I could have paid for the chemicals and the rental out of Pulaski's loan, but there didn't seem any point in it when they were so easily impressed by a mink coat and casual manner.

I didn't know the exact poison Pulaski had been boasting about last night. That wasn't important. There are several substances which, if introduced into the body, will produce death in a period of time. These are not new.

After the first World War, there was an epidemic of delayed deaths among workers who had done nothing more exciting during the war than put the numerals on the faces of those watches which glow in the darkness. They were victims of the sort of poisoning that Pulaski had been discussing. In their case, the fatal toxic was not a part of any compound that could be eliminated from the body by treatment. So they were faced with certain lingering death.

The idea of such a death was pretty scary, and I had selected J. X. Smith for my goof. Of the three, he seemed to be the softest.

Also I had heard that J. X. Smith was engaged to be married shortly, and men in love usually think they have a lot to look forward to. Life probably meant a great deal to J. X. Smith just now.

I rigged up two phials. One contained colored water. The other contained a liquid that would operate positively on the detector gadget.

But I was sharp enough to make sure that the stuff that would give a positive wasn't a chemical that could be used to poison a man. If the thing should happen to blow up, and the police get me, I didn't want them to have anything on me that would stand up in court. It would be inconvenient to have some District Attorney trying to prove that I had intended to poison anyone.

All I intended to do was see whether there was a quick dollar to be made. If there wasn't, I would find it out today. It seemed worth investing a day's time.

The phials were exactly alike as far as outward appearance went, and I tried them out on the detector gadget. The machine indicated positive to one phial. The headset attached to it gave off a quickened clicking sound. To the other phial there was, naturally, a negative reaction, which meant no reaction at all.

I didn't have much trouble getting an appointment to see J. X. Smith at two o'clock that afternoon. I told his secretary I was Miss Travice Ames, and that I was on the staff of a nationally known magazine. That got me the appointment. Publicity always appeals to them.

IT would help if J. X. Smith was a coward. I began to examine him for courage as soon as his secretary opened the door to his office, admitted me, and closed the door. J. X. Smith looked up at me. His jaw sagged a little, and he jumped to his feet. Evidently he had expected a frumpy middle-aged woman.

"I—uh—believe I've met you somewhere before," he said.

"Oh, you probably have," I told him. "I've been in the city some time."

"Ah, then you are doing a series of articles, perhaps," he suggested.

"Not exactly," I said. "Not writing articles. . . . Let's call it preparing to save a man's life."

He was one of the those long gangling men who know only one way of handling their emotions—by hiding their feelings inside themselves. When startled, they just jerk everything inside and close a lid. He did this now, but his deadpan face didn't get me to thinking he had iron nerves. I knew that his type is more easily frightened than any other.

His office showed that he had imagination as well as money. It was a large room done in pastels and blond woods, with a minimum of chrome and quite a lot of Lucite. It was the office of an egoist and a dreamer.

"I don't believe I understand," he ventured cautiously. That statement about sav-

ing a man's life had puzzled him. I handed him a shock to go with it.

"Mr. Smith," I said. "Did you know you have an enemy who is going to kill you?"

His reaction to that was normal. He probably thought I was a little crazy. He probably thought of several things to say, but what he did say was, "What is this, a joke?"

"Not at all. As a matter of fact, the enemy may be killing you now."

His mouth fell open and remained so.

"You have such an enemy, of course," I added.

He also thought of several answers to that which he didn't give. And by the time he spoke, I knew that he *did* have an enemy. Or perhaps more than one. Or he was overimaginative enough to immediately think of many who might qualify. . . . It was all right with me; the more imaginative he was, the easier he would be to trim.

"Who," he asked, "is this enemy?"

"I'm depending on you to tell me that," I said. "I don't know myself."

He moistened his lips. "This is a bit unusual, isn't it, Miss Ames?"

"And you're tempted to add that you think I'm nuts," I told him. "I wouldn't blame you. However, you had better listen to me. This isn't something wild that I picked out of thin air. It's wild, all right, but it can happen and probably is." I had brought my apparatus and I put it on his desk. "I suggest you give me about five minutes of your time."

J. X. Smith was now a little pale. He was perfectly willing to give me five minutes. He wouldn't have grudged me a couple of days. He was going to be an easy one.

I told him I was a private investigator engaged in searching for a man named Tuggle who had embezzled some stocks from a foolish woman named Simms, and that I was hired by the Simms woman's husband, who was sorry for his foolish wife and wanted it straightened out quietly. I said that I hadn't found this Tuggle, but in the course of snooping I had overheard two men in a booth in a bar discussing the administering of poison to a Mr. J. X. Smith.

"I presumed you were the J. X. Smith concerned," I said. "So that's why I'm here."

He said that it was a remarkable story, which it was. He added, "I think we'd better call the police."

"Suit yourself," I said. "But on the other hand, it might not be desirable."

"Why not?"

I gave him part of the stuff Pulaski had mouthed. "The poison, the way I heard it, has a treatment, but only the party who gave it to you knows the treatment. They're considering whether to make you pay plenty for the cure, or just let you die."

"This is damned ridiculous," he said.

It wasn't. I told him why it wasn't. I named examples of poisoning of a similar type, and suggested that he get on the telephone and call any X-ray or cancer specialist in the city, and ask just how practical such a method of poisoning was. An X-ray technician would probably know about it, I told him, although the poison had nothing to do with X-rays. And a cancer man would surely know, because they were familiar with the effects of activated compounds.

He listened to this, and didn't believe any of it until he used the telephone and talked to a doctor named Greenstern. Then he believed it. He had enough belief to make him a little blue around the mouth.

"I still think it's ridiculous!" he said.

"Naturally you do," I agreed. "But I came prepared to check on it and ease your mind, or at least settle the matter." I indicated the gadget I'd rented from the supply company, and told him what it was. There was no trouble convincing him, so evidently the doctor he'd just talked to had mentioned one of the contraptions. But he had plenty of suspicion and a couple of questions.

"Just where," he demanded, "do you hook into this?"

"I told you. I'm an investigator by profession. Nasty things like this are my business."

"But—"

"Oh, don't get the idea I'm a Samaritan," I told him. "It's a business proposition with me. As soon as I overheard this poison talk, I thought: I'll just make sure whether it's something real, or a piece of wild imagination. And if Mr. J. X. Smith has been poisoned, no doubt he'll engage my business services to find the antidote or cure to the stuff he has been given."

"You mean . . . ?"

"Oh, it's going to cost you—if you've been doped with the stuff already. . . . If not, it would be nice if you paid me for my trouble, but you'd really be a fool to do that because I might have just come up here with a wild story in order to hook you."

That impressed him. He had already thought of it.

He asked skeptically, "Are you qualified to test me for the presence of the stuff?"

I gave him a briefing on my experience. Some of it was genuine and some of it wasn't, but it didn't matter because he decided to let me test him.

"First," I said, "I'll demonstrate how the gadget works by giving myself a test. The result will be negative, and I'll show you exactly how and why."

He would naturally be interested in that, and it would help convince him that the thing was on the level, which it wasn't. Presumably, since he was an architect, he was a man who would be most intrigued by the mechanics of an operation.

There was not much to the demonstration. I rolled up a sleeve, explaining that concentrations of the stuff were more apt to build up in the body in the neighborhood of the major joints—ankles, knees, hips or elbows—and I was going to use my own elbow in making the test.

I explained it was first desirable to clean the skin of any possible foreign substance before applying the receptor of the gadget, and I proceeded to take one of the phials I had prepared, the one containing plain colored water, and, dabbing a bit of sterilized cotton into the liquid, mop a small area near my elbow.

This cleansing was an important part of the operation. When I sterilized his arm, I would use the liquid from the other bottle which was sufficiently activated to cause the detector device to register.

It came off perfectly. I used the tinted water on my arm. J. X. Smith asked some questions, mostly examined my legs while I was answering, and he adjusted his necktie. I gave him some large technical words and some eyelash waving of a genteel sort. He was coming along fine.

"You see," I said. "The indication is negative. The beat-note of the apparatus is unchanged, which means there is nothing of sufficient activity in my body to register."

He smirked and probably thought of some wise crack about my body, but didn't say it. He was beginning to like this. That meant he didn't think there was a chance in a million of his having been poisoned.

Okay, brother, I thought, the shock will be that much more effective.

Then calamity landed on me. I was going to switch phials now—they were exactly alike—and use the activated liquid to "sterilize" his arm. Actually this would leave a deposit that would register on the apparatus.

My fingers groped for the other phial. . . . It wasn't there. Gone. I didn't have it. . . . I knew immediately what had happened, and I wasn't proud of myself. I knew exactly where the other phial, the little bottle containing the activated solution, was—on my dressing-table back at the Congress Hotel. I had overlooked bringing it along. It was an utterly stupid oversight, and it ruined my plan.

I said, "In case this test should be negative for you, Mr. Smith, I feel it might be advisable to make succeeding ones. Perhaps daily for a time. I didn't overhear when they intended to poison you."

He grinned. "Of course. That will be fine." He was looking at my legs again.

"Why not try again tomorrow morning?" I asked. I was trying to salvage the scheme.

"Of course," he said. "But aren't you going to test me now?"

"Oh, certainly," I replied.

I applied the gadget to his arm. The measured clicking sound that came from its headset immediately speeded up and became almost a buzzing. A positive reaction.

The man had really been poisoned!

Chapter V

HE CAME apart the way you unravel a burlap bag by first finding the end of the knitted string, plucking at it, and finally pulling the string with a great flourish, the bag coming apart simultaneously. Mr. J. X. Smith did not take to fear quickly. Not very quickly. It took about ten seconds. Then you could almost see the dry wind of terror dry up his lips.

I liked the analogy to unraveling a gunnysack. I was just a little surprised myself to find he had been poisoned—after about thirty seconds I realized the aching in my chest was because I wasn't breathing, and I would need to resume breathing. I used pains and care and did so.

He tried to take it out on me. He glared and yelled, "What is this? A damned trick?"

I couldn't actually see the pigtail of knitted string that held him together, of course, but I took hold of it anyway, figuratively, and gave it a jerk. I said, "I resent that a great

deal, Mr. Smith. . . . I think we can consider our association at an end." I made gestures of gathering my paraphernalia together in some indignation. "Brother, I came up here to do you a favor, and I don't like your attitude." I leaned forward and added violently, "But I should have expected something like this from a fellow who would have an enemy that would want to kill him that bad!"

My phony indignation probably didn't disturb him, but throwing sudden death in his face started him turning blue, and not from brimstone inside either. It was a sickly blue, paralytic, cadaverous, utterly terrified.

I demanded, "Who did it to you, Smith?"

He got as far as, "Sonny must have been right when he said—" before he swallowed it. He didn't say anything more. He fell in a chair back of his desk, and his hands began picking up ruling pens, protractors and rulers and laying them down again without the hands having told him what they were doing. His breathing was hard and audible, like someone sandpapering a bone.

He had an idea who might have done this to him, and the idea had been given him by Sonny Conover, who was also on Pulaski's list along with James Like. But Smith wasn't going to say who it was. . . . When they want to keep something like that to themselves, it's usually a sign there is something off-color involved. This last was interesting.

Smith said thickly, "What will I do?"

"Have somebody you trust run a test on you," I said. "I don't like your attitude at all, Mr. Smith. I'd prefer to wash my hands of this. As I said, I came up here to do you a favor. I thought you would appreciate it, but instead of that you're acting rather as if I was a chiseler of some sort."

He scowled sickly and said, "It is odd, you coming to me."

"Is it? I'm an investigator. I make my living helping other people out of trouble."

I had my equipment ready to go. A show of reluctance was, I figured, the best sort of a buildup to hand him. If the test had been a fake, as I had planned, I would have used other tactics, tried to talk him out of consulting a specialist, or, if he had insisted, I would have made sure there was enough of the phony compound rubbed on his skin to give a positive reaction on anyone's apparatus. I had planned to manage this by testing his body at several points, applying the activated liquid as I did so. The traces of the stuff would linger several days. But this wasn't necessary now.

"Wait a minute!" J. X. Smith blurted. "You think I'd better have someone else test me?"

"Since you think I'm a crook, I don't care what you do."

"Oh, now! Come, come, Miss Ames. . . . I haven't implied anything of the sort. . . . Good God! You say there's a cure for this poisoning, but only the—uh—person who poisoned me knows the remedy?"

"I don't know anything of the sort," I said. "I only know what I heard those fellows talking about."

He gave his lips a quick going over with a perfectly dry tongue and demanded. "Two men? You say there were two?"

"I saw two."

"What did they look like?"

I described an imaginary man who looked something like Pulaski, but not enough like Pulaski that J. X. Smith would recognize him—that description was an out, in case the police came into it, and I got in a spot where I had to produce a fall guy; if that happened, I would produce Pulaski, naturally—and I added, "The other fellow I didn't get too good a look at. I'd rather not pin myself down to a description of him. I think, although I'm not sure, that I might be able to recognize him. It was rather dark in this bar where I overheard the plot."

"Could you find the men?" he wailed.

"That sort of thing is my business."

"Would you—"

"Look, Mr. Smith," I said. "You'd better think this over and check to be sure you've been poisoned. . . . Then, if you want to hire me, I'm at the Congress Hotel."

Letting him stew in the juice would make him more profitable, I believed.

He mumbled, "How much would it cost . . . ?"

"Plenty," I said. "I'm not going to quote you a figure now, because it would startle you. I don't risk my life for nothing, Mr. Smith. . . . You think it over, and call me."

He grunted. He didn't get up from his desk to show me the way out, and didn't say goodbye. He was a very upset man, and that was all right with me. Let him sweat enough, and he would pay plenty.

ENTERING a cab, I told the driver to take me to the Congress Hotel. I wasn't afraid of the story about my being an investigator getting me in trouble. I had used that idea before, and it was so convenient that I even had a license as a Private Detective. In most states, to get an investigator's license it is necessary to prove good character, and show experience, usually four years of it, as a police officer or operative with a licensed detective agency. This was not true of the state where I had my license, but that state and this one had a reciprocative agreement which made my license in this state good. I couldn't see where I would get in trouble.

Feeling pretty good, I got out at the Congress Hotel. The doorman carried my gear inside, and I paid the cab driver and gave him a twenty-five-cent tip. The sun was shining; it was a beautiful afternoon. There was a little park across the street, with benches on which sat the seedy old men you always see in parks; and the sparrows quarreled in the tired-looking trees. There was some pedestrian traffic, most of it women who looked a little stiff in their ten-dollar girdles, their hats a little silly.

Probably I was half-way across the sidewalk when he got in my way. He was a man and there was a court-plaster on the side of his face, a court-plaster or an asterisk of soiled adhesive tape or something—I never did know exactly what he looked like. But he was a man, and he had a little paper package clutched to him, and he faced me, and squeezed the package.

He did the squeezing gently, with both hands. He must have practiced, or he was too nervous and needed both hands, or something. He just held it in the middle of his chest, two-handed, and the liquid came out in a fine stream that hit his necktie and splattered and drooled down to the sidewalk, some of it. Some of it got to me, a little on my hand, more on my frock. But not much. Not as much as he intended. He hadn't figured on his necktie. It was a brownish necktie with a yellow check, and the breeze waved it a little, but hadn't waved it enough for him to realize that it might get in front of the nozzle of that rubber syringe he had in the package.

When you are a chemist, you get to know smells that mean sudden death. This one was almonds. They call it bitter almonds, a description which probably means nothing. Except, to a chemist, sudden death.

I started walking backward. I didn't scream. I would have liked to. I tried. I don't think even any breath went out.

He saw that he had missed, and he bent his head and peered foolishly at his necktie. He didn't breathe either. He started to—but caught the air in his mouth and held it there, cheeks bloated out like the midriff of an excited blowfish. He must have been afraid to take the air from his mouth back into his lungs, because he turned with the lower part of his face still fat and round and began walking away. Walking slowly, then walking fast, and then breaking into a kind of gamboling skip-hop run.

He ran half the block and turned into a street. He disappeared into a car. I could not tell what kind of a car it was, whether it was taxi or roadster or sedan, or whether it had been standing there or moving. There were too many other cars in between.

I walked a few quick steps into the wind, head back, and got new air into my lungs. I went into the hotel lobby and into the washroom and washed my hands. I took off my dress and put it in the washbowl and let water run on it. The odor of bitter almonds was still strong, but not strong enough to kill anyone.

I gave the washroom attendant a dollar and my room key and told her what dress to fetch. She was not gone long.

She said, "Honey, I like to not of found it. Your room was sure a mess."

"Mess?"

"Things all scattered around," she said.

It had been in perfect order when I left. So somebody had gone to the trouble of searching it, I gathered.

I decided to ask Pulaski why anyone would do that.

ONE-THIRTY WASHINGTON STREET turned out to be the part of town where you find all the trucks, the streets with pits in them, and the sidewalks that never get cleaned. It was in a not-so-tall building that had planks nailed over half the windows and an elevator that was more fitted for, and was being so used if the smell was any guide, a stockpen.

The elevator operator, an old character in a leather coat, said, "Pulaski? That the chemist guy? Third floor."

"Is he here?"

He blinked at me and mumbled and didn't get out any sense. The question had been too much for him.

The third floor hall lived up to advance notices and was of sparing area. One could swing a cat in it, if one used a shortened grip.

There was a door that said *Pulaski Chemical Research, Inc.* And under that it said, *Nathaniel T. Pulaski Industries.* And below that, *Nathaniel T. Pulaski, President,* and in smaller print, *Enter.* The door opened with a dry feel that was something like shaking hands with a medical school skeleton, and passed me into the sort of a room that should have a packed earthen floor, but didn't. There was one chair with a straight back, one with no back, and a desk that held together well enough to support an inkwell that contained no more ink than a blackbird, two well-chewed pencils, and Pulaski's hat.

Across the reception room was another door which stood open and showed that all the rest of the establishment was one neglect-ridden room full of the second-rate stuff that it takes to make what will pass for a chemical laboratory. The nature of the apparatus told Pulaski's story.

Pulaski had told me he was a research chemist with a considerable reputation, but I had not believed it, and I had been right not to believe it. The stuff in his laboratory said he was a hack chemist who made a living doing soil analysis and assay work and whatever routine stuff he could get to come his way.

I felt sorry for Pulaski and—thinking of poison and murder—pretty angry with him. I advanced into the laboratory. I was going to ask him who had tried to kill me, and why, and he was probably going to deny it, and I wasn't going to listen to his denials.

I didn't have to listen to him, though. He did not make any denials. He did not have a word to say. He sat in a chair and looked blankly at me and through me and beyond me. Pulaski was a short little man who had never looked comfortable when seated in an ordinary chair, but he seemed comfortable enough now. His arms and legs were relaxed and his face easy. His clothing was gathered loosely and comfortably in different places on his body as if he had done some moving about, and done it in paroxysms, shortly before he settled into that stillness. The odor of bitter almonds was barely noticeable in the air, about as obscure as a man-eating tiger sitting over his head.

I left without even trying to find out how long he had been dead.

Chapter VI

I RODE in three taxicabs, a street car and a bus, and kept looking behind me all the time. Then I found a hotel, but they wouldn't register an unescorted lady without luggage. The stores were all closed now—it was past six—but a chain drugstore sold me a fifty-six-cent suitcase for two dollars and forty-nine cents, and I bought a dollar's worth of their heaviest magazines from a newsstand to weight the suitcase impressively. The next hotel accepted me. It was called the Central Hotel. There is a Central Hotel in almost every city, but this one was a little better than the average. Almost good enough for your sister, but not quite.

Except for the hand prints on the wall around the bathroom door and a faucet that leaked as if it was dripping blood, the room was all right. I sat in it for an hour. I had not taken off my hat. I had not eaten since breakfast. I was not hungry. I had not been so scared in some time.

It's hard to say when I thought of Doc Savage. My thinking seemed to have just two speeds, a runaway, or dead stop. It was that way for two hours at least, possibly longer, and then out of nothing, Doc Savage popped into my head. Doc Savage! The answer to a maid's prayers.

After the notion of Doc Savage came to one, my thinking straightened out and made headway. It even picked up its spirits and pranced. I had never met Doc Savage, but I'd had him in mind for a long time. I'd only heard of him, but he was something you could keep in mind. He represented about the same thing that the mother lode represents to a burro-bedeviled prospector. I thought of him with the same appreciation that a safe-cracker thinks of Fort Knox.

It was, I think, in Havana that I first heard of Doc Savage, or maybe it was in New Orleans, or maybe it was anywhere, because the man was like that—you just thought, when they talked about such an individual, that it was rumor, or legend, or plain malarkey. Later I knew a confidence man named Berry in Denver, and one morning he

read in the newspaper that Savage was coming to Denver to address a convention of physicians, and thirty minutes later Berry was on a departing plane. I didn't get into the convention, so I did not see Savage, but I learned more about him, and added quite a bit from time to time.

He didn't sound genuine. I think that's what first attracted me. They said he was a man whose profession was righting wrongs and punishing evildoers—which was about as trite as a statement could be. But it was true. It was true, but it was also an understatement. It was like dismissing Napoleon as a soldier, or Henry Ford as a man who had built an automobile, or Cleopatra as an Egyptian girl.

Savage really did right wrongs, and he really was a present-day Galahad. This was a little hard to believe—he probably had an angle, and the angle must be good. Of him, I had heard the following: He was a remarkable combination of physique and mental genius. He had a source of limitless wealth. He had a group of five associates, all scientists, who worked with him either singly or together. His name alone was enough to inspire terror in any crook who really knew his capabilities.

On the other hand, I had heard: He was a gnarled freak whom nobody had seen. He was really two other men. He was a front for the F.B.I., and he was really the whole F.B.I. He was financed by the U. S. Mint. He was the U. S. Marines.

Some of the last—not all of it was spoken in jest either—sounded about as sensible as the former. I was quite curious.

He sounded like a sporting proposition.

I told the telephone operator. "Doc Savage—I think his proper name is Clark Savage, Jr. His headquarters is in New York City. . . . If he isn't there, I still want to talk to him, wherever he is."

"New York is a very large city," said the operator. "Don't you have a street address, or any other information?"

"He's a very large man," I told you. "Maybe you won't need any other information."

She didn't, but I did not get through the gate right away. I found myself talking to a squeaky voice, a voice like a wet stick being rubbed on a tin can, that said it was owned by a Mr. Monk Mayfair. That was reasonable. A Monk Mayfair was one of Savage's aides, according to what I had heard.

"But I want to talk to Doc Savage!" I said.

"Sister, you have to bore a hole through me to get to him," Monk Mayfair said.

"You mean—tell you my business?"

"Uh-huh. What you want with Doc, anyway?"

I began telling him and was about two hundred words into it when he broke in.

"Hold the door," he said. "I guess this will be something that would interest Doc."

Presently I was permitted to hear the Master's dulcet tones. I was a little surprised. He really did have an extraordinary voice. It was not overdeveloped and stagy, but gave the effect of being quite controlled and capable of considerably more than it was putting out now. The voice didn't sound very interested.

"Will you repeat this tale you have been telling Mr. Mayfair," he requested.

It wasn't difficult to give him an impressive story. In view of what happened, I should be scared, and I was, and I just let the fright go in my voice. All of what had actually happened I gave him truthfully. But of myself, my motives for getting involved in the thing, and my real reasons for calling him, I told practically not a word of fact.

In accounting for myself, I gave him the same story I had given J. X. Smith—I was an investigator who had stumbled on to this thing. I gave him my license number and the state of issue. For character reference, I also gave him the name of a young policeman named Grindle, who knew the whole story of my life—not a word of it true; I had fixed Grindle up with the information for occasions such as this—and who would give a fairly rosy view of my character.

"Have you talked to the other two victims Pulaski mentions—Sonny Conover and James Like?" Doc Savage asked.

"No. . . . Frankly, I'm afraid to get out of the hotel. In case you didn't hear me or something, an attempt was made to murder me by squirting hydrocyanic acid in my face. Had the stuff struck my face as intended, inhalation of the vapor alone would probably have been enough to kill me."

"Is that why you called me?" he asked.

"What you really mean is, is that why I didn't call the police? Isn't that it?" I asked.

"The point might stand a couple of words," he said.

"I can explain that, but I don't know how nice you're going to think it is," I said. "I'm an investigator. I make my living investigating. If I had gone to the police when I should have gone—when Pulaski opened up with that wild story—the police would have done the investigating themselves. Where would I have made a profit? Frankly, I supposed Pulaski's story fantastic. Since I found it wasn't, things have happened too fast."

"You sound," he remarked, "like a young lady who preferred the side doors."

"Look, I've had to make my own living for a long time."

"I see."

"The real reason I thought of you, Mr. Savage," I told him, "is because I've heard amazing stories about your ability, and I've also heard that you only involve yourself in cases which are quite unusual, and where the criminal or criminals seem to be too sharp for the police. Answer me this: Are those rumors correct?"

"Substantially," he admitted.

"Then what about this: Isn't this poison unusual enough to interest you? Think what a fantastic thing it is. Here's a scientific production of death that can be deflected only by a scientific treatment known, presumably, only to the person Pulaski sold it to. Do you know what is going to happen to J. X. Smith unless you interest yourself in this? He's going to die. That's what."

"Oh, you're jumping at conclusions—"

"Jumping, nothing! Name me another scientist in the country, other than yourself, who is capable of finding how to eliminate the radiant substance from the victim's body."

"Oh, there are several—"

"I doubt it. It's a job for a man who is both a nuclear scientist and a physician and surgeon. . . . You're the only combination of those that I've heard about. . . . And here's another point: Pulaski seemed perfectly confident that the victims would never find how to eliminate the stuff from their bodies. That—if you'll take my word that Pulaski wasn't entirely a fool—means at least one life, and possibly two others, depend on you."

He said, "Can you stay in your hotel room the remainder of the night—with the door locked?"

"I can't think of anything easier to do," I told him.

"Do that," he said. "You'll hear from me later."

I hung up—after he had hung up first—and tried to figure out what the conversation had accomplished. I had told him more than I had expected to tell him, and learned less than I had intended to learn. I was a little impressed, and I had not intended to be impressed, and would have sworn no one could get that done to me over a few hundred miles of telephone line.

Chapter VII

AWAKENING was like an icicle breaking. In nothing flat, I climbed an unseen ladder of terror a dozen feet high, and stopped at the top because there was nowhere else to go. That was the way it felt—actually, I just stood up in bed.

He had the door wide open. He stood there.

"Uh-huh. Had the door unlocked," he said. He had a soft, low voice that was a puppy sleeping.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't get my voice loose from my hair roots.

He was not tall and he had thin hips and considerable width through the shoulders. His hair was jet-black and straight, as black as a cake of anthracite on his head, and his nose was large and aquiline, his mouth also large, but mobile. He had his hat off, was holding it against his chest with both hands. The way he held the hat reminded me of the way court-plaster-face had held the syringe with the hydrocyanic in it, and I tried to float higher on that invisible spike of terror.

"I live here," he told me. "I live in the hotel, that is."

"That's fine," I managed to say. "That's just fine. You broke in to tell me that, I suppose."

He shook his head. "I didn't break in. He opened the door. He had it unlocked."

"He . . .?" I stared at him doubtfully. "What do you mean? Are you trying to tell me someone picked the lock?"

He said, "A tall man. Very thin. Blond hair, blue eyes, in a dark suit. Do you know him?"

"Not from that description." I didn't know whether to believe him or not. "Who are you?"

"Me? . . . The bellboy," he said. "That's funny."

"Funny about being a bellhop? Why?"

"No, funny he should come to the hotel, find out what room you were in, then leave and come back later by a side door and come up here and pick your door lock."

"Oh, he did that?"

He nodded and pointed at the floor in the hall outside the door.

"He dropped something out here. Maybe you'd like to look at it," he said.

He might be fooling. He acted like a clown, but I hadn't figured him yet. While the doubts were still showing me their blank faces, he continued to stab a finger at the hall floor, and added, "I don't know what it is. Bottle of something." So I went and looked, and it was a small bottle of limpid rather colorless liquid. I picked it up and, after hesitating, gave the screw cap part of a turn then brought the bottle near enough to get that odor of oil of bitter almonds.

"What's it?" he asked. He was watching me.

"Just his medicine," I said casually, about as casually as if I was standing on my head. "He must have dropped it. . . . You say you're the bellboy? Do you have a name?"

"Futch," he said, grinning a yokel grin. "That's what they call me. Futch. Nothing before or after it."

"Well, thanks, Futch," I said. "You've given nice service, and I won't forget it. But goodbye, now."

"Wait a minute," he exclaimed. "You want me to hunt the guy?"

"Which way did he go?"

"The stairs. Down."

"You didn't chase him?"

He blushed again and confessed, "I wasn't that brave right then." He looked me over the way a two-year-old watches a Fourth-of-July sparkler. "But I might be brave enough now."

He evidently thought that was pretty gallant. He grinned as if it was.

"We won't test you out this time," I said. "But thanks again. . . . And if you see him, or see anyone else who might have an idea like he had, you could telephone me, couldn't you?"

"You bet! I'll telephone you, Miss Ames. The name is Miss Ames, isn't it?"

I said the name was Miss Ames and shut the door. I locked it again, too, but without the confident feeling I'd had when locking it last night. . . . Futch seemed to stand outside the door a long time. There was no sound of his going away. I waited for it. There never was such a sound, and when I opened the door suddenly and looked out, there was no sign of him in the hall, no sign at all.

No more than there was any trace of how the door lock had been picked.

I STACKED what furniture I could move against the door after looking under the bed and in the closet and in the bathroom, then went to the window. Dawn was an angry red fever on the eastern sky, but I was more interested in the fact that the window could be aligned from a rooftop across the street. I pulled the cord that made the venetian blind slats stand on edge, and went to lie on the bed again.

Sleep was out of the question. I probably lay there half an hour, and probably not more than thirty consecutive seconds of it was in one position. They say animals can smell fear on a person. It began to seem to me that it was all around me, and I got up and took a shower bath that didn't help much, and when I shut off the water, the telephone was ringing.

"Miss Ames? . . . I'm downstairs—the dining-room—if you would care to come down," he said.

The long-distance telephone last night hadn't added or subtracted anything with his voice. It was still the most impressive voice I had ever heard.

"How will I know you?" I asked.

"I'll be the out-sized one."

"In three or four minutes, I'll be there." I said. "And listen—another attempt was made to kill me. Someone picked the lock of my door, and dropped a bottle of cyanic when he ran away."

"That is interesting," he said, and hung up.

There was nobody in the hall, and nobody who made me nervous in the elevator. But crossing the lobby, a shadow fell in beside me and the sleepy puppy voice said, "He's not the one who was at the door."

I frowned at Futch and asked, "Who?"

"The guy you're meeting in the dining room. He's not the one. He's bigger. He's—well, he's different the way a tiger is different from a tabby cat."

"You're keeping pretty close tab on me, aren't you, Futch?"

"I find it a pleasure," he said, and split off and went to the porter's desk.

DOC SAVAGE was alone in the dining room. There were thirty-odd other people eating breakfast there, but for practical purposes he was alone. He stood out like that. He wasn't twenty-feet tall and lit up with neon, but that was the general effect.

His manners were good enough. He stood up and held a chair for me, and we exchanged perfectly normal preliminary words. He was Doc Savage, and I was Miss Ames. But from there on, business picked up.

"Pulaski's body has not been found—or at least the police have not been notified," he said. "I think I'll have a look at the body. If you feel up to it, you might come along."

"I—well, I'll have to think about it. . . . How did you manage to get here so soon?"

"Plane," he said. "What about this second attempt on your life?"

He listened to my story. He was considerably more than six feet, but with a symmetrical build that kept him from seeming that large except when you were close to him. There were several unusual points about his appearance, two in particular—the deep bronze of his skin and an odd flake gold coloring of eyes that were striking.

Toward the end of my story about the prowler at the door, my wording became a bit disconnected. I was making an unnerving discovery about him—I couldn't read him. This was something unusual, and not expected. He had the most natural of expressions, and it changed in response to what he was hearing—his face showed logical mounts of surprise, curiosity, admiration for my nerve, all at the proper times—but I had the feeling that it meant nothing and had no bearing on what he was thinking.

"Thought of anything you forgot to tell me on the telephone last night?" he asked.

Just like that. Not a word of follow-up on the prowler. No questions about how it felt to hear a fellow had been outside your door with a bottle of hydrocyanic.

"Any thoughts," I said bitterly, "were scared out of me."

"You seem very competent," he said, and proceeded with his breakfast, letting me draw whatever conclusions came handy.

Usually my confidence isn't easily rattled. One of the best ways to pull off a failure, it was impressed on me long ago, is to let your knees get to knocking at the start of an operation. Plan carefully, don't plan too conservatively, and then get going and don't hesitate nor look back. And above all, don't get to thinking that the plan might not work.

But suddenly I was wondering if I had been so clever to draw this Doc Savage into the affair. My plan was to use him, persuade him in one way or another to do the dirty work, then capitalize on his efforts, and if it was at all convenient, give him a trimming. The dirty work would consist of protecting my neck, finding an antidote for the radio-active poison that J. X. Smith had been given, and possibly finding out who had done the poisoning and why. The latter didn't seem vital to me, but it would be interesting to know, and it might be profitable. Once Savage found the antidote, I intended to see that J. X. Smith—and Sonny Conover and James Like also, if they had to have it—paid plenty.

From my standpoint, it was going to be a business proposition. Somebody owed me for the scare I'd been handed last night.

A waiter drifted up with the coffee. A waiter, not the waitress we'd had. It was Futch. I wondered how long he'd been standing behind us, listening.

"Anything I should know about that fellow?" Savage asked casually when Futch had gone away.

"What fellow?"

"The waiter."

Evidently my face hadn't stayed as poker plain as I had thought. "That was Futch. The one who frightened the intruder away from my door. He seems to be taking an interest in me."

"If you'll pardon me a moment, I believe I'll take an interest in Futch," Doc Savage said, and arose and went into the lobby. He was not gone long. He came back and said, "Just a bellhop, apparently. A character, though."

We finished breakfast and Savage asked if I felt up to having a look at Pulaski. I said I wouldn't enjoy it, which was certainly true, but I would force myself to go along. My nerve wasn't quite that shaky, but it seemed advisable to try some clinging vine technique

on Savage and see how that worked. Savage already had a car. A rented one. Futch was on the sidewalk to flag us a cab. He looked disappointed.

Chapter VIII

ONE-THIRTY WASHINGTON STREET was no more appetizing at nine o'clock this morning than it had been last night. There may not have been as many trucks in the street, but they were going faster and hitting the ruts oftener and the racket was about the same. The character in the leather coat was still operating the elevator, and he said almost exactly as he had said last night, "Pulaski? The chemist guy? Third floor."

We went to the door that had Pulaski's name on it three times. It was closed, and I was trying to remember whether it had been closed when I left yesterday as Savage asked, "Anything different?"

"I don't know," I said. "The door—I can't recall closing it. . . . But maybe I did. I was in a little bit of a dither when I left here." I tried to think how my state of mind compared to words, and couldn't think of any words that shaky.

We opened the door and went in, and I knew we were not going to find any body. I knew positively that Pulaski's mortal remains were gone, that the chair where he had been sitting would be empty, that the windows would be open and there wouldn't be a trace of odor of oil of almonds. This knowledge came as a premonition. I have them sometimes. I would have bet on this one, bet my chances of coming out of this mess with a profit, even bet my percentage on taking Doc Savage for a sucker, which was the percentage any pretty girl with brains has in her favor when she starts work on a man. I would have lost, because Pulaski's body was there, looking quite a lot worse than it had last night. The almond odor was strong enough to take hold of my hair roots.

Savage began looking around. I didn't have to look—I was discovering that everything about the place, every detail had lodged in my mind last night.

"I—uh—don't think I can take this. I don't feel good," I said, not entirely faking. "Is it necessary—do I have to stay here? Why can't I go back to the hotel?"

"Aren't you afraid of another attempt on your life?" Savage asked.

"Yes," I said. "But the idea doesn't make me feel much worse than"—I tried to gesture at what was now Mr. Pulaski—"being around that."

"I'll call you at the hotel, then," Savage said. "The police may want to talk to you." Then he changed it a little and said, "Why don't you wait in the outer room a while. You might feel better."

"I'll try that, then," I said, knowing I was not going to feel better. There was no percentage in feeling better, because I wanted to get away from him a while.

I had thought of something.

He was examining the body closely as I went out. And suddenly he turned away, went to a workbench and got something and brought it back to the table where the body was sitting. I waited long enough to see what he had gotten. It was a microscope.

Five minutes was all I could stand in the dingy reception room, and it wasn't entirely because, in the silence—the clamor of trucks in the street was oddly absent here—my ears got to ringing the way telephone wires ring on a cold day, the way your ears can ring when you stand beside a casket.

Back at the laboratory door, I said, "I—could you tell me something? . . . You see, I haven't much money, and I asked you to take this case. And—well—I'm beginning to wonder, will I be able to pay you?"

He was doing things with the microscope, and his fingers had a practiced touch on the instrument. He had brought over a fluorescent desk-light and it was turned on.

"I never work for a fee," he said, shaking his head. "Don't worry about it. . . . Are you feeling better?"

That bore out what the rumors said about him. He never took money. He labored for love. Love of what? Excitement? He didn't look nor act that crack-brained. He must have an angle somewhere.

"Not much better," I said. "I think I'll have to leave. I'm not accustomed to bodies, I'm afraid."

He nodded, then said, "Before you go—how well did you know Pulaski?"

"Not too well—a few dates." That was fairly close to the truth.

"Know any of his friends? In this case, it might be an acquaintance." He pondered a moment, added, "Say a man between forty

and fifty years old, with brown hair. Incidentally, the fellow would have had a haircut and shampoo yesterday."

"No, I can't think of one. . . . But that's not a very definite description."

"Not too definite," he agreed. "But I wouldn't like to be someone who answered that description too closely."

"Oh! You mean. . . ?"

Doc Savage nodded. "That prussic acid was thrown at Pulaski rather hard. It splashed quite a bit. And the killer had, I think, to hold Pulaski a few moments until the stuff began to take hold. It doesn't work instantly, you know. . . . If you'd held your victim, and perhaps had some hydrocyanic on your hands as a result, what would be the first thing you would do?"

"If you want a personal answer—pass out cold. . . . But otherwise, wash my hands."

"That's what someone did—wash his hands." Savage said. "And comb his hair. There's a comb at the washbasin with some of Pulaski's hair on it, and on top of that a couple of strands of different hair—the hair of a man between forty and fifty, who had a shampoo and a barbering yesterday. Hair can be read, you know, under the microscope. Incidentally, the man probably has a thick head of hair—brown. That's a guess, really. The cut looks as if it was done with thinning shears, the ones that have crocodile teeth."

"You've got me amazed," I said.

He glanced sharply to see if I was ribbing him. He said, "If you're really feeling bad, you might go back to the hotel and wait."

"Thanks. I think I will."

I RODE down in the elevator feeling a little worried. He was sharp, all right. And what was worse, I had the feeling that he habitually didn't tell all he knew—just about one per cent of it.

Futch gave me something else to think about. He was there, leaning against the grimy lobby wall, looking too innocent.

"I have a car, Miss Ames, in case you find need for such a convenience," Futch said in that sleepy voice.

"Listen, you—you shadow! How did you get here?"

"Have I done wrong?" he asked with an injured air.

"That depends on what you've done."

He looked as embarrassed as a kid who had accidentally tripped his schoolteacher. "I'm afraid I followed you and that fellow," he confessed. "However, my intentions were good."

"Oh, they were, were they!"

"I didn't really have anything else to do, either," he added sheepishly. "I was off work. I'm—uh—a single man. I don't have much to do with my spare time. I get a little lonesome."

Somehow Futch began to seem all right to me. The more open-faced they seem and the more honest they sound, the chances are the more they need watching. Futch sounded about as honest and glib as a frog trying to swim in buttermilk.

"I don't get your point, Futch," I said.

He grinned the same kind of a grin that would come from a toe being pinched.

"I like you, Miss Ames," he said.

So that was it. It probably was, too. It was logical enough to explain everything. There seemed to be no point in being coy with him, so I laughed in his face. "You're just building up to a disappointment, Futch."

"My life has been full of disappointments," he said quietly. "You want to go anywhere? I got my car, like I said."

Why not use him, as long as he was handy? He listened intently as I gave him J. X. Smith's address, and nodded, saying, "I know about where that is, I think."

IT turned out that he didn't know. He had to ask a policeman who made it even by not knowing either, until he looked in a little book. But finally we were parked in front of Smith's office building, and I said, "Thanks. You can either wait, or you can call it a day."

"I'll wait." Futch nodded at the building. "You think you'll be all right wherever you're going in there? You don't want me along?"

"Why should I want you along?"

"Search me. I never stopped to think of that," he said blankly.

The receptionist in J. X. Smith's swank office suite gave me an odd look and said, "You have an appointment? Mr. Smith isn't feeling well, and he has cancelled all appointments." I could imagine he wouldn't be feeling well this morning, and told the girl to try sending my name in anyway. I was admitted at once.

J. X. Smith gave me a look that he had been keeping on ice for the purpose and said, "I had started to wonder about you. You weren't at the hotel where you said you would be."

His barber and his valet—he probably had one—had apparently done their best with him this morning, but he still showed signs of a hard night. His eyes had the thick-lidded loose appearance of not having slept, and he had the general air of a tall mechanical toy with the spring wound far too tight.

"I changed hotels, Mr. Smith. But it didn't do too much good. Whoever tried to squirt anhydrous prussic acid in my face when I left here made a second attempt later."

"Prussic acid?" he said. Either he didn't know what it was, or his mind wasn't closely enough on my words to get what it meant.

"Oh, you've heard of it, Mr. Smith. Hydrocyanic acid. Potassium cyanide is a crystalline salt derivative. Inhalation of the vapor of anhydrous prussic will cause immediate death—so quickly, it is said, that scarcely any symptoms can be observed."

He got that all right. His jaw fell, buried itself in his expensive necktie.

"Good God."

While he was properly floored, I described the man who had stood in front of me last night and squeezed the package. The description didn't add up much—mostly it was the asterisk of adhesive tape that had been on the fellow's face. That, and the brownish necktie with the yellow check that had gotten in front of the nozzle of his gadget and probably saved my life.

"Recognize him from that description, Mr. Smith?"

"No . . . No, of course not. Great Scott! Is he the one who—who—"

"That's right. I just wondered if you knew him . . . By the way, did you go to a properly qualified doctor about that poison?"

That jolted him again—merely by throwing the discussion back to himself, which was the only thing he was interested in anyway. He shuffled over and fell in a chair, nodding his head while doing so, and still nodding it as he announced, "My whole body is saturated with a radioactive substance. Not a strong saturation, but enough to kill me slowly in the course of from four to eight months."

His doctor had probably guessed about four to eight months, because it was doubtful if there had been enough radiant poisoning cases as yet for doctors to classify the pattern of effect. That might be wrong, though. There had doubtless been considerable study of the Japanese cases and later of the animals in the Bikini tests.

He was looking at me bitterly. "I'm going to put this matter, and you, in the hands of the police, naturally."

"That's fine," I said coldly, for I was ready for this. "The police are just the boys to find an antidote for that stuff for you."

"They'll catch the party who gave it to me, and make him produce the cure," he said grimly.

He didn't stumble over referring to the poisoner as "party." Yesterday he had done some juggling with the words "person" and "uh" and something that Sonny Conover had said sometime or other. Today it was a straight, "the party who gave it to me." I rather got the idea that he had decided to keep his suspicions to himself, and I tried that out with a question.

"Decided who might have given it to you?" I asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea!" He had it all ready for me, like an urchin with a snowball behind his back.

I shrugged. "Call in the police if you want to," I told him. "But that might queer a better idea that occurred to me . . . Oh well, my idea would be expensive. Better give it to the police."

He glared at me. "Money? You think money means anything in a case like this?"

That was good to hear. It was a point. And it opened up the way for the matter that had brought me here.

"Ever hear of Doc Savage?"

He frowned—he was having a little trouble keeping his thoughts off dying—and had to rub his jaw to stir a recollection. "Savage? . . . I believe I've heard faintly—scientist, isn't he? New York. Got together some tables on alloy stresses that made quite a change in bridge construction methods and design . . ." He remembered some more, enough to make him bolt upright. "Say! That Savage is an amateur detective, or something, isn't he?"

He listened blankly to the buildup I gave Doc Savage which I had a suspicion might be more truth than exaggeration, al-

though it sounded as if I was describing a combination of Einstein, Tarzan of the Apes, and the F.B.I. "You can get on the telephone, Mr. Smith, and check that, possibly with the local police, or if they don't know what the score is, with the New York police."

"That won't be necessary. I'm—uh—remembering more that I've heard of Savage . . . What do you have in mind, Miss Ames?"

"Hire Savage for this case."

He had heard of Doc Savage, all right. Because he said, "It's my impression that Savage isn't someone you hire."

"It could be done," I said. "I'm willing to guarantee you that it could. You see, I happen to have certain contacts with Savage."

He didn't know exactly how to take that; he grinned, or started to grin, knowingly, then wiped it off his face, and pretended to be considering something or other. The emotions he played on his face were not very effective over and above his other feelings.

He finally decided he needed a drink, and he probably did, several of them. He got out the makings—he had a trick affair on his desk: Push a button, and the whole left end of the desk suddenly became a bar with glasses, tiny cooler full of ice cubes, and almost anything you wanted in bottles. It was quite a startling effect.

He made and drank half his drink before he remembered his manners and offered me one. I told him what I wanted and he made it and I tasted it. He was not much of a bartender. With that rig, almost anyone could have done better.

J. X. Smith finished the contents of his glass. I finished mine. His manners improved and he raised both eyebrows in a gloomy question. I shook my head.

"I'm really here on business, remember?" I said.

He dropped the glasses back in the bar, pressed the button, and presto! the whole thing vanished.

"You actually think this man Doc Savage could be persuaded to interest himself?" he demanded.

"You put a thousand dollars in my hand, and an agreement to guarantee another ten thousand if Savage produces the antidote . . . You do that, and I'll produce Doc Savage for you."

He didn't know me well enough to pay me a thousand dollars, and said so. We argued about it. He was inclined to be as tight as the bark on a log. Finally, when he was ripe for a clincher, I told him I had consulted Doc Savage, and Savage would take the case. I didn't mention anything about Savage already being in town and on the case.

J. X. Smith began writing his personal check for one thousand dollars.

Watching him, something odd occurred to me. "You have brown hair, haven't you, Mr. Smith. And you're between forty and fifty years old."

His head jerked up. "That's obvious, isn't it?"

"And you probably had a haircut and shampoo yesterday, didn't you?"

He frowned. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I—what did you do, see me in the barber shop?"

It suddenly occurred to me that I had said too much. "As a matter of fact, I did—I was just trying to be Sherlock Holmes. Sorry."

He seemed satisfied with that, and I left waving his check to dry the ink.

FUTCH was waiting in the reception room. He looked sheepish, pulled at his shapeless hat, crossed and uncrossed his feet, and J. X. Smith's receptionist, a middle-aged woman with the figure of a Grable, was glaring at him.

"I thought you were going to wait downstairs, Futch."

"I got lonesome," Futch mumbled.

I let him think that would do until we got into the elevator, then demanded, "Why was the receptionist browning you off?"

He blinked a couple of times, and confessed, "Well—ah—I told her somebody wanted her in an office down the hall. I gave her the number of an office I had noticed, eleven . . . When she was gone I sort of cut in the intercom set. The talk-box on her desk, you know. I noticed she had the master station on her desk—you can switch in on any office and hear what's being said. She came back and I think she wondered how Smith's office got switched on."

"You eavesdropped on me!"

"I just thought I wouldn't be as lonesome if I heard your voice, Miss Ames."

"You're a liar, Futch!"

"Uh-huh," he said. "Maybe I am. A little one."

THERE was a bank in the building, and they gave me the cash for J. X. Smith's check. But first they telephoned Smith about it. I was afraid he had changed his mind by now, but he hadn't.

"Nice profit," Futch said casually. "But I understood this Doc Savage party didn't work for money."

"Who said he was going to get any?" I asked grimly. "And listen, you keep out of this! . . . On second thought, Futch, your nose seems a little long. I don't think I can stand them around when they're that long."

He looked frightened. "Gee whizz! I'm just—"

"Lonely. I know!"

I turned and walked away from him.

There was a uniformed policeman outside the bank, a policeman as big as a barn and with all his brass buttons shining, a policeman with a big melodious voice that drawled, "You're Miss Ames, aren't you? Well, we'd like to take you for a little ride."

When I got over the shock sufficiently to look around, there was no Futch. Futch had gone. He had disappeared. A magician could not have done better.

Futch, it struck me, also had brown hair. Whether he was also between forty and fifty years of age was difficult to say, but it was an item for thought.

Chapter IX

THE policeman was nice. He was a wonderful policeman. How wonderful he was didn't dawn on me until we walked, after riding a while in his squad car, into the building on Washington Street where the trucks rumbled and the man with the leather coat ran the elevator. Doc Savage said, "I got worried about you, Miss Ames, when I couldn't get in touch with you at your hotel. I think, for your own safety, that you'd best stay with me." I really appreciated what a fine cop he was then.

"I was transacting some business—cashing a check, as a matter of fact," I explained.

A heavy-set, white-haired man said, "You certainly had us worried, Miss Ames. Mr. Savage told us about the attempt on your life." He turned out to be a police detective named Carnahan, in charge of the investigation of Pulaski's demise.

I expected to get a going over from the police, but what I got was a fooling. The queen of all the land wouldn't have received more deference. I tried to decide why, and got about as far as a scientist trying to figure out what is gravity, until the reason came out of Detective Carnahan's mouth by chance—they credited me with getting Doc Savage on the case. That, it seemed, made my soul pure.

It had been gradually dawning on me—not too gradually, at that—that Doc Savage was going to be one of those wonders of a lifetime, a notable who is as good as he's talked up to be. The way the police deferred to him proved it. Previously it hadn't occurred to me that the police here had more than barely heard of him.

And Savage hadn't had me brought here because he was concerned about my health, not entirely. He had a customer for me.

"Miss Ames, this is Mr. Walter P. Earman," Doc Savage said.

Earman was a man who looked long, but wasn't, and looked that way because he was of tubular construction, like sausages linked together. He was nervous. He was also full of impulses, and the one he had now was to seize my hand and give it a shaking and then hold to it. His grip was dank and moist, as if a catfish had swallowed my hand. "Terrible, terrible, terrible!" he exclaimed. "An awful thing. Poor Pulaski. The poor, poor man."

Savage said, "Mr. Earman is a former business associate of Pulaski, and just arrived in town."

"No, no, no, not an associate exactly," Earman corrected hastily. "I employed poor Pulaski at one time. That was in Cleveland, six years ago. I was a contractor—chemical plant construction work—and Pulaski was on my staff. I hadn't seen him since I dissolved my business. But I had heard from him—letters—and I thought I would look him up while I was here. I came down here looking for a location, because I'm thinking of going into business again and—"

A young policeman came hurrying past us. Only he didn't get past without an incident. He stumbled—oh so naturally—and flopped his arms, swore, fell against Mr. Earman, knocked Earman's hat off, rammed his hand through Earman's hair. It was all as naturally done as a frog jumping off a lily pad.

"You clumsy ape!" Detective Carnahan said to the young policeman. The latter said, four or five times, how sorry he was. He went into the laboratory.

Walter P. Earman, believe it or not, had not let go my hand. I got it away from him, partly by main force.

Carnahan apologized again for the humpty-dumpty clumsiness of the young policeman, then began asking Earman questions about Pulaski six years ago. I listened to that. Pulaski had been a fine boy, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, the way Earman told it. It didn't seem reasonable that Carnahan would be satisfied with what he was getting, but he seemed to be.

Doc Savage drifted casually into the laboratory. . . . Presently I sauntered into the laboratory myself.

Savage was examining something under the microscope. A human hair. One of Walter P. Earman's hairs.

"Pretty slick," I said. "But shouldn't another policeman or two fall down to make it really look good?"

Savage smiled slightly. He had a nice smile. "Was it that bad?"

"Not if he's on the level. But he seems nervous. . . . If I was that nervous, and a cop happened to stumble just right to grab out some of my hair, I might wonder."

"That's true."

"But it was a waste of time, wasn't it? His hair is grey, not brown."

He answered that by removing the slide carefully from the microscope and handing it to the young policeman, saying, "Better have your laboratory do more than a cursory check on this. The definitely shaped pigment granules within the hair shaft show markedly darker, and there is evidence of diffuse penetration, probably by a bleaching agent or dye."

"Brown?" I gasped.

He nodded. "But farther than that, I wouldn't say."

ANOTHER officer, a fat one in plain clothes who had the air of never having pounded a beat, had been talking over a telephone in the back of the room. Now he hung up and approached.

"The F.B.I. has him under that name—Walter P. Earman," this officer said. He consulted some notes. "He operated the Four Companies Construction Company in Cleveland before the war. He was the principal stockholder and president. Two months after Pearl Harbor, his concern was awarded a contract to build an eighty-million-dollar ordnance plant in this state. A plant for manufacturing explosives. Thirty days later, his three partners approached the F.B.I. with the information that Earman was an alien, had sympathies with the enemy, and had belonged to subversive organizations. The ordnance plant contract was cancelled. The three partners, whose loyalty was unquestioned, then bid on it again and were awarded the contract. Earman was bankrupt. He was in a so-called relocation camp during the war, and since then has worked at odd jobs in Cleveland."

Doc Savage had listened to this with the proper amount of interest. He asked, "You get the names of his former partners?"

The officer said, "Well . . ." He looked at me doubtfully, and added to Savage, "There's some pretty important local names involved."

"Don't tell me," I said. "Let me guess. And let's be coy about it, too, and just say their initials are J. X. S., S. C. and J. L. Of course, if I *Smithed* my guess we can *Conover* the thing again if you'd *Like."*

The young cop thought I'd performed quite a feat, but he didn't think it was funny. He put out his jaw and said, "A lady genius. Maybe Carnahan didn't ask you enough questions."

Doc Savage asked hastily, "Was her guess correct?"

"Too correct."

"Earman's former associates were J. X. Smith. Sonny Conover and James Like?"

"That's right," said the young officer. He either didn't like me, or he did and thought I was Savage's property and was going out of his way to show disinterest.

"Those three," said Savage. "Went to the F.B.I. with the fact that Earman was an alien? . . . In effect, ruined Earman financially?"

"That's right again."

I said, "Don't look now, but isn't that a motive creeping out of the corner?"

Savage said, "It might be."

The young cop, looking at me, said, "We don't believe in lady mind-readers around here. So maybe you're something more in this than we thought."

Savage said, "Miss Ames has told me all she knows."

"I'm sorry," said the young policeman. He walked away.

"It might be a good idea," Savage told me dryly, "if you picked the right times to look beautiful and say nothing."

"I got it a little late," I said. My voice didn't shake, although it felt as if it should, along with my knees. It had just reoccurred to me that I had found Pulaski's body and hadn't said anything about it to the people that should have been told—the police—and why wasn't I in jail? "Thank heavens you seem to have quite an influence," I added.

"I'm not a genuine magician," he said. "I can't make you vanish—which may be what you'll wish to do if the police interest in you gets a bit stronger."

"I got that a little late, too," I confessed. "But I sure have it now. I'm not likely to forget it. It's tacked to my brain. And, incidentally, I'd like to tack another fact alongside it, if I could pick it up. Meaning—why are you doing me all these favors?"

"Maybe they aren't favors," Savage said.

That scared me so bad I dropped the whole thing. I didn't know why it scared me, but it did. I didn't know why he said that. But he had said it, and it was beginning to grow on me that Doc Savage was a party who used his words as carefully as the old-time buffalo hunters are said to have used their cartridges.

"That stuff with the hair sample, and the F.B.I.—you work fairly fast," I mumbled.

"Routine," he said.

And he went back into the reception room. Walter P. Earman and quite a crowd of police were still there. Savage conferred in a corner with Detective Carnahan, who gave his replies between spells of jaw-rubbing and head-scratching. Most of the policemen here now were the experts who had come to take prints, pictures, measurements and the multiplicity of other stuff the police do on a murder case—as an example, a man was taking finger-nail scrapings from the body and depositing them in a petri dish which could be covered. All the efficiency made me feel even more uneasy. Even the thousand dollars in my purse was not too much of a comfort.

Savage evidently made a deal with Carnahan to handle Walter P. Earman his way.

Rejoining me, Savage said, "We might as well leave now." Then he told Earman, "Miss Ames and I are leaving. Would you care for us to give you a lift?"

Earman accepted the way he would have taken a gold watch. Evidently he had been wondering how he was going to get out of there, and whether.

We rode down in the elevator. The man in the leather coat had a sandwich in one pocket, was eating one, and parts of a third were on the floor. He was having a big morning.

WE rode north in Savage's car. He drove. Walter P. Earman was so relieved that he had to talk; he was so loose with relief at getting away from the police that his tongue just had to flop. But what he talked about was the city. A wonderful city, he said. Fine, fine, fine. He would like it here, and he hoped he could find some sort of suitable business, or a desirable business connection. What he said meant nothing except that he was nervous, all up in the air. He didn't even think to ask to be let out.

Savage stopped the car in front of a building that would compare favorably with anything in Kansas City or St. Louis. He said, "Mr. Earman, in view of the fact that you once knew the deceased, I wonder if you would do me a favor?"

Earman clearly didn't want to do any favors, but he said he did.

"It won't take a moment," Savage said. "I'm going in to see a party. Would you go along, just to tell me whether you recognize this party as having been an acquaintance of Pulaski when you knew him?"

"Gladly," said Earman unconvincingly. "Anything I can do that might help catch poor Pulaski's murderer, I shall be eager to do."

A second look at the building told me who we were going to see. Doc Savage was being tricky. Walter P. Earman would know the party we were going to see.

"You may come along if you wish, Miss Ames," Doc Savage informed me.

"I wouldn't miss it," I said, and his warning frown was just a thing that might have been on his bronze face.

AND we went into the building, and I saw the elusive Futch. Saw him, and didn't.

Because maybe Futch was there, down the sidewalk a short distance, one of the crowd; I thought I saw him, and then thought I didn't. Futch, if it was Futch, was not making himself any more prominent than a lecherous thought in a parson's mind.

Waiting for the elevator, I whispered to Savage, "I think I just saw Futch. Outside. On the sidewalk. West."

Savage didn't say anything about Futch. He did say, "I think I'll pick up a newspaper." And he went over to the lobby newsstand, and a thick-necked man who was standing there, a man who had police detective on him like whitewash, nodded imperceptibly to something Savage told him, and turned and went outside.

They certainly had their lines out.

We went upstairs and into an office without Earman realizing where he was being taken. I was sure Earman didn't know, because he did not turn any special color. The office was a little larger than necessary to store two locomotives, and was all walnuts and chocolate leathers. It was meant to impress. It did. The receptionist was blonde, had a figure that made me a little self-conscious, a high-voltage personality, and she hadn't bought a dress that achieved that stunning plainness on any forty dollars a week.

I asked Earman if he was married, and he brightened up and got busy telling me he wasn't, and didn't hear who Savage asked the receptionist could we see.

A moment later, we were shown into Sonny Conover's office.

Walter P. Earman did his color-change now. White first, then it was shaded with blue. He hadn't expected to see Conover. Meeting one of his old partners, one of the men who had tagged him as a dangerous alien and then taken his business away from him, was to Earman about the same as stepping off the edge of a tall building.

Sonny Conover was surprised too. His mouth was open when Earman's fist filled it.

This Sonny Conover had wrists and arms and a body to go with them that would have been full equipment for a village smithy. He could have taken Earman the way a swatter takes a fly. Sonny Conover was a big man. In all ways. He didn't even need his name, or his firm's name, on his office door.

But he fell flat on his back with surprise. It couldn't have been the negligible effect of Earman's fist on his teeth.

Savage went to Earman. He took hold of Earman with the casual manner of a good forward taking the basketball, and Earman seemed to try hard to do something about it and succeeded in doing absolutely nothing. Savage sat Earman down in a chair on the far side of the room. He did not appear to sit Earman down hard. The bottom split out of the chair.

"You'd better stay there," Savage said.

Earman stayed there. He watched Savage's hands with a kind of fascinated horror.

Sonny Conover turned over on the floor, sat up, dabbed at his lips with a handkerchief, and examined the red stain he got with a kind of surprised interest, as if it was lipstick. He got to his feet, shuffled around his desk and sat down. He didn't act as if being hit by Earman meant anything at all, as if it was as nothing to something else that was on his mind.

He said, "You are Doc Savage?"

Savage admitted it.

Sonny Conover said, "I've heard of you—before I talked to J. X. Smith, I mean. I talked to Smith a couple of hours ago. I went to his doctor. I've got the same thing in me that Smith has. Poison. Radioactive. I'm going to die."

He certainly believed in getting down to business quick. One speech, and he had told the whole story. Also he had explained why he wasn't thinking much about being hit by Earman. His thoughts were on dying. He hadn't had the thoughts for more than an hour, probably, and they were a fresh-born monster to him.

"Any idea who gave you the stuff?" Savage asked.

Conover's eyes drifted toward Earman, back. "Nothing I could prove," he said.

"Anything at all that would help?"

"Nothing yet. I'm trying to think of something." He wasn't fooling there. He had been grinding his brains together like rocks, and the only grist he got was whatever it meant to a man like him to die. If this office layout was a sample, it would mean leaving a lot.

Savage said, "I take it you know Mr. Earman."

"Him? Oh, sure."

"In business with him, weren't you? You, and Smith, and a party named James Like?"

Earman called Conover a dirty name. Savage glanced at me, and winced. He didn't feel right about a lady hearing a bad word. I knew worse words. Savage got up and moved toward Earman, and Earman melted back in the chair like a tallow candle being approached by a blowtorch.

"He ruined me!" Earman wailed. "The three of them did. Lied about me. Stole my business."

In the most disinterested voice, as if discussing a cravat he had worn yesterday, Sonny Conover said, "You fool, if we hadn't taken the course we did, the F.B.I. would have found out anyway that you were an enemy alien. They would have cancelled the contracts and ruined us all. But all that has been explained to you."

"You framed me!" Earman yelled.

"Oh, nuts," said Conover. "The F.B.I. found plenty on you, and nine-tenths of it we hadn't known about."

"Lies!" Earman shouted. But Savage was going to Earman again, and Earman didn't like that. He went back in the chair himself as if wanting to disappear in the upholstery. He said, "They lied," again, but it wasn't at all convincing.

"Were you an alien?" Savage asked.

"No," Earman said weakly. And then he said, "Yes. . . . Yes, but they—yes. Yes, only my sympathies were with this great, fine country. . . ." Savage stood over him now. Earman made a swipe at his lips with a tongue as dry as a sagebrush stem. "I belonged to the Bund," he confessed.

Savage said, "Then your partners were justified in turning you in?"

"Well—"

"Justified as American citizens?"

Earman bent over. He put his face in his hands. "Yes," he said. In a moment, a puppy-like sound escaped between his fingers. "I'm afraid," he whimpered. "I don't know what is happening, and I'm afraid."

Sonny Conover didn't seem at all interested in this. He pretended to be interested in the top of his desk, but nothing was there. And then he looked at me. He wasn't interested in me, either, but he seemed called on to be something, and he asked, "May I inquire who you are?"

"Miss Ames," I said.

"But what part . . . ?"

"I've been sort of Doc Savage's advance agent in this thing," I said. And then, because I didn't want Savage to notice particularly the statement I'd just made, and give out the correct idea of my status, I added hurriedly, "There's another man who may possibly be involved in this. Mr. Conover. James Like. He, too, was a partner of Earman's six years ago. Is that right?"

"Jimmy was one of us, yes."

"Have you discussed this with him?"

For answer, Sonny Conover—the name Sonny certainly didn't fit him—snapped down the lever of an interoffice communicator, similar to the one which Futch had done his eavesdropping at J. X. Smith's office, and addressed his secretary. "Miss Spellman, have you gotten hold of Mr. Like yet?"

The young woman said she hadn't.

"Where have you tried?" Conover demanded.

The girl had a list of places and friends, most of the places being bars, and most of the friends women. "No one seems to have seen Mr. Like for a couple of days, Mr. Conover," the secretary reported.

Conover said, "Thank you, Miss Spellman," snapped up the lever—he wasn't fool enough to have the intercom master set on his secretary's desk, as Smith had been—and asked us, "That answer your question?"

"You are trying to get hold of James Like and can't locate him?" Savage asked.

"That's the general idea."

Earman made no more puppy sounds, but he still held his face in his hands as if it was made of thin glass.

Savage studied Conover thoughtfully. "Figured out any measures, or had any advice, on treating that poison in your body?" he asked.

Conover's control split a little. He had been doing well, but now there was a crack. Not much escaped. Just a shudder. One that would have mixed a malted milk.

"Good God!" he croaked. "Figure out something! You're crazy, man! The doctor tells me there's no known treatment for radiant poisoning. That it's a tissue destruction effect that doesn't show up until later. Months later."

"Perhaps in this case—"

Conover had another of the shudders, then told us the reason for it. But first, before he told us, he cursed his doctor, or J. X.

Smith's doctor. He called the doctor much worse than he had been called by Earman a few minutes ago, but Savage let it pass. Then Conover said, "That damned doctor. The blankety-blank morbid so-and-so showed me some pictures of the Hiroshima victims. Why in the hell he did that, I don't know. I was scared bad enough without that."

Savage said patiently, "It's possible there may be a ready available cure in your particular case." He turned to me and said, "You might repeat what Pulaski told you."

I had forgotten Pulaski's exact words. But I gave Conover the gist of it—that the radio-activated substance was carried in an insoluble salt, and that the salt itself could be eliminated from the body by the proper treatment, "If that's true," I said, "these cases aren't the same as ordinary radiant poisoning due to exposure—for instance, the sort of exposure they fear in working around an atomic pile—nor quite like the thing that happened to the victims in the pictures the doctor showed you. . . . That was the basis for the whole extortion scheme."

"I'll pay plenty to get out of this, if that will do it," Conover said bitterly. "I suppose the smart thing is to say I won't pay a damn cent, but what's the use of kidding."

He looked at Earman when he said that. Earman didn't take his face out of his hands.

Savage now stood. He said, "In case you think of anything that might help catch whoever gave you that stuff—and if you are contacted, and a payment demanded—get in touch with me."

Conover nodded. "It may take some nerve to do that if I'm told not to do it by whoever contacts me."

Savage didn't argue with him about it. "That will be up to you," he said.

Apparently the interview with Sonny Conover was over. We had learned quite a lot, accomplished nothing. Savage went over and took Earman's shoulder and raised Earman out of the chair. It looked as if he had picked up a coat. "We'll be going now, Mr. Earman," he said.

We left Sonny Conover braced back in his chair, staring fixedly at the ceiling and the end of life, and crossed the reception room that would hold two locomotives and some to spare, went along the hall again, rode down in an elevator that I now noticed would itself hold a small truck.

Futch wasn't around on the street, not noticeably. The solid-looking police detective who had left the cigar stand to look for Futch was standing at the curb trying to disguise himself by reading a newspaper. He didn't particularly look at us, but shook his head, whatever that meant. We got in Savage's car.

Earman got in beside Doc Savage and sat there a minute. Then Earman's breath went out in a long shrilly audible rush, as if an alligator had hissed.

"I'm afraid I've lied to you somewhat, Mr. Savage," Earman said.

That will probably be the understatement for today, I reflected.

Chapter X

DOC SAVAGE drove the car three blocks—no doubt to get away from the police detective's large ear—and slanted the machine into a clear space at the curb, stopped it, shut off the engine, and told Earman, "I was wondering when you would begin to see some advantage in the truth."

Earman didn't get it out at once. He wanted to, but he had been holding back his fears as if they were handfuls of rats, and they began getting loose. Most of them got as far as his throat and filled it.

"I didn't exactly lie," Earman gasped, after two or three minutes of tough going. "I—uh—said I came here from Cleveland to investigate a business proposition. That was right—substantially. But I was paid to come here. A man named Rilling—Theodore Rilling—the letter said he was a man—there were two letters in all—the first one was three weeks ago, but I told Mr. Lilsey that—"

Savage interposed, "You're getting a couple of carts before the horse. Suppose you take a deep breath and tell it the way it happened."

Earman gripped his knees with both hands and tried again. He said, "God, I'm afraid! I think I've been framed." And for another three minutes, he found ways of saying he was afraid and had been jobbed. Savage waited patiently, watching Earman with a rather clinical calculation, as if he thought Earman if left alone would get himself back on the track. This was right.

Earman had been working for a Mr. Lilsey who owned a radio shop in Cleveland.

Earman sold radios for Mr. Lilsey. A letter came for Earman from a Mr. Theodore Rilling. The letter said he, Mr. Rilling, had once been employed by Earman and still remembered the fine treatment Earman had given him and all his other employees. Mr. Rilling was grateful, the letter said. Gratitude, said the letter, had moved Mr. Rilling to offer Earman an executive job beginning at two hundred dollars a week in Mr. Rilling's organization, a firm which was expanding in the prefabricated housing field. That was the first letter. Earman accented by mail. Why not? For selling radios, he was averaging about thirty-five a week. The second letter from Rilling had contained eight hundred dollars—a month's advance—and instructions to come to this city and register at the Segrew Hotel, and take things easy until Mr. Rilling showed up. To be in no hurry. It might be a week. Two. But don't worry if Mr. Rilling didn't appear at once, because Rilling was a busy man and might be delayed making the territory.

By this time, Earman sounded like a barrel that had lost some of its staves.

"I've been here three days," he said. "Rilling hasn't shown up."

"Who is this Rilling and what does he look like?" Savage asked.

"God, that's what terrifies me," Earman cried. "I never remembered such a man. I don't know whether I even had a Rilling working for me. I can't recall the name."

"Then why did you come?"

"Eight hundred dollars," said Earman miserably.

"Have you these letters you mentioned from Rilling?"

"Oh, yes! Yes! Damn, I'm glad I have, too," Earman blurted.

He handed Doc Savage the letters, one at a time, and Savage read them, then passed them back to me. They were what Earman had said they were.

Earman was shaking now.

"Do you think I was decoyed here to serve as goat?" he cried. "Do you? God, I think I was! What am I going to do?"

If Savage had an answer to that, he kept it to himself. He started the engine again, twisted the car away from the curb, and drove north. Then he asked, "Miss Ames, do you know James Like's home address?"

"Why would I know that?"

He said pleasantly, "I merely thought you might have looked it up."

He was right. I had looked it up, last night. But the fact that he had decided I had was disturbing—while it was a small thing, nothing in itself, it did indicate that Savage was deep water and seeped into unexpected places. I was feeling pretty good up to then—our interview with Sonny Conover had gone just about the way I wanted it to go. But now I had the impression of being undermined, surrounded, and that Savage was doing it, or had already done it.

"It's on Kay Street, 116," I said quite thoughtfully. "That's an apartment district. The best one."

"We'll try there," Savage said.

THERE were lots of flashy roadsters on Kay Street. The baby carriages were all pushed by nurses who wore nice uniforms. One-sixteen was twelve stories of dignified dark brick and the entrance was Colonial white and the brass didn't have a spot on it. There was a doorman and a PBX operator and three uniformed elevator operators. There was an argument with the PBX operator, then with the manager, and it wasn't settled until the manager telephoned the police. That settled it quick.

We went up to the seventh floor, and the manager unlocked a door with a master key, and we went in to see if James Like was at home. He was at home.

James Like was another man between forty and fifty with brown hair. He had a suntanned look and wore sporty tweeds and a checked wool shirt. There was a cloth sport hat on the stand table beside him, and leaning against the stand table was one of those canes that men takeout to the race track with them, the kind that can be made into a seat-rest. James Like looked like a sporting man, and the apartment was a sporting man's apartment.

The ceiling had great stained beams and the plaster was finished rough, like waves on a small lake. On the walls were stuffed animal heads, a giraffe and an elephant and some others with big mule ears and long horns like toothpicks the names of which I didn't remember. There was a Kodiak bear from Alaska, stuffed whole. The bear was only a little bigger than a horse. The apartment was full of stuff like that, the

apartment of a big man who had liked to do big primitive things in a hard direct way, the sort of a man who had plenty of courage and would be a great help to everybody in a case as grim as this one was.

The only trouble was, he was dead. His hands were on the armrests of the chair, and he had died peacefully. If there is such a thing as dying peacefully.

"Heart," Savage said. "Probably he just thought he was feeling sleepy, and so he took a nap."

"But isn't a heart attack sort of a coincidence?" I asked.

"Rather," Savage said, and looked at me. There was speculation in his eyes, and a deep-seated curiosity, and perhaps other thoughts that I couldn't fathom, and wouldn't have liked if I could have. He said, "You're a very stable person, aren't you, Miss Ames? Death and terror and men lying themselves blue in the face all around you, and you're not too much affected."

"I'm affected, all right," I said. "With a little more of this encouragement, I think I can shake up a first-rate set of hysterics."

"Don't," he said. "It might not look well on you."

I had heard somewhere that he was afraid of women, that he didn't understand them; that, as a matter of fact, he had a phobia about the point, and never allowed himself to form any kind of attachments of that sort. Just because he couldn't figure a woman out. It would be nice if that wasn't the hooey I was beginning to think it was.

He didn't go farther into my psychology. Instead, he got a small case out of his pocket, and I knew what it was at once, and wasn't too surprised that he should be carrying around something of the sort. It didn't have one twentieth of the bulk of the radioactivity detector I'd rented and used on J. X. Smith, but it was probably as efficient.

He adjusted the gadget and it began clicking. It was quite audible. He stood on the far side of the room and we could hear it going in measured time, a little like a clock. He came toward the body of James Like. The clicking quickened and became a clatter, a buzz, a whine, a wail like the child ghost of all the banshees trying to get back into purgatory.

There was evidently enough radiant material in James Like's body to set up in the atom bomb business in a modest way.

"But I didn't know that stuff would stop a heart!" I said.

Savage shrugged. "None of us know too much about radiants. We haven't been around them long enough. . . . Or it may have been the carrying medium for the radiant, the metallic salt or whatever it is."

Walter P. Earman now set up a diversion. He didn't hiss this time, didn't make a puppy sound; what he did make was a wail like a cat on a high pole, after about the third day. That was all he did, make the sound.

"What is the matter with you now?" Doc Savage asked him.

Earman moaned noisily. "He's the one who reported me to the F.B.I."

"But I thought all three of your ex-partners—"

"Yes, yes," Earman said. "Like was the one who did it. I mean—he's the one who knew I was an alien. He found it out first, and sold the idea to the others."

"In other words," said Savage, "James Like is the one you hate the most?"

"Yes," Earman said. Then he changed his mind fast and said, "But you see, I don't hate any of them. That's all out of my heart."

"Then you have nothing against J. X. Smith, Sonny Conover and James Like?"

"Nothing. Nothing in my heart," Earman insisted.

Anyone could see how much he loved his three—now two—ex-partners. About as much as an elephant defies the law of gravity.

Savage said, "It's good to be pure of heart."

He had been accusing me of being too calm, but I had never seen a set of self-controls kept on ice better than he was keeping his. If that pure of heart wasn't sarcasm, it would do until there was better.

I gathered that Savage wasn't completely satisfied with progress. Which, all in all, was understandable.

I said, "About now would be a good time for you to pull a great feat, wouldn't it?"

"What do you mean?" He didn't change expression much, but he was annoyed.

"Why, Mr. Savage, I understood that you made quick packages out of things like this. Here you've been with us—how long is it—several hours? And all we've done is find bodies and men who have an excellent prospect of becoming bodies."

He didn't say anything. He went to the apartment door and gestured, meaning we—Earman, myself and the apartment house manager who was with us and as weak as last year's campaign promises—were to leave. He said, "We'll telephone the police from downstairs."

Riding down in the elevator, I said, "He got a much heavier dose than the other two, didn't he?"

Savage didn't say nothing.

I said, "That might make it easier to find out how it was given to him, and if we knew how, we might learn when and who."

He still didn't say anything.

So I said, "It looks like I've hurt someone's feelings."

"Not seriously," he said.

THE elevator, all gold and mirrors, arrived at the ground floor with a halt no more violent than a golden wedding kiss, and the doors slid apart. Savage stepped out, a little sidewise—by now I had noticed that he had taken to watching everything around him—and there was an old woman in a long coat waiting, and she crowded in, crowded past him without waiting for us to get out. The operator started to say, "Please let them off—" and got part of it out when there was about the same sound that a rug-beater makes on a rug. The elevator operator didn't fall down for a while; he only leaned foolishly into the corner, propped up by his stool and the fact that his coat front was hooked over the control lever.

The old woman was closing the elevator doors now. Working fast. But Savage was fast, too, and got a foot in the doors and kept them from sliding entirely shut. The old woman labored against the lever which threw the doors shut, and at the same time began shooting—using the gun that had slugged the operator—indiscriminately at the door, at Doc Savage's foot. It didn't take Savage long to get away from the door. I didn't think he was hit.

The gunshots in the elevator were louder than you would think any sound could be.

The old woman was a he, naturally. But I wasn't impressed by that so much—not that I wasn't impressed, however—as by the fact that, having closed the doors, he turned and showed me the face that had the asterisk of adhesive tape on it last night. Here was the party who had tried to spray me with lethal hydrocyanic.

"Hello, Walter," he said to Earman.

The man—there was no tape on his face now—jerked at the elevator operator, who fell away from the controls. The man threw the lever over, and the cage got going upward suddenly enough that my knees bent a little.

"Walter, you're looking fine," the man said dryly and bitterly to Earman. The latter's eyes, mouth and nostrils, and probably his pores, were as widely open as they could get and staying that way. He didn't reply.

The man—I hadn't the slightest doubt now that I was going to die presently, and he would be the cause of it—had time to give me a vague look. He probably made it vague deliberately, and it was supposed to mean something, perhaps to scare me. Nothing could have scared me any further. Anyway, he had only time to give me the studied look—and the elevator stopped. There was no foolishness about its halting—*chuck!* I was a few inches off the floor, and settled back.

I knew what had happened. Savage down on the lobby level had shut off the current somehow and done it fast.

The man, ex-tape-face, knew what had occurred also. "Walter," he said. "Walter, your big friend is trying to make us trouble."

Earman, who was flattened against the wall now, had no words. The other didn't seem to expect any. He didn't waste time jiggling the useless control. Instead, he came down hard against the door lever and broke the doors open, looked out.

"We get a break," he said, pleased with what he saw. "Fifth floor. That'll get us out on a roof next door."

The cage wasn't quite at the fifth floor, but it was near enough that, jumping up, clinging to the shaft-door, the man was able to reach the device that opened the floor-level doors with his fingertips. He did some fumbling and yanking, and presently had a way out.

"Get going, Walter," he said.

Earman looked at him in a pop-eyed way that might mean anything, and began, "But should I—"

"I would, Walter. Indeed I would, if I didn't want to be guest of honor at an electrocution."

So Earman climbed out. He made a hard grunting job of it, was helped by the other, who then followed him up and out, then turned and looked down at me. He was on hands and knees. “Miss Ames,” he said. “You did manage to make a lovely mess of this after all, didn’t you?” He had a gun in his hand now. No more foolishness with prussic acid.

No more foolishness at all. He was going to be practical and shoot me. He had concluded he would get out of the elevator before he did it, probably not wanting to get himself spattered. Still, he didn’t look like somebody who cared too much about being neat. But he did look practical. He should have done it this way last night, probably.

About that time, I got against the lever that closed the doors, the lever that was shaped like an elbow. I came up hard against it, and I was strong, stronger probably than any woman in the world ever was. I could have bent a horseshoe barehanded. The door began closing. He said something nasty. His gun spoke a loud noise and a yard of flame.

But the door was closing. He grabbed at it with his hand that wasn’t holding the gun. All that got him was his fingers pinched. The doors slid together and got his fingers and his gun barrel. Out of the gun barrel, more fire and sound. Then he took the gun barrel from the crack. But he had more trouble with his fingers. We fought over the fingers, me trying to pinch them off with the door, he saying things and trying to keep his fingers. He got them.

I didn’t hear him go away. I didn’t hear Walter P. Earman go away. I stood braced there, pulling at the handle, forcing the door to stay shut with all my strength, working at it until I ached all over. It probably wasn’t necessary, but I didn’t want that door ever to open.

It wasn’t so good. My knees began to go first; I was pushing up against the handle so hard that they wouldn’t take it. The sensible thing to do was quit pushing, but I couldn’t do that; it would have been easier to stop breathing permanently. It was the first time I knew my knees would fold both ways, but that was what they seemed to be doing. My legs are long and nice, and pretty soon they weren’t good for anything; they didn’t even have any feeling in them. I began to feel as if I had been swallowed by a tiger that was dead.

And just then Doc Savage’s voice called, “Miss Ames! Ames!” He was outside the door. “Ames! Are you all right?”

I said something. “Go away,” I think it was. “I’ve had enough.” The words were clearer than they should have been.

“Are they in there?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“Where did they go?”

“Out. One said something about a roof.”

“That shooting—”

“Just go away,” I said. “Just go away. And never come back.”

Savage said, “You stay in there.” And then he went away, but not because I had told him to.

I didn’t stay there. I opened the door, crawled out, made my way down the hall by using the walls for supports, and found the inside fire escape stairs. I started up—intending all the time to go down—and had climbed half a flight before I got that straightened out. Then I went down. Five and a half flights, five and a half miles. Nobody was in the lobby but the P.B.X. operator and she didn’t say a word, just stared with big glassy eyes. The air in the street tasted sweet, like wine. But I didn’t stay around to sample it.

Chapter XI

SONNY CONOVER’S secretary gave me a bit of special treatment—she went into Conover’s office herself to tell him I was there. It didn’t take her more than five seconds to come out again.

Conover was right behind her, crying, “You have news for me? You’ve found some way of helping me?”

He had aged noticeably since I had last seen him. That had been about an hour ago. But he had aged—five years, just about—and it led me to wonder how old he had been that morning, before he had a conversation with J. X. Smith on the telephone and learned that there was a new kind of poison around that killed slowly, taking several months to kill, and which just possibly might—and might not—be curable. If curable is the word for poison.

I strolled past him into his office, saying, “I don’t have what you want to hear,

probably, Mr. Conover. But I do have some news for you."

Confidence had better be my keynote now. Because I was going to take two thousand dollars out of him, put it with J. X. Smith's thousand, and be on the next airliner that left the city. He was in a mental state where he might be easy for more than two thousand, but I wasn't sure and didn't want to take a chance. I hoped there would be an airliner ready to leave just as I got to the airport.

"Mr. Savage overlooked a detail when we were here a short time ago," I said. "Possibly he overlooked it on purpose. He does, sometimes. And I have to go back and explain that it was overlooked, and it's rather embarrassing for me." My diffident smile was intended to be embarrassed. "I'm sure you'll understand."

He didn't understand, but he jerked his head up and down anyway, and went around and fell in the chair back of his desk.

"It's a matter of fee," I said.

"Fee!" he echoed foolishly.

"Two thousand retainer," I said. "And an agreement that you will pay an additional eight, making ten altogether, when and if Savage produces an antidote for the poison and you are pronounced fully recovered." It wouldn't hurt to put in some more, and I did so, saying, "The matter of your recovery, in case of dispute, shall be settled by a board of arbitrating physicians, you to pick one, Mr. Savage another, and they to agree on the third. However, I'm sure there'll never be any question."

"Ten thousand," he muttered. He had something to think about now. He was evidently a man who put a high value on ten thousand dollars.

The secretary was still standing in the room. He looked at her; there was nothing particular in the look, but she left hastily. Something mechanical began whirring and ticking near me, and scared me more than a little, until it proved to be nothing more deadly than a stock ticker spitting out the latest quotations on a tape.

"Two thousand only, just now," I said. "It isn't much."

"Isn't much!" he said bitterly. "The hell it isn't."

This might be only instinct talking. He was a man who had made a great deal of money, and he probably had the habit of striking a bargain. I hoped so, and waited. The waiting got tiresome, and so I said, "It's hard to put a price on life. James Like, for instance, would probably consider it pretty cheap right now. Or maybe not."

"Jimmy?" He snorted. "Listen, that guy never spent more than fifty dollars on anything but a rifle or a shotgun. Not on anything. Even his women were cheap."

"I doubt if it worries him now, though," I said.

Conover scowled. "Now—why are you using that word. Now! Why now! He wouldn't change in a day. Not Jimmy."

"It may have been yesterday, then."

"Huh?"

"He's dead. He was given a heavier dose than either you or Smith. I gather it would have finished him in a couple of weeks anyway, but his heart jumped the gun. We don't know too much about radiants—maybe they do have a direct effect on the heart. Anyway, he's dead."

That made it a sale. He sat there a while, not long, then he reached over, leaning down, and turned back the corner of the office rug. There was a little safe embedded in the floor under the rug—a wall safe, only it was flush-faced and in the floor instead of the wall. He gave the dials a few turns and opened it, and the office door opened again about the same time. It was his secretary.

"Doctor is here," the secretary said, and my face started getting red, for I thought she meant Doc Savage.

But this doctor was a crisp young man in his early thirties, who came in briskly with a satchel and raised his eyebrows at me rather pleasantly, noted my legs, and otherwise showed few signs of the old-fashioned practitioner. Conover knew him, they exchanged hand waves, and Conover forgot to introduce me, and the young physician took care of that formality himself. He was Doctor Cavanaugh, he said, radiologist.

Answering the questioning look thrown at him, Conover said, "Miss Ames is familiar with the situation."

"Oh, yes! Yes indeed," said Doctor Cavanaugh. "I realize who Miss Ames is now. She's the private investigator who unearthed all this affair." He gave me a big grin and said, "You must be a remarkable person. Mr. J. X. Smith told me of you—I made the examination on him which corroborated your earlier findings, Miss Ames." He made his

grin larger and added, “Mr. Smith gave me quite a different picture of you from reality.”

“Not favorable, eh?” I said.

“Well, I find it enchanting now that I’ve met you,” the doctor said. “Mr. Smith seems convinced you’re an unshakeable sort—as a matter of fact, I supposed from his description that you would have few feminine traits. I can see he was wrong.”

Sonny Conover, who clearly didn’t think I had any femininity either, muttered that they’d better get on with it. He had called Doctor Cavanaugh up to re-check the presence of the radiant in his body. Unconvinced, probably, that such a thing could really happen to him. When they had the habit of success the way Conover had it, sometimes they get to feeling ugly things just don’t come their way.

The doctor opened his case and brought out his gadget. It was similar to the one I had rented earlier, but a later model and more efficient. Curious as to how much he knew about what he was doing, I stood close and watched.

He fiddled with the controls, frowned, pulled the headset away from his ear and let it snap back, and made more adjustments. He stepped back from the contraption, then approached it again; he made some more tests for body capacity by moving his hand to and from the thing.

The young doctor finally looked at me, said, “Would you—uh—mind stepping back, Miss Ames?”

I stepped back. I wasn’t concerned. . . . Then there was an expression on the young doctor’s face. Just a loosening of his lips, a rounding of his eyes—but it took hold of every separate hair on my head and stood it on end.

“Good God!” he said.

“You—I’m not—”

He nodded. “Yes. You—unless you are carrying a radiant on your person? Are you?”

I wasn’t. I stood there and looked at nothing and died twice. There was nothing radioactive that I was carrying that would work his machine, nothing at all. But to be sure, I tossed my purse away and came close again, and the infernal machine squealed. I was poisoned, all right.

The young doctor said sympathetic things, nice things; I think he was genuinely shocked and sorry. Doctors can’t afford to be too concerned about their patients, but he was concerned. It was nice of him, probably. But I have no idea what he said, the tone he used, the words, or how he felt. My ears didn’t ring, but my cheeks got that foolish dull burning and the rest of my body was just something made of nothing and attached to my head.

Finally the young doctor, having said all he could say, put on his hat and took his little case and left. He probably said he would see me again.

Sonny Conover pocketed his hands and scowled at me. “Ten thousand dollars to find the treatment, and two thousand in advance!” He emphasized what he thought of it with a vulgar gesture; he spit on the floor. “I guess not. I guess you’ll find it for nothing, won’t you?”

My voice was gone, along with everything.

“I guess I’ll just wait until I see whether you *do* find a treatment, before I put out any two thousands,” he said.

I picked up my purse and left. I must have, because presently I was in the hall.

Conover laughed somewhere behind me. The sound was not real humor, just a yok-yok of a thing. Maybe a little mad.

THEN later I was sitting in a car parked at the curb in the street in front of the building. It was Futch’s car, and Futch was in it. Why Futch should be there didn’t give me any pause for thought at all, and I didn’t wonder why I was sitting there. Perhaps I had just crossed the sidewalk and gotten in, or Futch might have waved, or called, or even gotten out and taken my arm.

Futch said, “So you found it out? How? By accident?”

Suddenly there was a coat of ice all about me. “You said that more than once, didn’t you?”

“You don’t seem to be hearing too well,” he said, nodding. “You found out you had a radiant in your system, didn’t you? Nothing else would put quite that look on your face. Am I right?”

“But you already knew it?”

He nodded. He took a small case out of his coat pocket. It was one of the detectors, about like the one which Doc Savage had used, which was more compact than either mine or the one the young doctor had used.

"That's right," he said. "You had time to figure out who gave it to you?"

"Pulaski," I said. "Last night. He talked too much, and when he knew he had, he gave—"

"Oh, no," Futch said. "Pulaski was dead before this morning. And this morning you didn't have it. Not early this morning."

I looked at him. *"Who are you?"* I think I probably half screamed it.

"Just a guy who gets lonesome," he explained. "But I don't get lonesome because I'm entirely without brains. You and me, baby, have got this thing by the chin-whiskers. We got two facts in one hand and two facts in the other hand, and we add them together and what do we get? Four. Two and two make four. So we know who Pulaski sold his poison to, and the cure—if there is one. I think there is. I'm just guessing, but it's a pretty good guess, because there wouldn't be any profit to it if there wasn't a cure. And profit would be the only motive for—"

He didn't finish it. He had been too interested in saying it, so interested he had neglected something he needed to do to guarantee continued good health—keep his eyes open. Suddenly, but without any commotion to speak of, there was a thick tube of steel, the speaking end of a gun, resting on the edge of the window. A man leaned down behind it—ex-tape-face. He said, "You won't mind riding three in the front seat, I hope."

He didn't mean himself. The man he put in with us was a very sick-looking Sonny Conover, and then he got in the back seat.

"I'll tell you where to drive," he said. "And, oh yes, there's one other piece of information—you may all live through this. You could, you know. But getting reckless and shouting at policemen isn't the best way to do it."

Chapter XII

IT was a long drive out into the country that we took. No policeman stopped us. They must not have been watching the roads, or didn't know about the ones we took. Our guide, who spoke nothing but directions, and those very sparingly, certainly knew some backwoods lanes. He didn't object to our talking, until ten or so words had been said.

Sonny Conover said them. He said, "Just after you left, Miss Ames, he came in with a gun—"

"No, no," the man said. "No words."

So after a great deal of silence except for the grumbling and knocking the engine did, we were on a road that climbed over a series of ugly red clay hills made more ugly by starved trees, weeds and leprous-looking abandoned fields that were no more than two or three acres in area. Even these signs of a vanished decadent civilization were no more and we rooted along a still narrower trail, brush whacking the side of the car, and came to a cabin which seemed to be our destination. It dawned on me that we probably hadn't driven nearly as far as it had seemed.

"Hey, you," said Futch, who had driven. "This where we stop?"

Hey-you said it was. He also advised conservatism for our conduct. "You'd enjoy the drive back much more. Better stick around for it," he said.

The cabin was impractical. The location was impractical. Both had one thing that highly recommended them—the view. The cabin was situated on the crest of a great roundish hill, standing about where the cowlick would be if the eminence was a man's head, and overlooked a semi-mountainous valley and a lake of surprising size that was probably one of the government-built reservoirs for hydroelectric purposes which spotted this part of the state. Without referring to the scenery, Hey-you herded us into the cabin.

The matter of a name for Hey-you seemed to disturb Futch, who asked, "What do we call you? You got a handle?"

"Shaddup," the man said.

The cabin hadn't been lived in for several months, then had been opened up an hour or two ago, perhaps as long ago as last night, but not long enough back that it had lost the old-trunk smell that long-closed places, even cabins get. The odor of mice, spider webs, dust, stillness and faded memories.

The man stood three kitchen chairs in a row near a wall. Then he upset the chairs.

This was, really, the first time I had had a look at him under any but firecracker conditions. Not that the situation was so placid right now. But at least it was a chance to examine him without an aura of devil horns and spike tail. He wasn't big, he wasn't small. Not

thin, not fat. He was just nothing that was out of the ordinary, not handsome and not ugly enough to remember. He was somebody you would pass and not remember, a man with average features and average black hair and an average voice. Black hair. Black hair—that was something to think about. The killer of Pulaski had had brown hair—or maybe whoever had combed and washed in Pulaski's poor down-at-the-heels laboratory hadn't been the killer at all. It might have been anyone, come to think of it. Anyone who had brown hair and who'd gotten a haircut and shampoo yesterday. But looking average and not having brown hair didn't make this man seem a bit less like a skull-face with death a shadow in the eye sockets. A dramatic way to put it. But I felt dramatic that way, and apparently so did Futch and Sonny Conover. Sonny Conover particularly. He would pay almost anybody two thousand dollars cheerfully right now.

"Step in those chairs, one of you in each chair," said average-man. "Put your feet down between the rungs, and out through the bottom, and then stand there."

I wondered where Doc Savage was? Still chasing average-man and Walter P. Earman? I hoped so. Not that it seemed likely to do much good. And where, come to think of it, was Walter P. Earman?

We learned something about kitchen chairs. When you stand in them with both feet through the spaces in the rungs, any quick moving around is apt to be awkward.

Our host searched Futch. He seemed surprised with a gun he found—the gun seemed to be a trick automatic or machine-gun pistol of some sort; I had never seen one like it, and it was amazing that so much gun could have been so inconspicuous on Futch. The man was pleased with money he found on Futch, and his feelings about Futch's radioactive-substance-detector were less definite. I doubted if he knew what it was. Which seemed odd, if he was perpetrating this ultra-scientific poisoning.

Where was Walter P. Earman? We didn't find out just then. But J. X. Smith was in the next room. Average-man stepped through the door, and came back in no time at all dragging Smith.

Smith gaped at us. "How did you—"

"Shut-up!" said average-man.

"Listen here, Stone—"

"Shut up, I tell you!"

So average-man's name was Stone. It probably wasn't, but it would do, although it didn't fit him. He should have been named Smith, and Smith should have had another name, one that meant a man with lots of money who was very scared and perspiring like a glass of beer in August.

Smith was given a chair to stand in. Futch asked, "How did he get you here?"

But Futch didn't mean anything to J. X. Smith and he didn't answer. So I asked it, too: "How did—did he kidnap you the way he did us?"

"He brought me here at the point of a gun," Smith said.

"When?" Futch asked.

Smith just looked at Futch.

"When?" I asked.

"Not long ago. I've been tied up in there," Smith said.

Stone—to call him that; it was as good as anything—said, "Now you're all here, and you know how you got here. When I tell you why, you'll know everything. And the why is this: We want our dough and we want it damn quick."

"Who's *we?"* Futch asked.

Ignoring him, Stone continued: "You all know the deal by now, or should. . . . You've been poisoned. There's a cure. You can buy the cure off us, or die. Take your choice. That's putting it quick and fast, but that's the way it has turned out."

He looked us over unpleasantly before he continued.

"I don't mind telling you that this started out to be a leisurely thing, with you being given the poison and having plenty of time to think it over," Stone went on. "But it doesn't seem to have turned out that way. The young lady"—he gave me an un-nice look—"got too much information out of Pulaski last night, and Pulaski got to thinking about it, and thought he'd been quite a fool and had better tell us. He did tell us. We saw that indeed he had been a fool, and there was not much to do about it except knock him off. We did. . . . Now wait. Let's see. I'm not making a confession. I didn't kill him myself. I haven't killed anybody." He glanced at me again. "Although I tried a couple of times, on the young lady here. But I didn't kill anybody."

Futch said, "But you're saying Walter P. Earman did?"

"What?"

"Did Earman—"

"I should be so foolish," said Stone, "as to name any names. Here's what I say: I never heard of Walter P. Earman."

"Never saw him, either, I suppose," Futch said.

"That's right."

"It's clear now," Futch said.

Stone seemed pleased with the exchange, which didn't make any sense to speak of except that he had implied that Walter P. Earman was his boss without saying so.

"Let's wind it up," Stone said abruptly. "Doc Savage got mixed up in it, and we don't like him much. We want our dough. We want to go away. The leisure and the time-for-thinking-of-death is out. You pay. You get the cure. We leave. See how simple it is?"

J. X. Smith, his voice up with the birds, asked, "How much money do you want?"

"We want a half million," Stone said.

Nobody spoke.

"But we'll be reasonable and take a half million," Stone continued. "Does that sound funny? Then have a good laugh, because we—my boss, anyway—doesn't think so damn much of you, Smith, or you, Conover. . . . I'll tell you something I've noticed by observation—I don't think it would hurt my boss a bit to go off and let you two die. And the hell with your money."

Smith wailed, "How do we know the treatment will cure?"

Stone grinned sourly.

"You think you got us there? You haven't. We can give you some of the stuff, and you can take it, and by tomorrow morning you can see that the radiant has been partly eliminated from your bodies. But not entirely. There'll still be enough in you to kill you. And you'll need more medicine to get well."

Smith, the fool, said, "We could have the antidote analyzed—"

"Not," said Stone, "if I dose you with it here. Which is what I was going to do—providing you pay off."

Nobody spoke. Stone waited. The silence, without starting off that way, gradually became a matter of finality. The cards were on the table. The trigger had been pulled. Now it would be one way or it would be the other.

Smith, bubbling a little, finally said, "If—if we don't—what would—"

"Why," said Stone, "I'll give you a sample of what will happen if you don't."

Futch moved then. Futch must have been a mind-reader, or possessed extrasensory perception—he had something, anyway, that let him know Stone was going to shoot him, and know it ahead of everyone but Stone. Futch jumped. Not up, to get free of the entangling chair rungs; that would have been a waste of effort, and probably an impossibility.

What Futch did was spring upward and forward, take a kind of arching dive, hit the floor with his hands, go on over. It was a marvelous flip-flop; it was stupendous under the circumstances. Futch's feet, and the chair, crashed into Stone.

Stone, driven backward, had the worst sort of tragedy befall him. He lost his gun. He had been too confident with it, anyway. The weapon jumped out of his fingers, hit the floor, did some crow-hopping, and Stone pursued it.

I tried to go into action, and fell down. Ignominiously, awkwardly, when my life was utterly in danger, I sprawled over on the floor. For some unknown reason, I had forgotten all about standing in the chair.

But mine wasn't the only odd behavior. Futch was yelling something that didn't fit the occasion.

Futch was shouting: "Doc! Watch it, Doc! The fool was going to shoot me! We'll have to end it now!"

Futch's voice had changed a bit. It was quite educated, for one thing.

Stone had almost reached the gun he had dropped. All of this was happening in nothing flat. Futch nearly had his hands on the gun, and the hands had their fingers splayed until they were like eagle-claws. But Futch did more gymnastics with the chair, struck the gun and knocked it across the floor, twirling as it went, to a point near J. X. Smith.

J. X. Smith now fell forward, picked up the gun, aimed with the deliberation of a man examining the back of his own throat in a mirror, and shot Stone in the brain.

Sonny Conover solved his status in the proceedings neatly. He fainted.

Doc Savage came in through the door. He looked twice as big as he had before, and somehow discouraged with the way things had gone.

Stone finished his dying. He had not made much of a fuss about it.

This, I thought, ended the present phase.

Chapter XIII

IT ENDED it like the French getting licked ended the Second World War. Futch twisted the chair off his feet, swung the chair around his head once and let it fly at J. X. Smith. This thwarted temporarily, but not permanently, J. X. Smith's intention of shooting Doc Savage. Then, quite probably, he would have shot Futch, Conover and myself.

Smith ducked, and this caused him to stumble forward on all fours. I now noticed that he had one foot out of his own chair. He freed the other foot with alacrity, fired the gun, did not hit anyone, gained his feet, and headed for another door, the one through which he had been escorted by Stone a while back.

Savage was going for Smith. They had a two man race for the door with Smith leading, losing ground, but going to make the door.

J. X. Smith probably made his last serious mistake then. He paused to shoot Savage. The bullet—it was pretty apparent that Savage wore a bulletproof vest—only turned the big bronze man somewhat sidewise and made him a target half as wide. Smith went on into the other room. He tried to get the door closed, and didn't succeed, and Savage was in the room with him.

The sounds that came out of the room didn't last long, and seemed to please Futch, who lost no time going into the room himself.

"He's alive. . . . Why, thank heavens, he's perfectly all right," I heard Futch say.

He didn't mean Smith, but Walter P. Earman. Because he came out of the room in a few seconds, leading Earman and helping Earman get ropes off his hands. There was a gag, a huge one made of adhesive tape and rags, that covered the lower part of Earman's face, and Futch let Earman remove that himself.

"Will you find some water," Futch told me, "and pour it on Mr. Conover? If you will do so, Miss Ames, I imagine Conover can clear up a point."

He didn't sound like Futch. He sounded Harvard.

After I had found the water and was pouring it on Sonny Conover as directed, Savage came back into the room dragging J. X. Smith by the shoulders. Smith didn't look at all the same, wasn't worrying about it at the moment, but would later.

When Conover stopped sputtering, blowing water, and yelling questions, they had one question for him:

Did you and James Like have any idea recently that J. X. Smith might be short of money?

Conover said, "Yes, and Jimmy had some notion that Smith might have lifted some securities belonging to him and worked a forgery and sold them. He talked to me about it, but we didn't quite think Smith would do a thing like that."

Conover filled a minute or two with words telling how the three of them had enjoyed a prosperous wartime period when anybody who had a cost-plus contract with the government could make money, and how after the war J. X. Smith had not been as successful, although he hadn't retrenched nor cut down his expenses, and had seemed to think he could keep on as if the government hadn't shut off the spigot.

"You mean," Conover broke in on himself suddenly, "that J. X. and not Walter P. Earman was doing this thing to us?"

"That's right," Doc Savage said.

"But how did you—"

"Know it? We didn't, for sure—or we wouldn't have let it get this far along," Savage explained. "But Smith had brown hair, and the police dug up for me the fact that he'd had a haircut and shampoo this morning. And when Miss Ames showed up with the poison in her system, we were fairly certain. . . . You see, my associate, Mr. Ham Brooks, had been keeping very close tab on Miss Ames, and the only time she could have been given the poison, we thought, was when she had a drink with J. X. Smith at his office earlier in the day."

Conover nodded. "I guess he would, at that. He was the one who dug up that alien case against Earman in the beginning. We sometimes thought he dressed up the evidence against Earman somewhat."

Earman had seemed dazed by the whole thing, but now he came out of his trance sufficiently to yell, "I was framed! Smith framed me! I'm going to sue—"

"Oh nuts!" Conover told him bitterly. "You were an alien, all right. And belonged to the Bund to boot. So don't get funny."

If all this seemed to mean that everyone had forgotten the really important matter—was there a cure for the radiant poisoning we had in us—it was wrong. Because Conover suddenly began shouting about it, and wouldn't shut up when Savage told him to do so.

Futch finally went over and bellowed in Conover's face: "Of course there's a cure! A sure-fire one, too."

"How in the hell do you know—"

Futch levelled an arm at Smith. "He took some of the stuff himself so absolutely nobody would suspect him. . . . Do you think he would have done that if he didn't have a cure?"

That was the kind of logic that leads you to know an apple will fall if you let go of it in the air. It was absolutely irrefutable. There was a treatment for the radiant. Smith wouldn't have taken a chance of there not being.

The stuff, it developed, was on hand. In the next room we presently found a small canvas bag, one of the fifty-nine-cent ones with a zipper that now sells for two dollars eighty-nine, and in it was some stuff in a bottle, and some other substance in powder form in pill boxes, that seemed to have possibilities.

Doc Savage asked J. X. Smith, who was now conscious, if this was the antidote. Smith said sneeringly it wasn't.

"Then," Savage said calmly, "We'd better destroy it. It's probably some of the radiant poison material, and we don't want any of that around for someone else to be tempted."

Smith waited until he was convinced that Savage meant to destroy the stuff—Savage was actually dumping boxes of the powder into the stove before he began screaming not to do away with the chemicals. They were the antidote. All there was in existence, too.

Savage eyed the hot stove regretfully. "Too bad you didn't say so earlier," he remarked. "You let me burn so much of it that there may not be enough left to treat you, after we get Miss Ames and Conover out of danger."

That, presumably, was to soften up Smith for a confession. Because I had come across Savage a bit earlier outdoors. He was putting ordinary road dust in the boxes he'd chucked into the stove later.

"Futch," I asked thoughtfully, "what did he call you?"

"Who?"

"Doc Savage."

"Oh, you mean called me for being sucker enough to let Stone get a gun on me and bring me out here?" said Futch. "Well now, he hasn't gotten around to calling it yet. I imagine it'll be plenty."

"A while ago," I said, "he called you Ham Brooks. . . . Who is Ham Brooks?"

"That would be the name of a lawyer, one of Doc Savage's associates."

"You're Ham Brooks?"

"Yes."

"I see. He put you to watching me last night."

He grinned. "I didn't mind the work, after I got a look at you."

So I had been pretty smart. I was the one who was going to use Doc Savage to rake the chestnuts out of the fire, then I was going to grab the chestnuts and leave him with a foolish expression. Sure, I had been smart, the way a cat is when it sticks its head inside the milk bottle then discovers that the head that went in easy won't come out.

I remembered that I had left my purse in the car. I went and got it and took a look inside. The two thousand wasn't there, and it wasn't too much of a surprise. I had a pretty good idea that I wouldn't say anything about my vanished profit.

And I didn't, and a couple of weeks later I got an awfully nice letter from a cancer research fund, thanking me for the fine donation of two thousand dollars. So I didn't feel too foolish.

THE END