

ONCE OVER LIGHTLY
A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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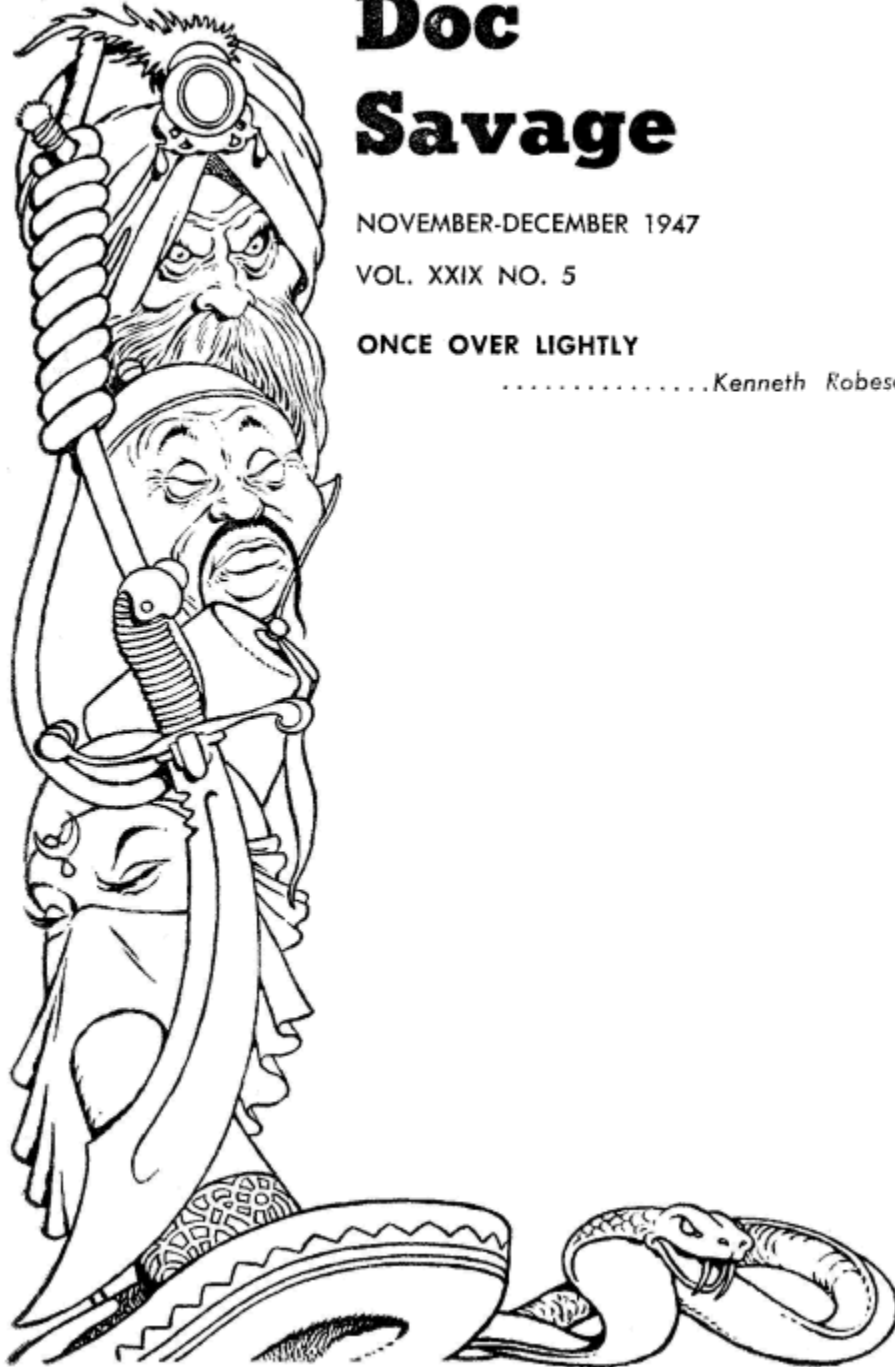
Doc Savage

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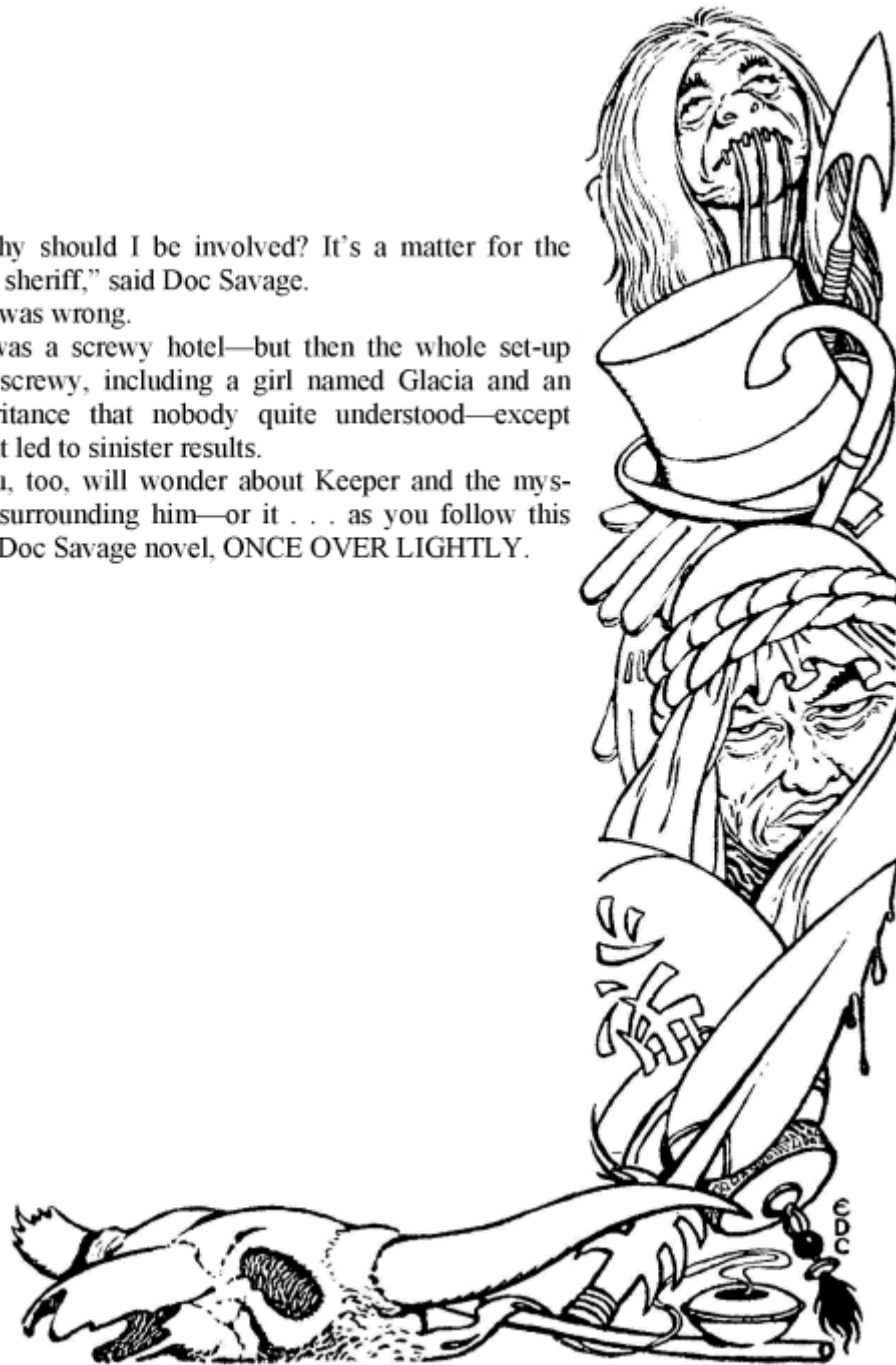


“Why should I be involved? It’s a matter for the local sheriff,” said Doc Savage.

He was wrong.

It was a screwy hotel—but then the whole set-up was screwy, including a girl named Glacia and an inheritance that nobody quite understood—except that it led to sinister results.

You, too, will wonder about Keeper and the mystery surrounding him—or it . . . as you follow this new Doc Savage novel, ONCE OVER LIGHTLY.







ONCE OVER LIGHTLY

by Kenneth Robeson

Chapter I

OUT of a clear sky came this telegram. It read, MISS MARY OLGA TRUNNELS: IF YOU ARE MAKING LESS THAN HUNDRED A WEEK QUIT YOUR JOB. I HAVE BETTER ONE FOR YOU. FINE SALARY, LOVELY SURROUNDINGS, WONDERFUL PEOPLE.

It was signed, GLACIA.

That didn't sound like Glacia should sound somehow, so I wired back. HAVE YOU TAKEN TO DRINK?

This should have drawn a sassy answer, but it didn't. It got this:

WIRING YOU TRANSPORTATION. JOB IS SUPERB. HONEY YOU MUST COME.—
GLACIA.

The telegrams were coming from a place named Sammy's Springs, California, and it did not seem to be on the map. A place called Sammy's Springs sounded as if it belonged in California, but it still wasn't on the map. I looked.

Being a conservative girl sometimes, and also still feeling that all this didn't sound quite like Glacia, I tried the telephone. The operators seemed to have no trouble finding Sammy's Springs.

"Glacia," I said. "What has gotten at you? Have you married a monster, or something?"

Glacia had a voice that went well with champagne and little silver bells, and she used it to tinkle pooh-pooings at me. Then, speaking rapidly, she told me in five different ways that it was a wonderful job out there, and asked me four different times to come out in a hurry.

"I'll rush down and wire you a plane ticket this instant," Glacia said.

"Why should *you* wire the ticket? Why not let the purveyor of this wonderful job do that. And by the way, who is my future employer?"

"Oh! You're coming! Fine! Wonderful! Oh, I'm so delighted!"

She kept saying this in various ways for a while, then said well this was costing me money, long-distance calls didn't come for nothing, and goodbye and she would meet the plane with bells on, then she hung up. She hadn't told me who the job was with, nor what it was.

I decided that it had been Glacia I was talking to, because it was Glacia's voice, but that was about all. Glacia hadn't demanded a cent of grease for getting me the job. Not like Glacia, that wasn't. She wasn't one to do a favor without getting her bite, and she was brazen and hard-headed enough to have it understood ahead of time that she would want a cut.

I lay awake for a while trying to figure it out, and about midnight, just before going to sleep, I began to wonder if Glacia hadn't sounded scared, really. Still, it would take quite a fright to jolt a dollar out of Glacia's mind.

The next morning, I went to work at the office, and waited for Mr. Tuffle to make a mistake. Mr. Tuffle was my department boss, and could be depended on for a mistake every day. He was the vice-president's son-in-law, which put him in a position where he could blame his subordinates for his stupidity. I began to think he was going to miss today just to spite me, but about two o'clock he came over to my desk roaring to know where the Glidden Account papers were and why in hell I hadn't turned them in on time. I had turned them in on schedule, and further than that, I knew just where he had misplaced them the afternoon he rushed off early for a game of golf. I went to his desk, dumped the drawer contents on the floor, grabbed out the Glidden Account papers, and raised hell myself. I carried the stuff into Mr. Roberts' office, raised more hell, and got fired.

That took care of the embarrassing matter of having to quit the job without the usual two-week notice. Incidentally, it did the office morale some good. They gave me a party that night.

Glacia had wired the airline reservation herself. I inquired about that, and she was the one who had sent the ticket.

The plane was one of those super-duper four-motored stratosphere jobs. It got me to Los Angeles in less than ten hours, and they were paging me over the public address system there. I was wanted at the res-

ervations counter, the loudspeaker was saying.

"Oh, yes," said the reservation clerk. "This gentleman is waiting for you."

The gentleman was a very tall Indian, with two feathers in his hair. He was having trouble with one of his feathers, which was cocked forward over his left eye. He straightened it, and looked at me.

"Ugh!" he said presently. "You the one, all right. You answer description." And then he asked, "You got heap strong stomach?"

"I don't know about that, Hiawatha. Why?"

He put a large copper thumb against his own chest. "Name is Coming Going," he said.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Going," I said. "Now why this interest in my stomach?"

"Got lightplane," said Mr. Coming Going. "Supposed to fly you like a bird to place named Sammy's Springs."

"Oh," I said. "You mean that you are a pilot who has been employed to furnish me transportation the rest of the way to my destination?"

He nodded. "That would be long-winded way of saying so," he admitted.

"Who hired you? Glacia?"

Coming Going lifted his eyes as if he were looking at an eagle, and whistled the wolf-call.

"That would be Glacia," I said. "All right, lets get my suitcases and be on our way."

"Ugh," he said, and we got my suitcase. He must have expected more in the way of baggage, because he seemed favorably impressed.

"Squaw with one suitcase!" he remarked wonderingly. "Wonders haven't ceased." Then he examined me again, with more interest than before, and said another, "Ugh!"

That "Ugh!" was the end of his conversation for the trip. I found out why he was interested in whether or not I had a strong stomach. The plane he had was a little two-place grasshopper affair, sixty-five horsepower, the pilot seated ahead of the passenger. A kite with an engine. We flew for three hours over desert and mountains and the thermals and downdrafts tossed us around like a leaf. My stomach stood it, although there were times when I wondered.

The only comment Mr. Going had on the durability of my midriff was another, "Ugh!" after we landed. It was slightly approving, however.

Glacia came running and screaming, "Mote! Darling! You did get here! How divine!"

Glacia was blonde, small, lively, and wonderful for gentlemen to look upon, with hair falling to her shoulder, widely innocent blue eyes, a tricky nose, and other features to nice specifications. She did not look as if she had a penny's worth of brains, although she actually had some—in an acquiring fashion.

I told her she was looking wonderful—she was—and then asked what about this job, and didn't get an answer. I got a lot of conversation, the gushing sort, but no specific data on the job.

Glacia had a car waiting. A roadster. Seen after dark, the color of the car wouldn't put your eyes out, but now the desert sun was shining on it, and it nearly blinded me.

"You must have taken some fellow for plenty, honey," I said.

Glacia had no answer to that, but plenty of other words, and we got in the roadster and drove through mesquite, cholla cactus, yucca cactus, barrel cactus—I didn't know one cactus from another, but Glacia gave a running comment on cacti as we drove—and after a few miles it became evident that we were approaching a rather odd sort of civilization.

"You'll love this place, dear," said Glacia.

We got closer.

"For God's sake!" I said.

"There!" said Glacia. "I told you. Quaint, isn't it?"

"You mean this is a hotel?"

"Yes."

"But what—"

"Oh, it isn't a bit like the ordinary hotel," Glacia explained. "That's probably what makes it *the* place to be seen. Lots of Hollywood people come here. Nothing around here is supposed to be quite commonplace."

I could see that it wasn't commonplace. The buildings were made of native stone and enormous logs in an utterly bizarre architectural plan, like one of those hairbrained plans that artists think up for the magazines when they are handed a story of a visit to Mars or some other planet to illustrate. The structures

hadn't been skimped on size, either, I discovered, when we drove into a tunnel-like portico that would have accommodated a locomotive.

There was a whispering sound, a big door closed quietly behind us, and we were greeted by a rush of cold conditioned air that seemed approximately zero. Outside the temperature must be past a hundred.

"You'll love it," Glacia said.

"You're not," I said, "implying that this is going to be my place of residence?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"There's a slight matter of dollars involved. Or don't they use them for legal tender around here?"

"Oh, that's taken care of," said Glacia.

"Is it? You don't say. I'd like to know—"

What I wanted to know about was this job, which was rather elusive it seemed to me, but three more Indians stalked out of the place and without a word captured my bag and disappeared inside with it. Two Indians carried the bag. The other walked behind them. They hadn't made a sound.

"Do they scalp anybody?" I asked.

"They're bellhops. Don't be silly," Glacia said.

"What do they charge you for a room around here?"

"They don't call it a room. You're a tribe member. That includes your lodging, food, recreation, everything."

"Don't beat around the bush, dear. I asked you the charge—"

"Nothing—for you. It's taken care of."

"Just the same, I'm not going to sign the register."

Glacia laughed, and I found out why. There wasn't any register, or if there was one, I never saw nor heard about it. This hotel, or resort, or whatever you would call it, was the screwiest spot imaginable.

My room was swell. Glacia managed to deposit me in it without telling me what the job was, and then skipped, saying, "You'll want to scrub up, honey. You look like you'd been pumped here through a pipe." Which was more like Glacia. She normally wasn't a very civil person, to people she could bulldoze well enough to call them her friends. I'm afraid I belonged to that category.

The room had a stuffed buffalo in it, but otherwise it was normal. The walls were pastels, blues mostly, and the furniture was what one would probably find in the forty-dollar-a-

day suite in the Waldorf. But the buffalo rather dominated the place.

I went to the window to see whether the scenery was in keeping. It wasn't. The scenery was all right, a swatch of authentic desert equipped with the varieties of cactus Glacia had named, sand dunes, mesquite, probably sidewinders and scorpions too. The mountains were not far away; they were remarkably dark mountains that tumbled and heaved up to a startlingly cyanite blue sky, and if there was a shred of vegetation, I failed to see it. The scenery was unique in a bleak, tooth-edging way. It didn't look at all genuine, but then that wasn't unusual in Southern California.

The scenery seemed to have an effect on me, though, or perhaps it was the hotel. Or wondering about this job. I showered and changed, and didn't feel any more confident, and tried to find a telephone to get in touch with Glacia. There didn't seem to be any room telephones. I went into the hall, and an Indian, presumably another bellhop, was passing, and I asked him, "What about room phones? Don't they have any here?"

"Ugh," he said. "Takeum buffalo by horn and talk to him." He walked off.

I yelled, "Listen, Pocahontas, what room is Miss Glacia Loring in?"

"Mink," he said, not looking back and his feathered headdress not missing a bob.

So I went looking for mink. The suites weren't numbered either, it seemed, but were designated drawings of different animals and birds on the door panels. The place was screwy enough that this touch seemed quite sane and practical.

Glacia had changed to a bathing suit. It was small, a dab here and there. Not enough to do her figure any harm.

"Angel," she cried at me. "I want you to meet Uncle Waldo!"

"Whose Uncle Waldo?"

"Mine."

"I didn't know you had one," I said. "Listen, you beautiful wench, if you're trying to pass some antiquated boy-friend off as—"

"Oh, don't be so stinking moral," she said.

"He's really your Uncle?"

"My mother's brother. God help her," Glacia said.

That should sort of prepare me for anything, I thought. I hadn't known Glacia's family too well when I was a kid growing up in

Kansas City, because we lived in the part of town where we had backyards and washings were hung there. The Loring had lived four blocks over, not a great distance, but quite a long way measured in the snobbery scale. Glacia Loring and I ended up attending the same high school, and we must have found something in common—as I recall, we were both going to become actresses at the time, and got together in school theatricals—and we saw quite a lot of each other.

Were we friends as kids? I don't know. I doubt it, but it would depend on what the definition for friendship was. We were together a lot. We fought over the same boys, and got stuffed at the same soda fountains. I suppose we sort of rubbed off on each other. I toning Glacia down a little, and she giving me more glisten. But I don't know about that either. I do know my mother didn't approve of Glacia's folks, and Glacia evidently had similar trouble at home, because she never took me there.

Not that Glacia's folks were snobs. They were screwballs. They just plain resented common sense, and they maintained that the conventional and the ordinary was slops for pigs. I think Glacia's mother and father were married in an airplane circling over Kansas City as a publicity stunt, and I knew that her grandfather on the maternal side had maintained that he, not Peary nor Cook, had been first to discover the North Pole, and that he had sued, or threatened to sue, both Admiral Peary and Cook for daring to lay claim to the Pole. This old fellow would be the sire of Glacia's Uncle Waldo, if there was really such an individual. And since Uncle Waldo was a sprig on such a goofer-tree, anything might be expected of him.

It might have been the cockeyed hotel, but I expected to find Uncle Waldo covered with monkeys. I wouldn't have been surprised, anyway.

What I met was a nice-looking old gentleman, not much taller than I am, an old gaffer made of oak and weather-cured hide. He wore tan flannel trousers with sandals, and a terrific checkered shirt. He was sitting in the bar which overlooked a swimming pool, and he was the only person in the place with a glass of milk in front of him. He looked me over.

"A seaworthy seeming craft," he remarked.

That didn't sound too much like a compliment, but I gathered it was. He had no more to say until he had given Glacia's scanty bathing costume a disapproving nose-wrinkling, and watched me order a drink. I ordered ginger ale with nothing in it, because my stomach was still in some doubts about what to do over the lightplane ride. Apparently, what I ordered met with approval, because Uncle Waldo got around to dropping an oracular opinion.

"She'll do," he said.

Glacia blew out her breath.

"Darling," she told me. "Now I can tell you about the job. It's working for me."

"For you!"

"Oh, don't look so shocked. What's so bad about that?"

"I don't know what's tough about it," I said. "But I'm sure something will develop."

Uncle Waldo chuckled. This sounded like a steam engine snorting once.

"The pay is good," Glacia said hastily. "You'll get fif—" She paused and examined my expression. "Eighty a week," she corrected.

"That's too much," I said. "Or is it?"

"Don't be so damned suspicious," Glacia said.

"So there's something I should be suspicious of?"

"Of course not!" She didn't sound convincing, although she tried hard enough.

"What is this job, baby?"

Glacia evidently had an answer all ready, but suddenly decided I wouldn't believe it, and got busy trying to think of another. While she was doing that, Uncle Waldo summarized the job.

"You hold niece's hand," Uncle Waldo said.

He meant Glacia, of course. By holding Glacia's hand, I hoped he didn't mean what I thought he meant. Anything that would make Glacia want her hand held probably wouldn't be easy on the nerves.

Chapter II

THE job had a snake in it somewhere. But two days passed and nothing happened and I was lulled into a condition that might be called somewhat puzzled peace of mind—the kind of an attitude where you don't think

you'll have to swim, but you take your bathing suit along just in case.

The two days had incidents enough in them, but they weren't significant incidents. Except, it later developed, one incident was going to lead to something. For I saw Doc Savage.

Glacia was with me at the time. We came into the lobby and there was an air of hush and bated breaths like the Second Coming.

"The redskins must have arisen," I said.

"It's always like this when he's passing through," said Glacia.

"What do you mean?"

"You'd think," said Glacia, "that if he wanted a vacation, he would go where no one knew him . . . Still, that place would be hard to find, I guess."

At this point the magnet for all the gaping interest appeared. He was a bronze man with flake gold eyes—that description sounds a good deal more casual than it should sound, probably. But that was all he meant to me at the time. A bronze man with flake gold eyes. I did notice that when he passed near another person or a piece of furniture to which his proportions could be compared, there was the rather odd illusion that he became a giant. Not quite seven feet tall, but almost. Otherwise he was just an athletic-looking bronze man with gold eyes. Striking. But nothing to fall over on your face about.

Not until he had passed through the lobby and was gone did it seem permissible to resume breathing.

"Well, well, quite an effect," I told Glacia. "Who might he be?"

"Don't you know?"

"Should I?"

Glacia looked at me as if she considered me thoroughly stupid. "You mean to tell me . . .?" She shook her head wonderingly.

"Has my education been neglected?"

"You evidently forgot to put on your brains this morning," Glacia said. She seemed genuinely disgusted. "That was Doc Savage."

"So?"

Glacia's eyes popped a trifle. "I honest-to-God believe you've never heard of him."

"Am I supposed to have?"

Glacia said she could cry out loud, said a couple of other things not complimentary, and added, "You must be ribbing me, dear."

"Just be nice for a change and tell me who he is?"

"Doc Savage, the Man of Bronze, the righter of wrongs and the nemesis of evildoers."

The way Glacia said it was odd, and I looked at her. She had put considerable feeling into it, not as if she was irked at my not knowing who this fellow was, but as if it was a personal matter with her—as if Savage himself was a personal matter.

"Oh, a detective," I said.

Glacia said, "Not so you would notice," without bothering to shake her head.

"G-man, then?"

But Glacia shook her head and said, "Skip it, baby." And the rest of the afternoon she was rather sober.

Later that evening, I found my redskin pilot, Mr. Coming Going, near the swimming pool. He wore a swim suit and two feathers, was having trouble with one of the feathers drooping over an eye, and was sitting with his legs cocked up on a table, watching female guests disporting in the pool.

"Ugh!" he said to me.

From that beginning, I worked the conversation around to Doc Savage, and asked for information about the star guest. I had touched a sympathetic chord, because Mr. Going's eye brightened. He said "Ugh!" a couple of times enthusiastically, changed to perfectly good Kansan City English, and told me that Doc Savage was a noted celebrity, a righter of wrongs and punisher of evildoers.

"I got that same line from my girl-friend-employer," I said. "But it sounds a little screwball."

"That Savage fellow is no screwball," said Coming Going. The glint in his eye was probably admiration—not for me, but for Savage. "What gave you such an idea?"

"That evildoer nemesis and wrong-righter stuff," I said.

"It's straight."

"Gadzooks. It sounds like strictly from the place where the bells hang."

"Well, that's what he does."

"You mean that's his profession?"

"Yep."

"How does he make it pay off?"

Coming Going shrugged. "I'm not his historian. Strikes me you should have heard of Savage. How did you miss it?" He gazed at me with more approval than he had evidenced hitherto. "You seem to be a pleas-

antly ignorant wench. The type I admire, incidentally."

I noticed that Mr. Coming Going had blue eyes. "Just how much Indian are you?" I asked.

He pretended to be alarmed lest we he overheard. "My pop once bummed a cigarette off Chief Rose Garden, but don't tell anybody on me."

"What tribe did Chief Rose Garden belong to?"

"Kickapoo, I guess. He was selling bottled Kickapoo Snake Oil off the tailgate of a wagon that stopped in our village for a while."

I left Mr. Coming Going without being certain whether I was being kidded.

That night, Glacia asked me to share her room. Somehow I did not seem at all surprised when she did so, which must mean that I had sensed something of the sort coming. Glacia was off-handedly high and mighty about it. "You'd better move in with me, and cut expenses," she said. And added, "I've already had your things brought to my suite."

It was all right. After all, she was paying me—she really was; I'd collected the first week's pay in advance—and she was entitled to give the orders.

About ten o'clock, Glacia said something else that seemed a bit odd. "I'm going to say good night to Uncle Waldo," she told me.

"If I'm not back in half an hour, will you check up?"

"What do you mean, check up?" I asked.

She said angrily, "Just see why I haven't returned! You ask too many questions!" She flounced out, slamming the door.

I went over to a chair and dropped into it, waiting for the clock minute-hand to move half an hour. And presently I noticed that I had instinctively or for some other occult reason selected a chair facing the door. My hands seemed to have a peculiar unrest of their own—they wanted to hold something, and the fingers were inclined to bite at whatever they gripped, the latter objects alternating between the chair armrests, my knees, a handkerchief and an Indian warclub that I chanced to pick off the table.

The warclub, it presently occurred to me, was out of place. It didn't belong in the room, which was otherwise a fine modern hotel room. The screwball atmosphere of the hotel didn't extend to any of their suites—

except for one little touch like a stuffed buffalo or something of that sort. And that reminded me—I looked around for the screwball item in Glacia's suite. But there didn't seem to be anything, because the warclub wasn't enough of a zany touch to qualify.

Presently I was worrying because there wasn't a stuffed buffalo or the equivalent in the place. The logical conclusion to be drawn from that was: I must be getting a loose shingle. The nutty desert resort, and the intangibility of my job, might be getting me.

Twenty minutes later, I decided I was scared. There was no other emotion that would quite account for my goose bumps. Frightened. Why? Well, Glacia wasn't back yet. But that didn't quite account for it. Something was giving me the feeling—Feeling indeed! It was more than an impression. It was utterly conviction—that there was considerable danger afoot. Where the notion came from, I hadn't the slightest idea.

In the next five minutes—Glacia had been gone twenty-five now—I formed a sound notion of what was making the roots of my hair feel funny. It was this: It didn't make sense, but it was this: Something was waiting around to happen, and it was something violent. I had arrived at the desert resort and found an air of suspense, of expectancy, concealed waiting, tension, fear, danger and God knows what more. How did I know I had found these things? Somebody would have to tell me.

I was in the right mood to jump seven feet straight up when the door began to open with sinister slowness. It had been twenty-nine minutes since Glacia left. The door to the hall opened a fractional inch at a time. I didn't jump straight up or straight down. I just turned to stone.

Nobody more dangerous than Glacia came in. She gave me a rather odd smile.

"It's fate. Why don't you go to bed?" she said.

"What for?" I asked. "I won't sleep."

But evidently I did sleep. I think I did, anyway, because there was a period when nightmares and nighthorses galloped through a zone of muted terror. And once I possibly sat up in bed and looked for Glacia and she was gone. I say possibly, because I'm not sure; I only know that I lay back—granting that I ever sat up in the first place—and worried for a long time through a ghastly series of dreams about what I should do about Gla-

cia being gone. Then finally I got the answer—I should get up and find her. Whereupon I awakened, unquestionably this time, and looked, and there was Glacia asleep where she should be on the other bed. I didn't go to sleep again that night. It wasn't worth the effort. I was scared of the dreams, too.

The sunlight was splattering in through the windows when Glacia arose, showered, wrapped a housecoat about herself and said, "I'll see how Uncle Waldo is feeling."

"Is he ill?"

"He wasn't quite himself last night," Glacia said vaguely, and left.

She came back with her face the color of bread dough that had been mixed two or three days ago.

She said, "Uncle Waldo is—is—" She gagged on whatever the rest was and arched her neck, all of her body rigid. She held that for a moment. Then she said, "His face—his brains are all over his face."

Then she went down silently on the floor. Fainted.

Chapter III

HE was a short, wide, furry man with one of the homeliest faces ever assembled, and he wouldn't have to be encountered in a very dark place to be mistaken for an ape.

"Oh, Yes," he said. "Another female admirer. We comb them out of the woodwork every morning. . . . Well, what do you want?"

"I wish to see Doc Savage," I said.

"That's not hard to arrange. Doc will be passing through the lobby at nine-fifteen. Just be on hand. I understand they're thinking of putting up grandstand seats."

"Aren't you funny?"

"Not very," he said. "Just sarcastic. Look, baby, do you think it's very lady-like to pursue—"

"I want to talk to Doc Savage."

"I know. But it will be harder to arrange. Still, some do. It happens. One did in his car yesterday, and assaulted him with a pair of scissors. It scared the hell out of me, but she only wanted to cut off the end of his necktie, which she did."

"Stop being a stuffy fool!" I said.

He grinned faintly, examined me with more interest, and whistled his approval bra-

zenly. "If I thought being sensible would get me anywhere with you—"

"There's a man dead," I said.

"Uh-huh. It happens every—" He paused, his head jutted forward and down and turned sidewise. "You levelling?"

"He's dead."

"Natural death?"

"I wouldn't say so."

"Where?"

"Here in the—I can't get used to calling this silly-ranch a hotel," I said. "His name was Loring. Waldo Loring."

He nodded and said, "Oh, that. Yes, I heard one of the guests had been killed in an accident."

Accident. That was right. That was what the hotel had said it was, which was about the only normal thing I had seen about the hostelry so far—hoping to make their guests think a murder hadn't been committed. So they had said it had been an accident.

"The accident," I said, "was an Indian warclub. It happened several times to his head. There was quite a change made."

He considered this, and there were some subtle changes in his manner, somewhat as if a racehorse had heard the rattle of fast hoofbeats.

"Now I want to talk to Doc Savage," I said.

"I'm Monk Mayfair. I'm Doc's right hand and catch-all. Won't I do?"

"Listen I've told you—"

"Oh, all right, but you'll just get tossed into the wastebasket, and I'm the latter. Doc is on a vacation out here." He paused and looked at me thoughtfully. "I guess you won't be satisfied until he tells you that himself, though."

He went away, leaving me in the living room of a suite which was clearly one of the larger ones. I looked around for a stuffed buffalo or the equivalent, and was peering behind things when Monk Mayfair reappeared and asked dryly. "You hunting something?"

"Stuffed bison," I said. "But I suppose you'll do for a substitute."

After he scratched his head without thinking of a reply, he escorted me into another room where Doc Savage was making a coffee table and room-service breakfast look small by sitting before them.

Monk said, "Doc, this is Miss—"

"Mote," I supplied. "Mary Olga Trunnels, formally."

"She hunts buffalo, but thinks I would do as a substitute," Monk added. "Mote, this is Doc Savage."

Doc Savage arose, gave me a surprisingly pleasant smile, and indicated a chair. But, probably lest I get any idea the visit was to be on a social plane, he said, "Monk tells me you have a matter of a dead man and a warclub."

"That sounds a little like hello and goodbye," I said. "Am I dismissed already?"

"Not at all. What gave you that idea?"

"I just got a long lecture on lady necktie snippers and wastebaskets from Mr. Mayfair. I gathered I was only to be permitted a bow, and that just to humor me."

Perhaps he thought that was entertaining. I couldn't tell. His bronze face was handsome, but already I could see that it only showed the emotions he wanted it to show. So the fact that his smile flashed again might mean nothing.

He said, "Mr. Mayfair is watchdog today. He prefers to watch pretty girls. I presume that was the gist of his lecture."

"That wasn't its gist," I said. "But it might have been the hidden meaning."

Monk Mayfair took a chair. He didn't seem disturbed.

Doc Savage said, "If you have the idea I don't care to listen to your troubles, perish the thought." He picked up the coffee percolator, asked me if I could use some, and I said I could.

"I'm Mary Olga Trunnels, and up until a few days ago I was employed by the Metro Detective Agency in New York City. It's a private investigations firm, doing all sorts of jobs that detective agencies do, but mostly insurance company work," I said. "Have you got time to listen to me begin the story that far back?"

"Start as far back as you wish," he said.

So I began still earlier, in Kansas City when Glacia Loring and I were brats together, and gave him a picture of the non-conforming background Glacia had. I carried the briefing down to a couple of years ago, when I had last seen Glacia—she had quit a modeling job in New York to come to Hollywood and be a movie star, without having achieved the latter, however—and skipped the intervening time. Then I told him the

events of the past few days, and they seemed rather flat, somehow, except for the death of Waldo Loring.

"I think Glacia really hired me as a protector," I said, "because I happened to be working for a detective agency, and she felt that sort of job qualified me."

"I gather Miss Loring hasn't flatly told you that?"

"No. Intuition and guesswork told me that. But I know a scared girl when I see one, and Glacia is scared."

"Of whom?"

"I don't know."

"Then I presume you don't know what is behind it?"

"Look, I haven't been Girl Friday around a private detective agency for better than three years without learning a little about human nature. Glacia is terrified. I'll stick by that. She is doubly scared now, but she had it before her Uncle Waldo was killed. I can't cite you case and example for proof, but I do know how it feels to sit on a volcano when it's getting ready to erupt, which is the way it has been the last couple of days."

"What about the deceased man, Waldo Loring?"

"Waiting. Secretive and waiting. I had the feeling he was a hunter in a jungle full of wild and dangerous game, a hunter standing behind a tree with his rifle cocked. Waiting to shoot, but at the same time not knowing what instant one of the wild animals might pounce on him. Last night one of them pounced."

Doc Savage tasted his coffee. "Let's leave your intuition a little more out of it," he suggested.

"No. Because I wouldn't have much left," I said. "And I know my intuition. I'll bank on it."

"Did Glacia discuss her Uncle Waldo with you?"

"Never . . . Of lately, nor before. I didn't know she had him."

"He wasn't around previously, then?"

"No. I got the idea they'd only met recently—that is, Glacia hadn't seen him for a number of years, and he had looked her up a few days ago at the most. Uncle Waldo had been a seafaring man, I think. He talked like a sailor. A real one, not a phony. I would guess him as not a navy man, but a commercial sailor, and an officer, perhaps the captain of a freighter."

"Is that entirely guesswork?"

"Deduction, my dear Watson. I know the difference between navy and commercial jargon. Uncle Waldo was commercial. You can spot a man used to commanding by his manner—at least I can. That meant Uncle Waldo was an officer on a ship. And officers on passenger liners develop polite manners. Ergo, he was a freighter captain."

"A freighter captain waiting for something to happen to him," Savage said dryly.

"Or waiting to make it happen to someone else, if he could get in first lick."

"You mentioned an Indian warclub in the room occupied by yourself and Miss Glacia Loring. Was that the instrument used on Uncle Waldo?"

"I don't know. But the warclub is gone."

"You also mentioned a nightmare last night during which you thought Glacia had left the bedroom."

"I'm not sure about that."

"I would mention it to the police anyway," Doc Savage said. "The warclub. The nightmare. Both items."

"I'm mentioning them to you," I said uneasily. "Isn't that enough?"

"I hardly think so."

I slapped the coffee cup down on the table. Some of the coffee sloshed out. I jumped up. "You mean you're not going to help me?"

"Help you?" His bronze face registered a great deal of astonishment, all for me. "Good Lord! This is a matter for the local sheriff. A murder. Why should I be involved? Particularly when I'm on vacation."

Why should I involve him? A question of great logic. I could look a long way and not find an answer. But he had sat there for fifteen minutes and let me recite my troubles, and so I told him just what I thought about it. My thoughts of the moment, worded just the way they came to me.

"My, my," said Monk Mayfair. "Language."

"So you two let me in here and big-shot me!" I said. "I don't know why I didn't expect that, but I didn't. All right—I've entertained you for a quarter-hour. Now you can go ahead and enjoy your day without further help from me."

Doc Savage did not say anything. He was examining the inside of this coffee cup, and his neck seemed a little deeper bronze.

Monk Mayfair got up hastily, said, "Mote, you seem to be a capable article, and I wouldn't want you to—"

"With that funny face," I yelled at him, "You don't really need all those wisecracks. You're hilarious enough without them!"

I left them. There was a chair in my way, and I kicked that. The door was too heavy to slam well, but I gave it a good try.

Chapter IV

THERE was a tall sunburned man wearing dungarees and a checkered shirt in front of the door of the suite in which Glacia's Uncle Waldo Loring had died.

"What body?" he said. He listened to me explain that I knew about the body because I was an employee of the dead man's niece. Then he said, "Oh. I see. Well, what do you want to know?"

He had a deputy sheriff's badge pinned to the pocket of his shirt. From the same pocket dangled the paper tab on the end of the string that was attached to his tobacco sack. He had been holding a stick of sealing wax over a blazing match. Now the wax got soft, he jammed it against a strip of paper he was sealing across the keyhole, and implanted the impression of a coin, which he took from his pocket, on the soft wax.

He added, "The deceased is still in there. The Sheriff called in a crime laboratory guy from Los Angeles. The expert can't get here until this afternoon. I'm sealing the suite meantime. What did you want? Anything out of the room? If so, you can't have it."

"I just wanted to know what arrangements had been made about the body," I said.

"No arrangements. The arrangements we hope to make is to put the pinch on somebody for murder. The Sheriff said that. The arranging is his job, and I'm glad it is. Me, I would be baffled."

He didn't sound much like a native of the desert, so he probably was. He said his name was Gilbert. He showed me the coin he was using to seal-mark the wax. It was an early California gold piece, worth about ten times face value as a collector's item, he said. It was his pocket piece. Then he said he would finish waxing the lock in a minute, then why shouldn't we have a drink?

I said no, thanks, and left.

Now I wasn't angry. I was getting a little scared. I had been put out with Doc Savage because he hadn't jumped to our aid, but that had evaporated. The anger had drained out of me, and the hole had filled up with something that could get a little worse and be terror.

I went to our room. Glacia was sitting in a chair, her purse open on her lap and both her hands in the purse.

"You feeling better, honey?" I asked.

She took her hands out of the purse. She was a trifle clumsy doing so, and a small blue .25-caliber automatic pistol slid out on her lap. She had been sitting there holding it. Gripping the gun and watching the door.

"I feel all right," she said.

She didn't look it—her gay, crisp, alert, predatory blondness was awry. She was like a china doll that someone had been carrying in his pocket.

"Who were you going to shoot?" I asked.

She jerked visibly. "Nobody. Don't be ridiculous." She jabbed the gun back into the purse, and threw words out. "Where have you been? Why did you run off and leave me?"

"Baby," I said, "you'd better not hold out on me any longer."

Her head came up, and her eyes tried to meet mine, but couldn't. "Don't be such a fool," she mumbled.

It was obvious that she wasn't going to open up. I didn't pick at her, because it would have done no good. I dropped in a chair and waited. Glacia got hold of herself with an effort—you could see her doing it, like a sparrow drinking water. She would look at me, take an intangible drink of what she probably supposed was my calmness, and her throat would tremble. But it trembled a little less after each look.

When she had herself nailed down again—proving she wasn't scared enough to lose her head, at least—she conducted mining operations in the purse. It wasn't a little blue lady-gun this time. It was an envelope. In the envelope was a key.

"Uncle Waldo gave me this to keep for him," she said, displaying the key. "It's the key to the hotel safe deposit box downstairs."

I didn't know that the zany hostelry supplied their guests with private boxes, but it did not seem a bad idea, and some hotels did it. After hesitating, Glacia got around to

explaining why she was showing me the key. "Will you go downstairs with me and we'll look in the box," she asked.

"Glacia," I said. "Why did you hire me in the first place?"

She looked hurt, and sounded a little like a kitten mewling for its milk as she said, "You're such a competent person, Mote. You—you're the kind of advisor I need. Stable. And not afraid."

"You want advice?"

"Yes."

"Then take the local law along when you go down to investigate Uncle Waldo's box."

Still like a kitten—with its tail stepped on—she yowled, "That's ridiculous! I'll do nothing of the sort! Why should I?"

"Murder is a tiger that doesn't care who it scratches," I said, probably stupidly. "You start searching a murdered man's safe-deposit box, and you're likely to get scratched plenty."

"It's mine, too. Some of my jewelry is in the box," Glacia said.

She didn't say it cunningly, so I supposed it was true. Anyway, she wasn't going to take a policeman along, and if I didn't go, she would eventually work up the courage to go by herself. So we went downstairs, me wondering if she really had any jewelry in the box, and how she would lie out of it if there wasn't.

They let her have the box without an argument, but she did have to sign a slip. I got a look at the slip—the box was in her name as well as Uncle Waldo's. That made it partly all right, or enough all right that they wouldn't jail us immediately. Let's hope.

Sure enough, Glacia dug out a piece of jewelry. An amulet studded with rhinestones and worth all of thirty cents, probably, on the Woolworth market. But I knew it was hers, because she had worn it as a high school kid.

Glacia became sentimental over the gaudy. "Uncle Waldo gave this to my mother," she said in a small voice. "He was very touched when he learned I had it."

Suddenly I decided that Waldo Loring *had* been her uncle. This decision came as a surprise to me. I'd been under the impression that I had given in to the notion that he was her uncle, but evidently I hadn't until now.

The other object in the metal box was an envelope, and I put a hand in the way of

Glacia's hand when she reached for it. "It's still not too late to start using your head," I said.

"Damn you, Mote," she said. And then she asked bitterly, "What would you suggest?" I thought she was going to take a swing at me, and I know she was considering it. "If it's another lecture about going to the police, you can just chew it up and swallow it again. I haven't done anything the police can arrest me for."

The police were out, I could see that. Glacia didn't want any part of them.

"The alternative," I said, "might be to break loose and tell old Mote all. I can't say I'm anxious to be the collection-plate for your troubles. But it might help."

"Help what? Your curiosity?"

She had something there. "Help me decide whether I'm heading for jail by associating with you," I said.

Glacia got angry again. She called me an impossible wench, and a damned fine travesty of a friend. It didn't mean too much the way she said it, I decided. She was putting on and taking off her emotions—rage, sentiment, fear, hesitation, decision—the nervous way a man about to be married probably tries different neckties.

"What went wrong with you?" she demanded. "Where did you go right after the body was found? You went somewhere, and something happened to jolt you. What was it?"

All right, you asked for it. I thought.

"I went to ask Doc Savage to investigate the mysterious murder of your Uncle Waldo," I said, and waited for that to sink in and take effect.

She fooled me. She didn't show surprise, or not much of it. She even seemed interested. And she was alert enough to guess what had happened.

"He turned you down," she said.

"That's right, and with trimmings," I agreed. "It wasn't just that I got turned down, either. It was being exposed to their curiosity and then tossed aside that burns me. They opened me like a box, looked in, didn't care for any, and pushed me out."

Glacia's lips were parted a little, as if she was all set to blow out a candle. Her way of showing breathless wonder. "What was he like?" she gasped.

"Eh?"

"Doc Savage . . . what was he like? Did you really get to talk with him, Mote? He must be a wonderful person.

"That big bronze chew!" I said. "I didn't see anything so wonderful about him."

Glacia began to look as if I was putting verbal toads in the conversation. "Your trouble is, you're not impressed by anything!" she snapped. "Doc Savage has a reputation. Some people are scared stiff when they as much as hear of him. Why by just appearing here, he—"

She bit it off.

She had almost said something, then hadn't. She had nearly said that Doc Savage, by appearing here at the odd hotel, had caused something. Then she had caught herself, and hadn't said what. That was what she'd done. It was as clear as the nose on an ant eater. But I did a delayed take on it—delayed about half an hour. At the moment, I didn't even notice that she'd almost said something. All my wheels weren't turning.

I said, "The great Doc Savage is a thin trickle as far as I'm concerned." We were still standing over the safe deposit box and I pointed at it. "That letter is addressed to you. Are you going to open it?"

Glacia opened the envelope that had been in Uncle Waldo's box, and writing on the one sheet of paper that was in it said:

My dear niece:

Feeling that death by violence may possibly come my way, I am penning these few words with the intention that they constitute my last will and testament.

I bequeath to you, Glacia Mae Loring, all my worldly property including Keeper. I ask you to take good care of Keeper. In case Keeper is not in your hands by the time you read this, I direct you to contact my attorney, C. V. McBride, Lathrop Bldg., Phone Cay 3-3101, Los Angeles, California, and have Keeper delivered to you.

(Signed) Waldo D. Loring.

(Witnessed) E. P. Cook.

(Witnessed) Royalton Dvorak.

This was dated two days previously.

"Is that a will?" Glacia asked blankly.

"It says so, and probably is," I told her.

"What is this inheritance of yours?"

"Keeper?" Glacia stared at me foolishly. "I don't know what Keeper is. I haven't any idea."

"Oh, all right," I said wearily.

She seemed to think she had been called a liar, and said sharply, "I really don't! It might be—oh, I don't know what. I haven't any idea."

"A profound mystery, eh?"

"Oh, stop acting as if I was pulling the legs off flies! What's got into you, anyway?"

I told her what was wrong. "I'm just getting a little tired of going in here and coming out there. With the same dumb look on my face."

She said that didn't make sense, and she didn't want to hear any more about it. She handed the strongbox—she kept the piece of jewelry and Waldo's letter—back to the hotel employee.

She was really angry with me. She didn't say where she was going. She just marched off, jamming the document in her purse, then carrying the purse clamped with both hands. I followed. Glacia was going back to our room, apparently, but she passed up the elevator and took the stairs. She did that to torment me, I imagined—I do not like stairsteps, because I go up and down them awkwardly and with a certain fear, having fallen twice and been injured while on a stairway. It isn't a phobia. I just avoid stairs whenever possible, and have done so since childhood. Following Glacia up them now, I wondered if she had chosen the steps deliberately to provoke me. It was not above her to do so.

On the other hand, Glacia, who was wiry and alert and objective, expressed her emotion with action. She was the kind of a person who walked off her troubles. Her answer, when someone else was feeling under the weather, was: "What you need is some exercise!" One of those people. She might be merely climbing the stairs because she was upset.

Possibly it wasn't important. Certainly there were bigger things to do my thinking about. There was murder, my boss hiding things from me, and there was Keeper.

"Race horse," I said.

"What?" Glacia asked.

"Keeper. Maybe Keeper is a race horse. We could get one of those turf annuals or magazines and look in it for a horse with that name."

Glacia didn't say anything.

It seemed to me there was quite a time when she didn't say anything. A long time. I got the idea it might be fifteen minutes or so.

"Well?" I said.

Glacia still didn't say anything.

"Well, could Keeper be a race horse?" I asked.

I didn't see Glacia, and she didn't answer. I looked around for her. I looked hard. All I could see was the ceiling.

"Well, could it?" I said. Then I said, "Well?" a couple more times. After that, I gave the word-making a rest.

Things were very odd. All that was up there was the ceiling. I seemed to be lying on my back on something, evidently a floor.

Chapter V

IT took some time to accept the fact that I was on the stair landing exactly where I had been when I was asking Glacia whether Keeper could be a race horse, maybe. One square look showed that it was the stair landing, but accepting the fact took somewhat longer. But that's where I was. Now, why was I lying down?

I worried about having laid down for a while, then got to my feet. Apparently I was as good as new.

"What did you say?" Glacia's voice asked.

I turned around. She was sitting on the steps where they continued on upward from the landing.

She said, "A race horse? I don't know. Could be." She also got to her feet. She touched her blonde hair absently with a hand. "What happened? Did you fall down?"

"I don't know," I said truthfully.

"I didn't hear you fall," she said. "But you were on the floor."

"Why didn't you pick me up?" I asked.

"But I had barely turned—I didn't even hear you. You were getting up when I saw you."

"Look, honey, I'm getting damned tired of your denials!" I said sharply.

"What denials?"

"You were sitting down when I woke up. What were you doing, sitting there waiting for me to pick myself up?"

She opened her mouth. Denial was there. Then—her lips remained parted—she looked stunned. Shocked.

"I was—sitting down, wasn't I?" She mumbled.

"Glacia!"

She shook her head vacantly. She had trouble with her words, taking them out one at a time as if they were frightened little animals.

"What did—I don't understand—Oh, God, what happened to us, Mote?"

Her frightened small words dived into the silence and were gone.

Jumping forward, I seized her purse and opened it and found the envelope from the strongbox was still there. Uncle Waldo's last will and testament was intact in the envelope. I slid it back into the envelope, dropped that into the purse, and snapped the thing shut.

"Why did you do that?" Glacia asked wildly.

"Because I think we were unconscious. But don't ask me how long or from what cause."

She didn't ask me. I don't think she believed me—for a while. But then she did, and she said again, "I was sitting down, wasn't I?"

We went to our suite, and I told her, "Take a drink. You'll feel better." But she just sat on the edge of a chair, her fingers biting at things, breathing inward and outward deeply.

Later she took up the telephone and put in a call for Los Angeles, for the attorney mentioned in Uncle Waldo's testament, an attorney named C. V. McBride. The call went through, and she told McBride who she was, and that Waldo Loring was dead.

Attorney McBride's voice was deep, but staccato. I couldn't understand his words, but I could hear what his voice sounded like. Like a large drum being thumped.

The lawyer's deep voice began pumping and Glacia only managed to insert words, fragments of sentences. Things like: "Yes, Mr. McBride, I'm staying . . . But Mr. McBride . . . What is . . . This morning . . . But . . . What is Keeper . . . Yes." A "No," and three more "Yesses" finished up the conversation, and Glacia moved the telephone around in the air vaguely until it found the cradle.

There was confusion in her eyes as she told me, "He's coming at once. He's bringing Keeper."

"He had quite a few words, didn't he?"

Glacia folded her hands and said, "Damn him! He out-talked me!" This seemed to be a belated conclusion that she had just reached, and was angry about.

"I take it he didn't tell you what Keeper is."

"That's right. He didn't."

"And you didn't tell him much either," I reminded her dryly. "You left out several things, murder being one of them."

Glacia didn't say anything.

I asked, "Are you going to keep secrets from everybody?"

"You're fired!" Glacia snapped.

I got up and left the room, and as I was closing the door, she called "Motel!" sharply. I didn't look back nor go back. I closed the door behind me, hurried down the hall, took the stairs, and stopped in front of Doc Savage's suite.

The furry and amiable Monk Mayfair opened the door at my knock.

"Ah, the beautiful buffalo hunter," he said.

I pushed past him saying, "You've already demonstrated how funny you can be, so could we skip further proof?"

"Hey, now! There's no call to be—"

"Tell the Great Man I'm here for a re-take," I said. "Or do I just walk in?"

"You sound determined," Monk Mayfair scratched his neck with a fingernail. "I guess you *are* determined. Okay. But let me announce you. I was supposed to keep you out of here."

He crossed to a door and opened it, hung his head through and said, "She got in anyway, Doc. She has a look in her eye." He kept his head in the door for a while, then sighed. He told me, "I guess I'm in the dog-house," and held the door wider open.

Doc Savage was wiping his fingers on a towel. He stood beside what could have been a portable chemical laboratory—the table was covered with the odd-shaped glass gadgets that chemists use—and there was an odor of acid fumes in the air.

"Good morning," Doc Savage said.

He was big. I suddenly got all involved with trying to accept just how big he was. It wasn't just his physical size that I was feeling now, although there was plenty of that, without it being out of proportion, and without his being in any sense a physical freak—except

that he could probably tie knots in horse-shoes.

It was the intangible size of him that was flooring me. Because he was all that they said he was, and more. The way they had looked at him in the lobby yesterday, the awed way the phony Indian named Coming Going had spoken of him. Glacia's idea that I was a dope for not having heard of him—those were the things that had told me what he was. He was all they indicated. He was probably more.

I said, "You're Clark Savage, Jr."

He seemed surprised. "Yes."

"I was pretty slow getting it," I told him. "For some reason or other, the name Doc Savage didn't mean what it should have. I guess I don't know how to meet a legend. Or don't know one when I meet it."

"I don't believe I understand—"

"I have heard of you the way little boys hear there's a pot of gold at the foot of rainbows," I explained. "But I'm not a little boy, nor even a little girl—I'm twenty-four years old. That's too old to believe in anything at the end of rainbows, except maybe rain. But a while ago, Glacia Loring and I went to sleep on a stairway. And then I knew."

He said, "Really?" The word meant two things—that he was suggesting I didn't know what I was talking about, and that he knew I wouldn't believe his suggesting.

"I've heard of that gas."

"Oh."

"I even remember where I heard about it," I said. "It was at one of those lectures the F.B.I. give law enforcement officials. The F.B.I. agent who lectured was named Grillquist, and he said that your anaesthetic gas had been considered for general police use, but that it wouldn't be used. It was too good. Crooks might get it, and use it on people, and the folks they used it on wouldn't know, because most of the time they wouldn't even know they had been gassed."

He didn't say anything. "This is quite interesting. It sounds fantastic."

"Not to me, now that I know you're a fantastic person . . . You did it to have a look at what Glacia had taken out of the strongbox downstairs, I suppose?"

"You take some mighty long jumps at conclusions."

"Just a hop, that time."

"Does your—ah—employer share your rather unusual hallucination?"

"Glacia? She hasn't said so. She hasn't said anything much, really. But I doubt it."

"I see."

"Glacia," I said, "is in the middle of some kind of a plot, and knows it."

"Indeed."

"She's scared stiff. But she's not giving up. She's going it alone, if necessary. She just fired me."

"You're probably fortunate."

"Lucky that she fired me, you mean? . . . No. No, because I think the silly little blonde is going to need help, and I'm going to stick by her."

He thought deeply. The thing he was thinking about was whether or not he should shake his head negatively. He shook it.

He said, "If I were you, I'd catch the one o'clock bus for Los Angeles."

"No, if you were me you wouldn't do anything of the sort. I've heard about you, remember. If you had a friend who was foolish enough to let greed get her into trouble, you'd stick."

He said nothing to that.

"She telephoned the attorney and he's bringing the inheritance," I said.

It was hard to tell whether he reacted to that. His flake gold eyes weren't composed. But they were not composed at any time—the gold in them seemed always in motion, alert, wary. Presently I found I was staring at his eyes and they were getting some sort of hypnotic spell on me, or I thought they were. I stopped staring.

"You're in this yourself," I said. "I think you were in it before I was."

"Indeed?"

"That's just an idea that came to me. Would you mind verifying it?"

"You should catch that bus," he said.

I stood up. "All right. Not all right about the bus—just all right, I see I'm not getting anywhere with you. I just thought I'd drop in and let you know I'd figured out that fainting stuff. . . . And to get another look at the great Doc Savage. The first look didn't count. You have to know what you're looking at, to appreciate scenery."

If he thought I meant that as flattery—and I didn't—he did not rise to it. "You've made the morning interesting," he said.

Maybe he was just being cagey. But on the chance that he was being smug, I pointed at the chemistry stuff on the table. "Notice you were doing an iodine vapor check for

latent fingerprints. How's it turning out? Find out who killed Waldo Loring?"

For the first time he showed a little emotion. He looked slightly pained. He crossed to the door, opened it, followed me through. Monk Mayfair was in the other room, and Savage told him, "Our visitor has an active imagination."

Monk Mayfair was looking at my legs. His lips phrased but he did not say aloud, that was not all I had. He got to his feet, assisted Doc Savage with the goodbyes—and I got a pretty good idea of what he would presently do, and was not surprised when he did it. He opened the door after I had left and was walking down the hall, and said, "Oh, by the way, Miss Mote."

I stopped. Monk came up. "I said, 'It's either Mote, or Miss Trunnels, but not Miss Mote, please. Don't tell me I forgot my handkerchief.'"

"You were probably very careful not to do that," he said amiably. "Look, I didn't follow you just to shine my eyes at you, although that would be interesting too. I've got a question. . . . Are you going to stick with this thing?"

"If you mean stick with my friend Glacia, that's what I plan."

"Okay. Then I got a wee bit of advice. Be careful of new friendships."

"Eh?"

"In new acquaintances can lie danger, whereas old friends are to be trusted, or at least you know which one of them is a stinker."

I looked at him for a moment. "How do you want that interpreted. You sound like a thirty-cent fortune teller."

He grinned. He was so utterly homely that there was something pleasant about his grinning. "It's just a dab of wisdom. Tee it up and take a mental swing at it if you have spare time."

"You mean there's going to be a tall dark man in my life?"

"Search me. The tall and dark ones I wouldn't worry so much about, though."

"How about short ones?"

"If they're short and wide, and run quite a lot to jaw, I'd walk as if I was on eggs."

"Would those that look like that have names?" I asked him.

"Names can be changed. Jaws can't."

"Thanks, pal," I said.

Glacia had a reception ready for me when I got back to our suite. She had the door locked, but the purple carpet of welcome was spread out inside. The door was merely locked because Glacia was scared stiff—she was so frightened that she didn't trust herself to recognize my voice, but made me repeat the name of the kid who had put the civet cat in the teacher's desk when we were going to school in Kansas City. The kid's name was Dan Burton, and I came near not being able to remember it. Then Glacia unlocked the door and threw her arms around me. She made my shoulder wet with tears, told me several different ways that she was glad to see me and then swore at me. "Damn you, Mote, why did you walk out like that? I thought you had deserted me."

"The way I heard it, I was fired."

"Don't be silly," Glacia said. "You just had me upset, is all."

"Upset? Honey, your nerves are vibrating like harp strings."

"Pshaw! I'm all right."

"Uh-huh. Do you know a short, fat man with a jaw?"

She gave me a thoroughly blank look. "What are you talking about?"

"I had another round with Doc Savage," I said. "This time I was properly respectful—or anyway I knew I was before the master. He didn't admit a thing, but he did put out a piece of advice—leave the lodge. But his court jester, that Monk Mayfair, followed me out in the hall and was a little more explicit. He said to beware of a short fat man with a jaw, who would be a new acquaintance."

"All men have jaws," Glacia said woodenly.

"I gather this one is special. . . . Glacia, why are you looking like that?"

The way she was looking was somewhat the same as when she had walked into our room that morning and told me how Waldo Loring was wearing his brains on his face. But she didn't faint this time. Instead, she dived for the telephone. She put in a call for the lawyer in Los Angeles.

Waiting for the phone call to go through, Glacia looked at the floor, the walls, at nothing, and used a voice that was two tones higher to ask me, "Is Doc Savage—did he come here to the lodge because of—of Uncle Waldo?"

"You do the guessing," I said.

When the Los Angeles connection was made, her voice went up another tone, and she demanded to speak to Lawyer McBride. The reply she got was a quick piece of news. She hung up.

"He's left. He's already on his way here."

"With Keeper?"

"I—suppose so."

"Why didn't you ask whoever you talked to what Keeper is?"

"I—" Her eyes went different places, helping her mind hunt for words. "I never thought of it," she said.

"Or you already know what Keeper is."

Glacia shook her head dumbly. "Mote, I really don't know."

She didn't get mad, so probably she didn't know. And after that she wouldn't get ten feet from me. But she wouldn't tell me of what she was afraid, or what she thought might happen. I felt sorry for her. I seemed to be the only person she trusted, and she was too frightened to trust me much.

I spent about an hour with my imagination, picturing different things that could happen when the lawyer got here, different things Keeper could be, and various ways of being a murder victim. By that time, I had scared myself into needing sunlight and fresh air badly, so I suggested a walk, and Glacia agreed. Rather, I said I was going for a walk and Glacia, following her new policy of staying within two jumps of me, reached for her own hat.

It didn't occur to me that things might not wait to happen until the lawyer got here.

Chapter VI

THE portly gentleman was about fifty, gray-haired, with a distinguished face that ran extraordinarily to jaw, and he managed to carry more air of dignity than one would have thought could be gotten away with by a ponderous old boy in a bathing suit.

The dubious redskin, Coming Going, brought him up and introduced him.

"Mr. Montgomery, ladies," said Coming Going. "Heap anxious meet you. Okay?"

We were sitting near the pool trying to look as if we were enjoying a couple of cold drinks, and as far as I was concerned, it wasn't okay. Mr. Montgomery had too much jaw for me to want any part of him.

"Goodbye," Coming Going said suddenly. He must have been watching my face.

"Mr. Going," I said, standing quickly. "Will you show me your tribal totem pole. The one you were talking about." I took his arm and hurried him into the thicket of different kinds of cactus, mostly as large as trees, which bordered the pool and made the lodge grounds a thorny jungle. When we were out of sight on the path, I stopped the puzzled redskin.

"Now," I asked, "where did you get him?"

"Ugh. What tribal totem pole?" he asked.

"Never mind that, Hiawatha. The fat man with the jaw—where did you get him?"

"Didn't. He got me."

"He asked you to introduce him to us? How come?"

"Service to guests." He was uncomfortable, and took off his heap-big-Indian manner and explained, "He asked me did I know you two girls, and I said yes before I thought, and he asked would I introduce him, and I thought of how hard good soft jobs are hard to find these days, and so I did. Did I do wrong?"

"Is fat jaw—Mr. Montgomery—a guest here at this dopey hotel?"

"Sure."

"How long has he been here?"

"Couple of weeks."

"By any chance did he arrive about the same time as my girl friend?"

Coming Going shook his head and the feather that was always getting out of order dropped over one eye. "Before her. He got here about two days after her uncle arrived, the way I recall it."

"What else do you know about Mr. Montgomery?"

"He's a mining man—he says. His daughter and a gentleman secretary are with him. Daughter's name is Colleen. Gentleman secretary's name is Roy."

"How come I haven't noticed them, or at least Mr. Montgomery—around?"

He was fiddling with the feather. "They have been staying pretty close to their rooms."

"Do you know anything else I should know, Tecumseh?"

He grinned and shook his head. "It's my turn to ask a question. I hear your friend's

uncle met with an accident. This odd curiosity of yours got anything to do with that?"

"Accident—is that what they call it around here when a guest gets his brains bashed in?"

That shocked him. The feather fell over his eye. His jaw sagged. Everything else had gone out of him to make room for the surprise, and genuine surprise it was.

I walked off and left him. I thought I had him measured now. A nice young boy, no more an Indian than I was, who liked the playacting that went with his job. Probably he was a thwarted actor from Hollywood. Murder had floored him, and he was no doubt thinking that I was a hard case. He wasn't fooling with his feather, the last I saw of him.

I went back to the table near the swimming pool. Glacia was worried about me. She jumped to her feet when she saw me, and then sat down again, rather weakly with relief.

"You shouldn't run off like that, Mote," she wailed.

"Relax," I said. "The redmen aren't taking scalps today."

Mr. Montgomery sat at the table. He leaned down, brought Glacia's purse into view, and placed it on the table—conveying the idea, he no doubt hoped, that she had dropped the purse and he had picked it up.

"I don't believe the boy is an Indian at all," he said cheerfully. "Most of them around here aren't. Or am I disillusioning you two young ladies? I'm very sorry."

"Sorry enough to let us stick you for a drink?" I asked, pulling out my chair.

He said he was that sorry, and began waving at a waiter.

He was a well-cared-for old man, all right. He might not be as old as the white hair and the dignity made him seem. He might even be as young as fifty. He was certainly browned by the sun; it had taken a lot of sun to brown him that much; he must have spent years sitting around beaches and swimming pools in a bathing suit with a good drink in his hand. The fingers of his right hand were permanently curled from holding good drinks.

Finally my wondering settled down on one point. What had he taken from Glacia's purse, and where had he hidden it? His tight bathing trunks didn't offer much space for hiding things.

Mr. Montgomery got the attention of a waiter, and began ordering for us. He didn't

ask what we wanted. He just said he had something special, and told the waiter what it was, and how the bartender should make it. That took some time.

A young man came around the corner of the hotel. He stood looking at us. He was a rather slender young man with a round baby-like face and soft brown eyes. He was wearing a white linen suit, white shoes, white shirt and a startlingly yellow necktie.

The newcomer did not approach, but gazed at us with puppy-like friendliness. He wanted to approach.

Mr. Montgomery stopped in the middle of telling the waiter how the bartender should pour the creme de menthe over a spoon just so. Presently he smiled rather strangely. He smiled at the young man. The smile would have frozen grain alcohol.

"Yes, sir?" said the waiter hopefully.

Mr. Montgomery gave him the rest of the recipe. He probably slighted the rest of it. Then he arose and went to another table and picked up a chased silver cigar case, a lighter and a heavy knobbed walking stick. He came back with these.

The young man raised his eyebrows. There was a question, and a prayer, in the gesture.

"You'll love the drink I have ordered," said Mr. Montgomery to us. He spoke vaguely. "It's a specialty I picked up—ah—in Cairo."

"Cairo, Illinois?" I asked.

"Eh?"

The young man had taken a tentative step forward. Mr. Montgomery renewed the ice in his smile. He lifted the walking stick and stroked it with his hand.

The young man in white stopped. There was a butterfly almost as yellow as his necktie fooling around a cactus that grew out of an urn nearby.

"Cairo, Egypt, then," I said.

The young man raised and lowered his eyebrows. He turned and went away. Just before he disappeared, he held both hands out at his sides, the palms up, in a gesture of resignation.

"Was it Cairo, Egypt?" I asked.

Mr. Montgomery closed his eyes tightly, and they remained shut for a moment. Then he picked up his cigar case and looked in it and it was empty.

"Will you excuse me a moment, girls," Mr. Montgomery said. "I must get some ci-

gars. My special brand. Will you forgive my absence briefly."

He tucked the walking stick under his arm and went away. His jaw did not seem so prominent, oddly enough.

"Glacia," I said. "Let's see what he got out of your purse."

She looked at me, eyes and mouth three round circles in a round face. "What?" she gasped. Then she snatched at her purse, wrenched it open, and dug into the contents. "Oh my God! It's gone!"

"What is gone?"

"The envelope—Uncle Waldo's will." Her face flamed with rage. "That old man—why, damn him! He won't get away with something like that!"

Glacia sprang up and raced off in the direction Mr. Montgomery had taken. She was angry enough to have forgotten that she considered me a bodyguard.

I didn't follow her. I sat there and chewed over a theory I had. Mr. Montgomery's jaw had seemed prominent as anything when he first arrived at the table, and hadn't later on. There was a reason for that. The jaw, when he first came, had been in motion. Mr. Montgomery had been chewing gum then.

It was a good process of reasoning. Sherlock Holmes and J. Edgar Hoover never had a better basis for deduction. I was proud of it.

I moved to the chair Mr. Montgomery had occupied, put my hands under the table—and didn't feel so puffed up. But I wasn't going to let any fat man with a jaw make a fool out of me. I shed dignity, got down on hands and knees, and looked at the underside of the table as if I was reading hieroglyphics.

It was all right. He had just been cunning, and used his chewing gum to stick the envelope to the bottom of the table in front of my chair. He was cute, all right.

A cute fat man. I looked at the outside of the envelope to make sure it was Uncle Waldo's testament and at the inside to see whether the works were still there. They were. I scraped off Mr. Montgomery's chicle and tucked the thing inside my frock where no one with good manners would find it.

I was getting to my feet, and hurried it up considerably when Glacia began screaming. She was doing her yelling off to the left somewhere in the jungle of cactus and desert

plants. I and at least twenty other people ran in the direction of Glacia's shrieking, but a dozen others had arrived ahead of us.

Glacia, suddenly without noise, was pointing at the base of a cactus thicket. Her whole arm shook somewhat.

It was the young man in white. He lay on both shoulders and one hip and one leg was extended, the other leg drawn up and bent at the knee in the position for riding a bicycle. His white suit contrasted, alabaster to absinthe, with the palmetto dagger-like leaves.

His tanned face now had a mongrel coloring; it was marble that had received one coat of inadequate walnut stain. The blood that had left his nostrils was not much, but it had run down—his head was cocked up by the rocks on which it rested—and made a startling woodpecker's head blotch on the gay yellow of his necktie.

I looked hard for death in his face. I couldn't tell. His facial muscles were loose, but there was still some of the puppy-dog friendliness with which he had gazed at Glacia, myself and Mr. Montgomery a bit earlier.

Somebody got down on their knees beside him and began saying, "Hello, there!" in a shrilly voice, as if they were talking to a baby.

If he doesn't answer, I thought, I'm going to exercise feminine rights and scream like hell.

Just in case he didn't answer, I got away from there. It wasn't easy. I didn't know who he was, who had bopped him, why, how. . . . My bump of curiosity about him had grown into moose antlers. But I got away from there. I was worried about Glacia.

A quick pass through the cactus jungle in the vicinity got me nothing but lack of breath. Glacia was not around. Ice began to collect around the roots of my hair.

I went into the hotel, found the fellow who had given Glacia the strong-box to open, and handed him the envelope that Mr. Montgomery had temporarily lifted. "Can you put this back in Miss Loring's box?" I asked.

He shook his head and said, "Not without her key, or a meeting of the board of directors, practically. You see, there are only two keys to each box. The guest gets one, and the other is in escrow as it were—you have to convince about six people you're entitled to use it."

"But I want you to keep this envelope—"

"Why not a box for yourself. It's included in the service. No charge."

The simple solution left me speechless. I watched him arrange the lock box, signed something, put the key in my purse and said, "Will you have Miss Loring paged?"

"Certainly."

In the course of the next five minutes, I wore the upholstery off a lobby chair with my squirming. Glacia wasn't answering to the paging.

I tried the clerk again. "Can you give me Mr. Montgomery's suite number?"

We were old friends now. He gave me the information without an argument. Mr. Montgomery was in the second floor corner suite, northeast exposure.

The second floor hall was cool, almost cold after the desert heat of noontime beside the pool. The air was redolent of sage. They probably had a machine that manufactured the odor and squirted it into the conditioning system.

I listened at what I had been told was Mr. Montgomery's door for a long time, for such a long time that I grew weak as from starvation. Nothing in the rooms on the other side of the door made any more noise than a fly scrubbing his eyes, so I tried the knob. It turned. I pushed on the door. It opened. I gave it a little shove, and it swung wide and hit the wall with a little bump. Later I went in.

It was a wonderful room. Plenty of room for a couple of Russian ambassadors, with huge solid plate glass windows that picture-framed the mountains, and doors to the right and doors to the left. The plurality of doors was bothersome—my mind by now wasn't in a state where it could make a choice readily, even a choice between two doors. Right or left, which should it be? Finally I just started walking. Left, it happened.

That door also opened readily—into a bathroom. The color motif here was pastel blue and green against ivory, and the place was neatly departmentalized. Each department was enclosed in a little glass booth of its own, booths of etched glass and chrome. I tried to imagine how a stuffed buffalo would look in here.

"Good intentions are sometimes like curiosity," said a voice. "Except that I don't know that good intentions kill cats." It was Mr. Montgomery's voice.

I turned around. Mr. Montgomery was backing out of a door across the large room, and he had spoken to someone in the bedroom beyond the door.

He took his time turning to face me, and by then I wasn't there. I was in the shower stall, with the etched glass door closed.

Chapter VII

MR. MONTGOMERY moved over to the table, picked up his walking stick and examined it; with a slight grimace, he picked a brownish hair, complete with root, from the heavy head of the cane, carried it into the bathroom and washed it down the drain. Then he applied soap to the cane, scrubbed it, towelled it dry, and placed it by the window in the sunlight where it would dry.

He did none of this with much urgency, nor was his manner anything but placidly brisk, the air of an elderly gentleman who was self-satisfied.

I saw part of what he was doing—the shower booth door was sprung and wouldn't quite close, leaving enough crack for observation, and to scare me stiff—and there were enough assorted sounds to keep me posted about the rest of his activity.

Meantime, the sound of a typewriter, in the sporadic rushes of creative composition, had started coming from the adjoining room.

Mr. Montgomery tipped a finger of Scotch into a glass, added ice and a jump of soda, then a second hiss of soda after he had tasted the drink. He carried the glass along and went to investigate the typing.

By moving my head half an inch, I could see from the bathroom across the living-room into the other room where the typist sat.

She was a smooth, polished svelte number of about twenty-five with dark hair and rather small features. Strictly a custom job. Her slight excess of lipstick was used well, although her large harlequin glasses needed a more exotic face.

Mr. Montgomery was gazing over her shoulder at what she had been typing.

Presently he chuckled. "Very effective, Colleen. I imagine, if I were the young man, I should palpitate. Passionate sentiments, very." He rocked gently on his heels. His smile was contemplative. He added, "Dryden,

I think it was, who said: 'Pains of love be sweeter far, than all other pleasures are.'"

His Colleen took two puffs off a cigarette. "If you think I'm in love with the guy, you're nuts."

Her father—he was her father; you could see signs of family resemblance—seemed pleased with that. "That pleases me, my dear. Young Swanberg was an impressionable, callow, easily deluded jackass. His one asset, an overabundance of wealth, hardly entitled him to a passing grade in this life."

The daughter laughed. "Scram, Monty, will you. I can't compose this stuff with you grinning over my shoulder."

"Why compose it at all, my dear? Why bother?"

"Any old port in a storm," she said, shrugging. "If there should be a storm."

Mr. Montgomery's eyes glittered like knife steel. "There won't be."

She swung around slightly to face him. "There could be. After all, you could have hit Roy—"

"The fool! The disobedient oaf!" said Mr. Montgomery bitterly.

"Are you sure you didn't hit him hard enough to crack his head?"

"Bosh! You underestimate both the thickness of Roy's cranium and my experience. As a matter of fact, I also tapped him on the parietal, well back of the coronal suture, which is a substantial area of the skull. When you have occasion to hit a man with a cane, my dear, pick that spot." The old gentleman sipped his drink. "Roy will carry a substantial headache as a reminder. That is all."

"Roy," said his daughter, "didn't mean anything."

"Well, I certainly did when I hit him!" said her father.

"Roy was lonesome. I hadn't been entertaining him according to his ideas of entertainment. His taste runs to blondes, and pretty cheap ones."

"Lonesome, eh? Not as lonesome as he could become in Alcatraz. Even though, as is well within the bounds of reason, he might have us along for company."

Colleen shuddered. "Do you have to put such damned ugly ideas in well-rounded words, pop? Why not just say Roy might get us all in the pokey by showing himself where Doc Savage could see him?"

Mr. Montgomery waved his drink distastefully. "Let's omit Savage from the conversation. I'm allergic to the man's name. It makes me nervous."

The hall door opened. I couldn't see who had come in, but the way the Montgomery family jumped to see the arrival was impressive.

"Ah!" said Mr. Montgomery. He sounded relieved, as if he had nearly fallen into a tank of ice water.

Roy stumbled into view—the boy in white with the yellow necktie. To a nervous man in a business suit who was with him, he expostulated. "I'm all right. I fell, is all. How many times do I have to tell you that?" The man, evidently an assistant hotel manager, said the expected things about the hotel regretting any accidents and then left.

Sheepishly, Roy glanced at Mr. Montgomery. He did not say anything. He went over and lowered himself in a chair and laid his head back gingerly against the chair. His eyebrows went up, down, painfully.

"Colleen," said Mr. Montgomery with bitter sweetness. "Will you be so kind as to place a cold ice compress on Roy's head."

Colleen came into the bathroom for a towel. I could name her perfume. Forty dollars an ounce. I tried to remember whether I had used any perfume myself that morning, and couldn't remember even a little thing like that.

Roy sat in gray-faced shame while Colleen dumped ice in the towel and handed it to him. The glances that came from his brown eyes were injured ones.

Mr. Montgomery kicked the dog while he was down.

"Well, Roy, how did you like your brief look about the hotel?" he asked blandly.

Roy winced. "It was all right."

"Up to a point, you mean?"

"Yes. Up to a point."

"The point should have happened earlier. Prior to the execution of your foolish deed—in other words, before you stepped out of this suite."

"Okay," Roy mumbled.

"Common sense, if not respect for my commands, should have induced you to stay bottled up here."

"Don't rub it in," Roy muttered.

The old man's jaw was quite prominent now. "I shall rub all I damned please, and you shall like it," he said.

"Yes, Sir."

"I am—I really am, Roy—irritated with you. Of our group, the only one Doc Savage might recognize is yourself. Should he get one glimpse of you, imagine what might happen."

"But Savage only saw me once, years ago," Roy complained.

"Yes, Roy, but the man's mind is a photographic record. Let us not, at this late stage, start underestimating Savage."

"Yes, sir," said Roy. "Who were the babes I saw you talking with? The pocket-sized blonde . . . she's old Waldo's niece. Right?"

"Correct."

"Then the other one would be the lady sleuth she brought on from New York as a friend in need."

"Correct again."

"The lady shamus wasn't a bad looker. But should we worry about her the way you've been worrying?"

Mr. Montgomery scowled at Roy for long enough for me to feel surprised that I had given anybody cause for worry. They were afraid of Doc Savage. They were afraid of me, too. That put me in the big league. I felt rather puffed up.

Making a little speech, Mr. Montgomery said, "Roy, you have been using your brain. That is a poisonous thing. We use only one brain around here—mine. I did hope you understood that."

"I understand it," Roy said uneasily.

"You are a stupid incompetent, Roy," said Mr. Montgomery with the heedlessly playful air of a farmer discussing a coming butchering with the hog he is going to butcher. "There is too much involved in this affair—in case you feel I am being overly severe—to take any chances."

"Oh, I know—"

"You know from nothing, Roy! Let me point out the fundamentals to you."

The fat man stuck three fingers of his right hand under Roy's nose and began bending the fingers one at a time as he enumerated points.

"One," he said. "Old Waldo Loring had a secret of fabulous value to sell."

He bent down that finger.

"Two," he continued. "Waldo Loring approached me to serve as broker. He knew I had contacts with people who would pay handsomely for what he possessed. But we

could not come to terms—the old sea dog didn't want to pay me a proper commission.”

Down went another finger.

“Three. I thereupon began bending my efforts toward acquiring the fabulous item by whatever means feasible.”

He had run out of fingers. That bothered him, and he frowned at his hand. He solved the problem by starting over again with three more fingers.

“Four,” he said. “Waldo Loring was brained by a prowler he caught searching his room. This was unfortunate, because a dead Waldo could not be induced to tell where he sank that—ahem—where is hidden the item he had for sale.”

He paused to shake his head and cluck sadly over that development.

“Five. Waldo Loring was throughout a man frightened by the incredible magnitude and deviltry of the deed he was trying to perpetrate, and in his fear he sought comfort from the presence of his niece, Miss Glacia Loring. He invited her to join him here. I do not know how much of the truth he told her—but he told her some, because she in turn was terrified and had recourse to the only friend she probably has, this lady sleuth from New York.”

He was down to the last finger again, and he knocked that one off quickly.

“Six,” he said. “Miss Loring has inherited an unknown quantity called Keeper. She apparently doesn't know what Keeper is. But we know—and she must suspect—that Keeper is the answer to where old Waldo Loring's secret now lies.”

Through with the fingers, he rubbed his hands together briskly, then picked up his drink again.

Roy grunted. “You left out plenty. How did Doc Savage happen to get wind of it and show up here? That's what I'd like to know.”

“That's not a fundamental. I just gave you the fundamentals. And the conclusion you should draw is this: We must lie low and grab Keeper when the latter appears.”

“Huh? And not bother about Savage, I suppose?” said Roy skeptically.

“Bother? How do you mean? Concern ourselves over how he got a smell of the affair? That would be pointless. It's easily explained, anyway, if you use a little imagination. . . . Waldo Loring's secret was of such magnitude that its existence has no doubt traveled the grapevines, and it wouldn't sur-

prise me to find that Doc Savage is here representing the interests of the nation. Does that sound too startling, Roy? It shouldn't. The destiny of humanity might well be at stake here, Roy. Savage is a humanitarian, in his rather unorthodox way.”

Roy closed his eyes and didn't say anything. He apparently thought the portly old gentleman was using too many words. So did I.

“You mustn't disobey orders, Roy,” said Mr. Montgomery. He was a man who liked the sound of his own voice, apparently. He continued, “Actually, Roy, we should both be able to retire after this job. Retirement, you being a young man, may lack appeal. But if you wish, and we are successful, I imagine you could, young as you are, put yourself out to pasture the rest of your days. Now you understand why my feelings were a bit urgent when I tapped you with the cane.”

Roy grimaced. “I don't see why you had to knock me cold. It made a rumpus.”

“My temper got the best of me,” said the fat man blandly. “I'll tell you why. I haven't mentioned it. . . . While I was sitting at the table near the pool with the two young ladies, I filched from Glacia's purse an envelope containing Waldo Loring's testament.”

Roy brightened and sat up straight. “You think it'll tell where—”

“We shall never know, I'm afraid,” said Mr. Montgomery bitterly.

“Huh?”

“Listen carefully, Roy. I stuck that envelope to the underside of the table with a bit of chicle. Then you appeared and upset me so that I went to hunt you and urge you to return to our rooms. I did not find you at first, and then I chanced to observe Glacia's friend in the act of recovering the envelope from beneath the table. She had found it. I was naturally enraged with you, and when soon afterward I found you, I expressed my feelings.”

“Good God!” Roy blurted. “They're wise to you?”

“Thanks to you, I'm sorry to say,” agreed Mr. Montgomery.

Whereupon Mr. Montgomery slapped Roy. The fat hand was a broad poisonous serpent's head; it darted out and there was a pop of flesh on flesh. It must have been a harder slap than seemed logical, because Roy fell back in the chair again, and his eyes

turned in their sockets like white mice investigating their own tails.

"My dear boy," said the fat man. "I'm very irritated, I assure you."

I wasn't exactly irritated, but neither was my mind going tra-la. I hadn't dreamed that Mr. Montgomery had observed me finding the envelope—and it followed naturally that he knew what I had done with it after finding it. If he still wanted it, I might be in for some trouble. Because Mr. Montgomery was a lot worse article than I had anticipated.

Where was Glacia? I still didn't know that, and the fact that the fat man hadn't mentioned doing Glacia any harm within the last half hour didn't mean a thing. There were probably many things in Mr. Montgomery's life that he wasn't mentioning. The things he didn't mention were the ones to worry about.

I began to have a vague idea that I'd underestimated almost everyone and everything. I'd underrated the fat man. I'd missed the boat on Doc Savage—because I hadn't really believed he was involved. Oh, I'd told him he was. I'd told Glacia he was. But I'd been telling something I didn't quite believe. As for mysteries and fabulous secrets—well, I hadn't even been playing in that league.

I'd supposed the thing, even if it was pretty complicated, would be a matter of Uncle Waldo having done someone a dark deed, and the donee getting even with the donor for it. It seemed there was slightly more to it than that.

Apparently I now knew everything but a couple of salient facts. Uncle Waldo'd gotten hold of something terrific, and he'd tried to sell it, and the selling had gotten a trifle complex and now Uncle Waldo was dead and nobody knew the whereabouts of the merchandise Waldo'd had on the market. That was what the scuffling was about. Where was the button?

Mr. Montgomery had just gone over all this with Roy, but I went over it again just to be sure. It sounded far-fetched, even though I had stood in a shower bath booth and heard it. But I was sure it was true. Mr. Montgomery had left out just enough to make it sound like truth—he had left out what Uncle Waldo's secret was, and he'd omitted the matter of who murdered Waldo. He knew the details. Or he'd guessed at them. It followed that he might know who killed Waldo, or might be the one who had done it.

Probably I wasn't gaining a thing by standing here re-stating facts to myself. But it made me feel better, so I did it. Far better, it was not long developing, that I should have looked to business closer at hand—was there, for instance, a bathroom window through which I could make a flying exit?

There was no window, but maybe it would have done no good anyway. Because Mr. Montgomery's voice, not quite calmly, said, "I don't know what bard said familiarity placed a blindness on one. Maybe one didn't say it. He should have."

He had the shower booth door open by then. He was fast for a fat man, which was no surprise. Not nearly as much a surprise as seeing such a large gun in his hand. Somehow I'd imagined him as a deft old gentleman who disdained firearms.

"It was a long time dawning on me that a shower curtain doesn't have quite your silhouette, young lady," he said.

He must not have liked the way my head went back.

"Don't!" he said. "Don't scream. I shouldn't like it."

It was a good thing he said that. I didn't want to do anything he shouldn't like. Not when he had that look on his chubby face, lips loose like a kid's collapsed toy balloon, eyes big and all whites like boiled eggs.

"Colleen," he called over his shoulder. "Colleen, will you step in here and bolster me in misfortune."

Colleen came forward walking with lithe strides. She looked about as scared as a cat at its cream saucer. "It's Nell-the-girl-detective," she said. "Well, snatch my girdle and call me unrestrained!"

"Search her," said Mr. Montgomery.

Colleen did an experienced job with her hands, and I was invited into the living-room. Roy still sat in the chair and did not look any different, except that he had probably forgotten his headache.

"What I want somebody to tell me is how the hell she got in here?" remarked Colleen.

"That really should concern you, since she entered while you were here alone, obviously." Mr. Montgomery didn't sound too kindly toward his daughter. "Your search was also inadequate. Take her into the bedroom. Find that envelope containing Waldo Loring's final testament."

"I'm afraid of her," Colleen said with disapproval. "Me alone in there with her? She'll probably wring my neck."

Mr. Montgomery said coldly, "I am in a frame of mind to enjoy the act by proxy if she does. Get going. Find that will."

Colleen got me into the bedroom. There were two of the latter connecting with the suite, I noticed. "Pops is in a bad mood, honey," Colleen told me. "I'd be very meek, if I were you."

I didn't argue the point about her father's mood. If she said it was bad, I would take her word for it. I was convinced he had brained Waldo Loring while feeling a bit irritated, the way he was now.

One search didn't satisfy Colleen. She did it over, then inventoried my purse, sneering at the brand of my lipstick, and counting my few dollars before she folded them neatly and tucked them in her stocking. She wasn't happy about settling for the receipt for the lockbox they'd given me downstairs, but she settled for it. She carried it in and tossed it down before fat papa.

"She probably locked it up," she said. Then, not liking the boiled egg look her father's eyes got again, she added hastily. "That's right. They stamp the time on those receipts. That one is stamped not more than forty minutes ago."

Mr. Montgomery scooped up the receipt, eyed it, threw it on the floor.

He swept up the gun. "Step over here, dear," he said.

I stood exactly where he wanted me to stand. The look in his eye told me where. I stopped there, and registered as much cooperation as I could.

I wasn't scared. I was paralyzed.

He asked, "You have a good memory? You will recite the exact contents of that document. Beginning in five seconds."

"I don't remember," I said.

That was the wrong thing. I should have waggled my mouth around and let nothing but squeaks of terror come out. I should have been too scared to speak. That wouldn't have been hard to do, if I had thought of it.

Mr. Montgomery drew in a deep breath, a deep one. And he smiled. A little smile.

Roy came up out of the chair. He didn't stand up. He just seemed to rise somewhat

on the cushions, as if he were being hauled up by the hair. His face looked that way too.

"Father!" Colleen screamed.

They knew him, so they must know what his expressions meant. I didn't know him, but I thought I understood his grimace too. Because it wasn't really a smile.

He was going to kill me. Shoot me. He was a suave, egotistical, show-offish old gentleman with too much soft flesh and too many words. But he was blowing his cork.

The only reason he didn't shoot me—quite a good reason it was, too—was the loud noise knuckles made on the door.

Someone at the door didn't change Mr. Montgomery's glazed madness. But it electrified his daughter and Roy.

Roy pushed Mr. Montgomery down into an overstuffed chair. He tried to take the gun away from the old man, but Mr. Montgomery wouldn't give it up, so Roy compromised by shoving the old fellow's hand down beside him, between the cushion and the side of the chair—the hand and the gun.

Colleen grabbed me and hustled me into the bedroom. The last I saw of Roy for the nonce, he was walking toward the door with his eyes wide and tragic. The fist was banging the door again.

I heard who the visitor was. I was in the bedroom, but I recognized the voice.

"Heap sorry," it said. "Got short-circuit in wiring."

Coming Going. My redskin pal.

"There's no trouble with the wiring in here," Roy told him. Roy sounded all right. A little shaky with the last couple of words.

"In switchbox," Coming Going argued. "Got to take a look. Electricity in other rooms won't work. Fuse box in here. Take a minute. Okay."

"There's no switchbox in here, you crazy Indian."

"Look anyway. Okay?"

At this point, I woke up to the fact that there was a man outside the bedroom window. He was standing there, apparently on thin air, but probably on a ladder. I knew him. Another pal. Monk Mayfair.

Now that I had finally discovered him, Monk Mayfair shrugged—the shrug meant I'd certainly taken my time about noticing him—and then he made little circles in the air with a finger. Indicating I should persuade Colleen to turn around. He illustrated my next move

for me—he popped himself on the jaw with a fist.

“Colleen,” I said. “There’s a man behind you.”

She had a little gun. Where she’d gotten it from I didn’t know. She sneered over the gun and said, “Nuts, darling.”

“There really is.”

“Keep your voice down,” she breathed viciously.

“Oh, but there really—”

Monk Mayfair helped out by tapping on the window. Whereupon Colleen went off as if she had exploded. Her arms flew out from her sides much as if she was spreading them preparatory to flying. Her mouth opened, but whether she would have screamed I never knew, because I closed the mouth again, hard. It wasn’t a very orthodox punch. I think I used both hands. Both at once, the way you lift a heavy weight.

Chapter VIII

COLLEEN took plenty of time deciding to drop. The small gun fell. She showed lots of eye whites, let her arms down to her sides, managed two steps backward and one to the right, before deciding on the floor.

I was already passing her. The window was locked. I unfastened it. Monk Mayfair started to climb inside, which complicated matters, because I was endeavoring to climb out.

“Take it easy,” he said.

“Get out of my way,” I said.

A gun went off in the living-room. If there had been any preliminaries in the way of words, they had been softly spoken. But the gun was definitely loud, almost as noisy as the second one that answered it.

I passed Monk Mayfair. Probably I crawled over him. I went down the ladder, and halfway I passed Doc Savage. I had never imagined two people could pass on a ladder with so few formalities.

“Is it safe to go into the hotel room?” he asked.

“Certainly not,” I said.

He looked up and shouted, “Monk! Stay out of there!”

Monk Mayfair was already through the window. He didn’t answer.

The shooting continued inside the hotel for a few moments, then came to a spotty

end. I was trying to reach the bottom of the ladder as if it was everything on earth that I wanted, and it was. Then I got down there on solid earth—and didn’t know what to do.

It hadn’t occurred to me that there would be any question about what to do next once I reached terra firma and liberty. There were many courses open. Run was the first one. Then there were the assorted organizations I could hurriedly notify that a fat man had been about to kill me, these including the police, the sheriff, the F.B.I., the hotel house sleuth if it had one, and the U. S. Marines. Now, though, that I was on the ground and comparatively safe, unless hit by a ricocheting bullet, or someone leaned out of the hotel window and took a shot at me, I somehow did none of the obvious things. I waited to see what Doc Savage would do about all this. I tried to tell myself that I was curious about how the great man worked. Actually I probably thought his neighborhood was about the safest available spot.

Whatever went on in Mr. Montgomery’s suite happened in comparative peace. There were no more shots. Doc Savage, having demonstrated that he had no control over Monk Mayfair when the latter was excited, went the rest of the way up the ladder himself and disappeared in the window. That was my cue to start re-climbing the ladder. Whether Savage wanted to be a protector or not, I was going to elect him.

Not too happily, I crawled back into a hotel suite I had quitted not so long ago. Mr. Montgomery, Colleen, Roy, were gone, as was Monk Mayfair, while Coming Going was walking around yelling and ruining an expensive rug with the blood that was coming from at least two holes in him. The theme of his yelling was that he was calling on hell to open wide and receive the United States State Department.

“Where did they go?” I asked.

Coming Going looked at me and yelled, “Out! Where did you suppose they went?” And he had been so cute and kindly with his heap-big-Injun ways.

Doc Savage was hauling a chair across the room. I watched him. He got on the chair, and unscrewed a light bulb from the ceiling chandelier, selecting one particular bulb.

“The fat man’s party left hurriedly, as Mr. Going intimates,” Savage told me. “Monk

presumably followed them. They were all gone when I got into the suite."

"Aren't you going to—won't Monk need help . . .?"

"He won't get it, if he does. But he won't need it. Monk never does."

I thought that was a pretty dirty trick. The notion must have shown on my face, something like the look the baby rabbit gives the alligator that is going to swallow him. Because Savage looked patiently pained himself.

"We've been watching Mr. Montgomery's party for days," Savage told me. "We didn't want him alarmed. Monk will alarm him—which, incidentally, is my understatement for today."

I admitted that being alarmed by Monk Mayfair would probably be rather special. "But suppose he needs help. That Montgomery isn't exactly a lamb."

"If Monk needs help, he'll call for it," Savage said briefly.

He wrapped the light bulb he had removed in a handkerchief and pocketed it carefully.

Pointing at the pocket, I said, "Don't tell me that's a microphone?"

He nodded. "Yes. Only one we have in the fifty-watt size, too. It's a special job—practically undetectable even on inspection. It lights like an ordinary bulb, as well."

Coming Going asked Hell to also keep its gates open for all meddling human females. He was looking at me.

"Oh!" I said. "Oh, I see now. You were eavesdropping on what went on in here, and you had to change your plans and save my life."

"Something like that," Savage admitted.

"I don't see why it should gripe your redskin friend so," I said.

"He happens to understand how disastrous this setback may be."

"I see. Pardon me for having a neck that needed saving."

Nobody had any more to say until we had carried our bad tempers out of there—curious guests were just beginning to collect and ask what had happened—and adjourned to Doc Savage's suite. Savage began dressing Coming Going's injuries—bullet paths in, respectively, an arm and a neck muscle. Savage was deft, knew his business. Coming Going had stopped importuning hell to take

care of me and the United States State Department, and sat on a straightbacked chair. The back of his neck, the backs of his hands, became wet with perspiration that pain made.

"Mr. Going," Doc Savage told me, "is with the organization he has just been condemning with such sincerity—the State Department. He was the man first assigned to investigate this matter. It was at his suggestion that I was involved."

"Oh," I said, in a small way.

I dragged out and inspected my previous idea that Coming Going was a dopey ham actor from Hollywood whose speed was playing phony Indians. Just a nice, harmless boy, I'd thought him, who had been floored by the news that Waldo Loring had been murdered. The idea was like some others I'd had in my time. Rather sour.

"Then you're all secret agents," I said.

Savage snorted slightly. Quite a display of emotion for him. "Mr. Going might be remotely so classified. But I haven't been able to do anything secretly for years."

He might be right. Come to think of it, his presence here at the lodge had been as unobtrusive as the arrival of a circus in town.

"I don't get it," I said.

Coming Going looked up at me. "Neither have we. And now we may never get it." His feather was over his eye again.

"It's partly your own fault," I snapped. "God knows, I came running to you both for information. And what did I get? Big-eyed innocence." I was pretty upset about it. "What was I to do? My friend, Glacia, was in trouble, and it was up to me to help her."

"Some girl-friends you pick," said Coming Going.

"There's nothing wrong with Glacia except that she's money-hungry!" I yelled. "She wouldn't harm anyone intentionally."

Doc Savage patted the air vaguely with his hand that was holding a bottle of antiseptic and told me, "We know more about Glacia Loring than you do, and probably know things about you that you've forgotten. We should—there have been nearly a hundred agents sifting you both the past few days."

I asked a question that I had been afraid to ask.

"Where is Glacia?"

Savage caught Going's eye, hesitated, finally said, "We don't know."

Both of them watched me for a time. Going finally muttered, "For God's sake, ei-

ther faint or stop looking as if you're going to."

"You mean—she's not at the lodge?" It was my voice, coming from a spot several feet distant, the voice of someone who had been swallowed.

"We don't know," Savage said again.

"But surely—Glacia left me at the pool, ran off in a rage to hunt Mr. Montgomery because he'd rifled her purse. . . . Oh my God! She didn't find him and he—"

Savage's hand was up, his voice sharply urgent. "No, no, she didn't find Montgomery. We kept track of her for a while—or Coming Going did, but—"

"I wish you'd stop calling me Coming Going, or Mr. Going," the phony Indian snapped peevishly. "My name is Lybeck. Joseph Lybeck. . . . No, Mote, I lost track of your friend. She didn't lose me consciously. I just zigged when I should have zagged, and lost her."

"There is no reason to think she isn't perfectly safe," Doc Savage told me.

"No reason! When there's been one murder! And that fat Montgomery was going to kill me in cold blood if you hadn't—" I took hold of myself with both hands, my knees anyway. I could feel them shaking. "I'm sorry," I said. "Glacia may seem a little screwy to you fellows. But she has done a few things for me, enough nice things to outweigh the other kind."

"You think a lot of her," Savage said. It was more statement than question.

"Yes. A lot is right. Call it the attraction of opposites or whatever you want to. But the fact is that I swing my last punch for her if necessary."

Savage nodded. "She knows that. It's why she sent for you."

"Probably."

Savage's expression and manner now showed that he had a problem to solve. The result of what I'd said, evidently. I didn't know what it was.

I didn't know, either, why we were staying in the room making small talk. Action seemed called for. Glacia was missing. Monk Mayfair was missing. Mr. Montgomery and party had flown. Yet we were here, doing what never solves problems—talking.

When he had finished patching Coming Going—I couldn't think of him as anyone named Joseph Lybeck, although I had no trouble accepting him as a federal agent—

Doc Savage stepped back. He told Coming Going, "I think she should know the whole story."

Coming Going said, "Ugh!" He added, "Oh, all right. Everybody else seems to know everything anyway."

Savage went into another room to fetch a small radio that was not a conventional table model, but more resembled the communication apparatus that amateurs use. He switched it on. After it warmed up, the speaker did not emit the usual static cracklings, but a slight high-pitched hissing. I knew what it was. A V.H.F. outfit. Very High Frequency radio.

Without explaining why he had turned on the radio, Savage told me, "Your guess about Waldo Loring's previous profession was accurate. Exact. He was a ship captain. Master of freight steamers."

My nod was probably just a gesture I should have made. I was thinking of Glacia.

"I won't bore you with a lengthy summary of Waldo Loring's life," Doc Savage continued. "It was a rough life, and there was some sharpshooting in it, but probably no more than the average tough sailor does. . . . We'll skip down to the year before the war ended, the month of September. That was when—"

He jumped, bit off his words, eyed the radio. It had emitted a deep sound like a long steady breath. Savage watched the radio. Coming Going watched it. The radio stopped making the breathing sound without making any other.

"September. A freighter. The *Victory Tumble*. Captain Waldo Loring commanding." Savage still had his eye on the radio. "The *Victory Tumble* loaded a cargo at a Canadian port. Destination of the cargo, England. There was the greatest secrecy—even Captain Loring didn't know the destination. Only a Lieutenant Commander Roger Peelman knew that. Peelman was U. S. Navy. He went aboard with orders that made him Captain Waldo Loring's senior in command."

The radio for a moment proved more of a magnet for his interest than the story he was telling. After about a minute, he pulled away from it enough to continue:

"Perhaps if the Navy man had been more diplomatic, none of this would have happened. Waldo Loring was an egotistical, hardheaded old sea dog, and his opinion of the Navy was considerably lower than the

Navy's opinion of him. Captain Loring and Lieutenant Commander Peelman did not get along well. Peelman complained to Washington about it before sailing, but nothing was done about it—a bad bit of neglect, probably.”

“Something happened to the ship?” I asked, jumping at a conclusion.

“It sank. . . . Some three weeks later, a destroyer picked up a lifeboat containing the survivors. They consisted of Captain Loring and some of his crew. Peelman had drowned. The story they told—the ship damaged by an enemy torpedo, then a storm, and the ship going down—was corroborated by all survivors. The logs checked. Apparently the ship had sunk in deep water, three hundred miles at sea.” He hesitated, then added, “Apparently.”

“Apparently?” I said.

“Well, yes. You see, after the war, the Navy took pains to check enemy submarine reports and they found that the *Victory Tumble* had been torpedoed, all right—but a couple of hundred miles from the spot Captain Waldo Loring named.”

“What about the log-books, aren't they reliable records?”

Savage shrugged. “Easily altered. Captain Loring kept the master's log, which was a digest of the day-log. He could have made false entries and no one else would have known.”

“What about the crew members who were picked up with him?”

“Seamen. No officers. They wouldn't have known. Every pain was taken to keep the *Victory Tumble's* cargo, course and destination secret.

“Oh.”

“Because of the nature of the cargo,” Savage continued, “the Navy kept Captain Loring under surveillance. They checked enemy sub reports after the war, as I told you. And then they really watched Captain Loring. They watched him and they watched people he contacted—and they found out, a few weeks ago, that Captain Loring was trying to sell the cargo of the ship that had sunk.”

“You mean his vessel didn't sink?” I gasped.

“Oh, it went down all right. But not where Loring claimed—the Navy had sounded the whole area, and made Geiger counter tests—”

“Wait a minute!” I yelled. “Geiger counter? I've heard such a gadget mentioned, or read of—”

“Naturally. A device for indicting the presence of radioactivity.”

I thought I had it now. “This cargo wouldn't have been atom bombs?” I demanded.

“No. . . . On an unguarded ship? Certainly not.”

“Then what—”

Savage glanced questionably at Coming Going, who shrugged, said, “Might as well tell her. The State Department has the delusion that only three people in the world know what that cargo was. They won't mind this lady being a fourth. Much.”

“Want to bet I can't name at least two nations with aggressive notions who don't know by now?” Savage demanded. “Particularly since Waldo Loring has been trying to sell the stuff to them?”

“I was just being funny in my odd way,” Coming Going said bitterly.

“Uranium,” Savage told me. “Not freshly mined ore. Processed. That is, it had gone through the two preliminary processing stages. Intended for atom bombs, of course.”

“But why on a steamer going to—”

“Let's not go any deeper into top secret stuff,” Savage said. “You know that England and Canada were working with us on the bomb.”

“But why is it so valuable? The war is over—”

“Over? There is some doubt about that in a few quarters. Let's just say that all uranium sources are closely guarded and every speck of ore accounted for since the war ended. There's enough ore on that ship to furnish the makings of quite a few bombs. Enough to be worth—well, the destiny of a few nations, perhaps.”

Coming Going, with grating vehemence, said, “Don't underestimate the value of that cargo, honey.”

I decided that I wouldn't. I had read those conjectures about what a dozen or so bombs planted in American cities, perhaps months ahead of zero hour, and timed to let loose all together, would do to our defense plant. Pearl Harbor would be nothing.

Glacia. . . . Glacia was involved in something like that. . . . My silly, self-centered, dollar-hungry little friend. . . .

Doc Savage came over and placed a hand on my arm. "Don't get the wrong idea, Mote. Glacia doesn't know it's uranium. Waldo Loring told her it was gold, and I think she believed him."

My face felt dry and like bone and it must have looked like bone because Savage looked concerned and went to a writing desk, hauled open the drawer, and took out the Indian warclub that had been in Glacia's room.

He said, "You were worried about this club, I believe. You needn't be. Monk got it from your room—to run a few tests to see if it could be the murder instrument. It wasn't."

"I knew Glacia didn't kill him," I said tightly. "I never let that quite get into my mind."

He tossed the club on a chair. "Well, it's not comfortable having such things around trying to get into one's mind. You can forget it."

The radio did what they had been waiting for it to do. It made the husky breathing sound again, added words, remarkably clear words—Monk Mayfair's voice—and said, "Doc, I ran into something too rough—"

There was urgency in Mayfair's voice. Not fear, but sick urgency. A quality that made my hair feel as if it was being combed the wrong way.

"—no out for me," Monk was saying. "Get this quick, Doc! It's not Montgomery! It's another one who knows where the ship lies. It's nobody we suspected. Watch out for her—"

That was all. I don't know what a radio transmitter sounds like over the air when it is being smashed. Probably like the sound that came from our receiver.

Chapter IX

IT was quiet in the lodge bar now, and cool and semi-dark, rather like a sepulchre, for the day was done and a couple of hours of the night had gone, and they were having a party in another part of the lodge, which accounted for the bar being empty. A party. On the house. Everyone was there. The dead are dead, and the living must live. The bar was dank and still, a repository for me and my fears.

I moved my glass back and forth and it made wet smears on the table and they were

symbolic of something or other, the mess things were in, probably. The waiter went past silently, like a ghost walking on eggs. There was only one waiter, and he would look at me each time he passed. He didn't seem to see me.

I knew what was wrong with the waiter. He didn't like what we were doing. We were even. Neither did I.

The waiter didn't have a friend who had vanished into thin air, and I didn't imagine anyone had tried to kill him today. He hadn't spent an afternoon locked in his room with little cold-footed fear-things stampeding over his skin every time someone walked down the hall. He'd probably spent the afternoon shooting pool. And he was getting twenty dollars for what he was doing. Twenty, and the privilege of assisting the great Doc Savage.

Not that I'd decided Doc Savage was less than the reports said. He was good. He was marvelous. He had functioned all day with the acumen and skill of the F.B.I., Sherlock Holmes and all the fictional sleuths ever created with words. The trouble was, he hadn't been good enough to find Monk Mayfair. Nor Glacia.

My sitting here was Doc Savage's idea. I didn't necessarily need to be in the bar, but my room had gotten too much for me. I had stayed in that room until I began seeing things walking on the walls. I felt as if I could walk on them myself. So I was in the bar. Being at the party wouldn't do—I was supposed to be in mourning. I had lost an uncle. My uncle Waldo Loring. I was Glacia Loring.

The waiter would say I was Glacia Loring. Or he would if he earned his twenty dollars. The desk clerk would say so too. That had been arranged.

"Miss Loring?"

It was the waiter. He had walked straight to me and I had watched him and hadn't quite seen him. I jumped. "Yes, waiter," I said.

"A gentleman inquiring for you. A gentleman named McBride."

"Show the gentleman where I am."

"Very well, Miss."

"Wait—what does the gentleman look like?"

"He's about forty-five, Miss."

"Show him me."

Attorney McBride didn't look forty-five, or wouldn't with the worried look scrubbed off

his face. He was about thirty, but he did appear very tired. He was a large bushy young man in slacks, Hollywood shirt, sunburn and a deposit of desert dust.

"Miss Loring?" he asked. "Miss Glacia Loring?"

"Yes," I said, and wondered how well he remembered Glacia's voice from having heard it over the telephone.

"This is certainly a relief." Apparently he didn't remember it so well. "I'm Attorney McBride."

"Oh, yes indeed. I spoke to you on the telephone."

"That's right." He dropped on the seat opposite. "Oh, man! Whooeee!" He looked at the waiter. "Can a man get coffee laced with whiskey in here?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Then produce it," said Attorney McBride. He turned to me and said, "If I seem dithered, you can rest assured that I am."

"Has something happened?"

He nodded. "Your uncle was the damndest client."

"How do you mean?"

He blew out his breath. "How? Whoosh! I never heard of a client, much less had one, who left the sort of a legacy he left you, Miss Loring."

"Keeper, you mean?"

"Oh my Lord, yes," he said.

The McBride voice was not as yapping as it had sounded over the telephone—from what I had managed to overhear of Glacia's conversation with him—but it was not exactly dull.

"Did you bring my inheritance?" I asked.

"My Lord, yes," he said.

"Could I see it?"

"It? . . . Oh, I see. Uh—you apply a very good word to the inheritance. Calling it *it*, I mean. Very appropriate. I had thought of some words for it myself, but they wouldn't bear repeating in polite company."

"Mr. McBride, I have no idea what Keeper is," I said.

He sat back. His jaw dropped. His eyes were as round as shotgun barrels.

After wincing and hesitating, he asked, "Have you had dinner, Glacia? I may call you, Glacia, mayn't I? If you haven't had dinner, you'd better. You'll need your strength."

"Look here," I said sharply. "I don't know why you are so excited, but I'm beginning to wonder. What are you trying to do, upset me?"

"Upset? Oh, no. Forbid and preserve," cried Mr. McBride. "I only want your courage at full tide, bright and sparkling, so you'll have the nerve to take it off my hands."

"It?"

"Whew! I mustn't frighten you. Oh, no! I mustn't!" gasped the attorney.

I tried to pin him down with a frown. "Just what is wrong with this inheritance?"

"I don't believe I'd better start answering that, because I want to start back to Los Angeles tonight. . . . But if you want a fault, here is one of the milder ones: It eats a hell of a lot."

That settles it, I thought. A race horse. "How many races has it won?"

"Races? Eh? Can it run?" He couldn't have been more confused if I had stood him on his head and put a carrot in his mouth.

"Isn't it a race horse?"

"Oh, no. Well—no!" said McBride. "Race horse? Good Lord, what a description for—well, never mind." He mopped his forehead, although the desert nights weren't hot and the hotel air conditioner was still going. "What a characterization—race horse. Whooe! whooe! What ever gave you such a wrong idea? Oh, I see. . . . Uh, what *did* give you the idea anyway?"

"You," I said, "seem to be twittery. Keep it up, and we'll both be that way."

"McBride is twittering, all right," the attorney-at-law said. "Oh, thank God!" The last because the waiter had finally come with his coffee and a side of bourbon.

I decided to wait him out. This might be an act. I didn't know what it was.

Doc Savage might be able to make a head or a tail of it. . . . I took a chance and moved my purse a little on the table, edging it to a spot where it would better pick up our conversation. I supposed that moving it would make a terrific rumpus in the little microphone. Because there was a microwave transmitter—that was what Doc Savage had called it, whatever that was—in the purse. The theory was that I was a traveling broadcast station, and I was supposed to pretend to be Glacia, and that was supposed to lead to something. We hoped.

Lawyer McBride finished his laced coffee. He looked at me as if he was very sorry

for me. He blew out a considerable breath. "Miss Loring," he said, "you might as well see the bad news."

Whereupon he led the way outdoors and toward the parking lot. The desert night was clear. They were probably always clear, the sky cloudless, because the adjacent country didn't look as if a drop of moisture had ever fallen on it.

Attorney McBride approached a trailer. With misgivings. "I usually announce myself by throwing a rock," he told me nervously. "But this time, we'll take a chance."

The trailer was an unlighted, beat-up affair, and he knocked timidly on the door. No response. Without more preliminaries, McBride snarled, "Why the hell should I worry? I'm getting shut of him!" and he hauled off and kicked the trailer door. That got action.

"Oaf," stated a deep-throated male voice inside the trailer, "derives from the Iceland *alfr*, meaning originally an elf's child, a changeling left by goblins, therefore a foolish or deformed child, an idiot, a simpleton. Hence it may refer to one person who disturbs another. Will you go away."

"Harold!" said McBride. "Harold, your new owner is here."

There was a prolonged silence from inside.

"Harold!" said Mr. McBride.

"Yes, sir."

"Come out. Miss Loring is here, who inherited you, is here."

"I don't want to come out," the voice said. It sounded as if it was being manufactured in a barrel.

"Harold," said Mr. McBride patiently. "You wish to be fed, don't you? And guided, and managed, and cared for?"

"Yes, sir."

The lawyer yelled, "Then get the hell out here and meet the nice lady who has inherited you."

Oh, Lord, I thought—I was beginning to react like Attorney McBride. I had, or Glacia had, inherited something that talked with a man's voice.

Presently it opened the trailer door. . . . Older than I had thought. Too old to be very interesting; at least more than forty. And fat. Not short, but tremendously fat, egg-shaped.

"This is Harold," said Attorney McBride.

Harold's head was quite large, like a melon placed crosswise, and his mouth was

large out of proportion, as were his eyes. In front of the latter, he wore shell-rimmed glasses that, regardless of what they did for his vision, certainly made his eyes startling. None of his clothing fit well, all either too large or too small.

"Harold, this is Miss Loring," added McBride.

"Girl!" exploded Harold. "Girl was originally the name of the Goddess Vesta, or the human young of either sex, but the term is now applied to the female child, a maiden, a mare or filly, a maid-servant, a sweetheart, or a roebuck in its second year."

He slammed the trailer door in our faces.

There was a silence.

"The last one fits me," I said.

"Eh?" said McBride.

"The roebuck in its second year."

"Oh." McBride cleared his throat.

"You—ah—I have a paper for you to sign. A receipt for your inheritance. If you will sign same, I will be going."

"Wait a minute, brother," I said. I gripped his arm. I led him a few yards from the trailer, and I held my purse so the gadget in it would be sure to pick up and relay what we had to say. "What's the matter with Harold? Is he nuts?"

"Nuttier than a fruitcake," said McBride.

"Who is he?"

"Harold Keeper. You've inherited him. Now, if you will sign this paper—"

"How come, inherited?" I said, gripping the attorney's arm. "Give. What is this, anyway? Waldo Loring never told me what Keeper was. Who is he?"

McBride sighed elaborately. "Harold was the old man's—your deceased uncle's friend. Sort of a flunky, I surmise. A sailor. Harold was a sailor on your uncle's ships."

"Oh, Harold is some crazy sailor whom Uncle Waldo was taking care of?"

"Well—yes. Only your uncle did say that Harold had not always been—shall we say cracked. It seems that during the war uncle's ship was torpedoed, and your uncle and Harold were in the boatload of survivors. They suffered great hardships in the open sea in the small boat. The experience affected Harold's mind. Your uncle feels, or felt, duty bound to care for Harold."

"I don't think I like this," I said.

"I was afraid you wouldn't," McBride said wearily. "Are you going to sign—"

"Not," I said, "until I think it over."

"You can't do that to me!" yelled McBride. "My God, unless you accept Harold, I'm stuck with him!"

I walked back to the lodge. McBride hopped along beside me, complaining that I was cold-blooded and arguing that Harold had good points. He tried to enumerate Harold's points, and couldn't think of any.

"Listen, I'll talk this over with you in the morning," I said.

"But—"

"You've done enough to me for one evening. Good-night, Mr. McBride. In the morning. Say about eight."

He stamped into the lodge. I could hear him screaming at the registrations clerk about the price they were going to charge him for a room. A very excitable nature, Mr. McBride.

I moved a few paces and stepped into the shadow of the lodge, waited. Presently, without noticeable sound, there was a large form beside me. Doc Savage.

"Did the gadget work? Did you pick all that up?" I asked.

Doc Savage said he had.

"Were you surprised?" I inquired. "I was. Keeper a man, a screwball. That's the last thing—"

But Doc Savage had something more urgent on his mind than a discussion. His hand touched my arm. Not a hard grip. But as solid as a stone building.

"Let's watch the trailer," he said. And that was all he said until we had reached another wedge of darkness beside a parked car thirty yards or so from the trailer, which was still dark.

"Why doesn't Harold turn on the lights?" I said uneasily. "He—he gives me cold chills. I never did like psychos, and—"

All of a sudden, I wondered if I was going to lose my balance wheel. This whole thing of Harold Keeper, the way it seemed to bear no relation to Waldo Loring's murder, or Glacia's disappearance, or a shipload of uranium ore, was unnerving. It was like starting to a funeral, and finding you were in a circus instead.

"I'm coming loose," I mumbled. "I didn't expect anything like this. My stomach feels unfunny."

He tried the door of the parked car. It was unlocked, and he opened it. "Sit down here," he said. "Not in the seat, where you

will be seen. In the door. . . . Now, just what is upsetting you?"

"It's Glacia!" I blurted. "No word from her. And I thought this Keeper would be a document or a map or something that would solve everything. It hasn't. I feel so damn thwarted."

Savage said, "You've made a lot of progress."

His voice was wonderful. It built confidence underfoot as solid as a concrete sidewalk.

"Waldo Loring never had a friend named Harold Keeper," he said.

"How do you—"

"Waldo Loring's past has been investigated every way possible. We can almost tell you what he ate every meal for the past five years. We would know if Waldo Loring had Harold Keeper. Rest assured, we would know that."

"He was supposed to be in the lifeboatful of survivors—"

"No. He was not. I know where every man in that lifeboat can be found. And not one of them will be found in that trailer."

I felt better. Chilly. Nerve chills, but they were better than the awful feeling that I wasn't helping Glacia. I just sat there. The big bronze man had seated himself on the ground beside me, between this car and another. He was silent. Somewhere far off there was a giggling and yapping, and it sounded like several girls noisy from too much to drink. But it was coyotes. We were in the desert. Close to wild nature. But nature wasn't as wild as some of the humans around here.

"What is the rig?" I asked. "What are they trying to pull?"

"No rig any more, lady," said a voice.

It wasn't Doc Savage's voice. But it was close enough to have been. I looked up. I didn't make it out at first, except that it was big and hung with gross flesh. Why I didn't seem to understand that it was Harold was a mystery.

"Not any more," Harold said. "The rig is off. We have left just what is in my hand. So don't move."

We didn't move. Harold's gun was a big thing. Anybody but Harold would have needed a wheelbarrow to cart it around.

The night was still around us for a moment. Except for the coyotes far away, about as far away as my mind seemed from my body. I think my mind had fled that far be-

cause it couldn't stand staying in a place as scared as my body was.

"Lady, if you faint, do so quietly," Harold said.

Chapter X

ONE of those impatient men, Harold. He waited for me to swoon, and I didn't, but I probably tried. Savage had not moved, which showed good judgment.

"Lie down on the ground. Spreading eagle," Harold told Savage.

"Face up or face down?" Doc Savage asked.

"Down, of course."

"Whatever you say. But a man can get going from a face down position a lot quicker."

"You can give a demonstration of it if you want to," Harold said grimly. "It's about as wide as long with me."

There was a little silence, then Savage lay down on his face. Even lying on his face, obeying the order of a grossly fat devil with a gun, he did not surrender any of the competence that was always with him. Even in the darkness, where there was barely enough light to distinguish more than the presence of a hand on the end of an arm, he kept that feeling of ability. Harold got the same idea, evidently. Because he made a hissing sound through his teeth, ugly and serpentine.

"Mr. McBride!" Harold called softly.

The darkness stirred nearby, then the figure of Attorney McBride shaped up in it. He lingered a few yards distant. He seemed to be wishing he was a dried leaf and could blow away.

"Come here, Mr. McBride," said Harold.

The lawyer ventured closer. As if he was pushing his way through steel.

"This is Doc Savage, Mr. McBride," said Harold.

If Mr. McBride was breathing, he didn't show it.

Harold said, "You have heard of the sun that makes the tides, the U. S. Marines that make whatever marines make. Well, Mr. McBride, that gives you some idea. Because this is no less than Doc Savage."

McBride had no words.

"We didn't fool the great one, it seems," Harold said.

McBride replied with a deep breath. It shook coming in, and shook going out.

"We wasted our time," Harold said. "We went to a lot of trouble fixing a deal. And did we fix us a deal. Brother!"

Harold grew tired of McBride's answers.

He asked me, "Mote, isn't that what they call you? Mote. Well, Mote, didn't you think it was a nice deal?"

"It took me in," I said.

"That didn't make it good enough." Harold sighed, and in that pile of body, it was like steam going through a heating system. "You know what the deal was, don't you?"

"No," I said.

"Baby, you should see it by now. I was going to be your puppydog, see."

"Why?"

"Just to be around. Eyes open, you know. There were some flies in my ointment, and I was going to do a little fly-catching. Specifically was Doc Savage on this case? How much did he know—enough that we would have to knock him off? . . . The answer to the last is yes. Yup. Maybe we didn't waste all that finagling."

He seemed to have plenty of words. I didn't know what he was doing, trying to button up his own courage perhaps. And I didn't know how much of what he had said was lying, beyond the part of wanting to know where Doc Savage was involved in the case. He had known that all right, if he knew anything at all about what was going on, and he did.

Pretend to be Keeper so that he could find out just who was suspected of doing what and how much? That was more logical. It must be quite a mental strain to have someone like Doc Savage on your trail, and have him pretending that he wasn't. The temptation to do something about finding out just where the firm of Savage was going to do business—the temptation would be great. It would, when it ate on you long enough, be irresistible.

Yes, I could see where Harold would want to learn what Doc Savage was doing. It was even logical that Harold would go to the length of doing something slightly foolish in order to learn where the ax was going to fall.

And now I knew what was eating Harold. He was thinking along the same lines—he was reflecting what a damned fool he had

been to pull Harold Keeper on us. The ruminations weren't doing his temper any good.

Evidence of how accurate my notion was, Harold now kicked Doc Savage in the side. He did it twice, grunting both times with the effort.

If this did Harold's ego good, it wasn't noticeable in the deep-in-a-barrel voice when he spoke. The barrel was pretty tinny. "Search him, Mr. McBride," Harold said.

McBride didn't move, didn't speak, probably didn't breathe.

"McBride," Harold said. "Do you wish him to pull some gadget on us? The man isn't lying there letting me kick him in the ribs because he is afraid of me."

"Shoot him!" McBride blurted, finding his voice.

"I wish to God that I dared," Harold said. "On proper provocation, I probably would. But my brother wishes to consult him. . . . Damn you, McBride, search him! You're as useful as lipstick on an old maid."

McBride, operating as if he was driven by gears, got along with searching Doc Savage. While the hunt was in progress, Harold said, "I know about that anaesthetic gas you use, Savage. I'm holding my breath." I thought he was, too, part of the time.

"Feels like he's got a bulletproof vest on," McBride gasped.

Harold wasn't impressed. "I've been aiming at the back of his neck, anyway. . . . We will retire to the trailer and do this more thoroughly." He cocked his gun impressively, and the sound was like a well-thrown horse-shoe ringing the stake. "Let the retiring be of good judgment."

We entered the trailer, and I could see why Harold would feel disgusted. He had gone to a bit of trouble to decorate the trailer interior with the personality of Harold Keeper. He had filled it with dictionaries, nearly a hundred of them, all shapes, sizes and colors. I remembered how he had started off impressing his character on me by orating cockeyed definitions. Girl, the roebuck in its second year. He had evidently intended that to be his theme.

McBride began searching Savage again.

"Strip him," Harold said.

They did that, let me turn my back, and supplied Savage with what Harold said was his bathing trunks, and they gave Savage the

appearance of a bronze statue standing in a sack.

"Throw his stuff in the back of your car," Harold told McBride. "We'll dump it somewhere. I imagine it's full of bombs, or something. . . . Oh yes, then hook your car to the trailer."

McBride went out, and Harold took my purse and spent five minutes stealing glances into it and cracking open the little portable U.H.F. radio transmitter. He seemed to know what the latter was. "Ingenious," he said. "But no more than I expected."

I had been watching Doc Savage. I couldn't help it. The man's physical development was astounding, so much so that it was a little unnatural. Harold was impressed, too. He said, "You bat an eye at me, Savage, and I'm going to shoot you. Because looking at you scares the hell out of me. I don't know how I had the nerve to bring you this far. I must be crazy."

There was the sound of an automobile engine, followed by a slight jolt from the trailer, and metallic clanking. McBride showed us a face the color of an unbaked biscuit and said, "I'm hooked on."

"You know where to go," Harold told him. "Go there."

"But . . ." McBride swallowed quite audibly. He was having trouble with the simplest sentences.

"But what?"

"The trailer—the people at the hotel know it was here—won't they—it being gone—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harold told him. "But if you're saying we should be cunning some more, it's ridiculous. I'm winding this up with a bang."

"But we'll be suspected!" McBride wailed.

"Suspecting and catching are two different birds," Harold suggested. "We'll solve that problem in a broadminded way. We just won't be there."

McBride didn't think much of that. "You mean flee? Leave my law business?"

Harold sneered at him with his melon face. "Leave what law business? I thought you did a deal with us because you didn't have any law business."

"Oh, my God!" McBride wailed. "Where will we go?"

"I know a little place in Patagonia, right next to where Adolph Hitler lives," Harold told

him bitterly. "You can go along with me if you wish."

"I'm not joking," gasped the lawyer.

"Neither am I, brother. What about getting this caravan in motion? Are you giving that some thought?"

McBride ducked out of sight and Harold told us, "We had all better sit down. I have a hunch he is going to tow this trailer like a nervous bull dragging the chain in his nose."

He was right.

Later, when we seemed to be on a highway, I asked Harold a question. He appeared to like conversation anyway, because he had been doing plenty of it.

"McBride had the location of the *Victory Tumble*, the ship loaded with the processed uranium?" I asked.

"So you know about that, too." Harold said. "I guess it was a good thing I didn't leave you behind."

"I'm surprised Waldo Loring would give a lawyer information like that," I said.

Harold commented on this. "He didn't. Not exactly. He left an envelope with Attorney McBride. You should have seen the envelope—more wax seals on it than a high-school diploma. We were even scared to open it. Thought it might be booby-trapped."

"Oh, you've opened it?"

"Uh-huh. You want to know how that came about, honey? We were very clever—yeah, very. Just like sticks of stovewood are clever. But we finally ferreted out that Waldo Loring had a lawyer, and the lawyer was just about as shady as he was unprosperous, and so we presented the lawyer with a business deal. Sure we got a look at the envelope."

"Was the location of the *Victory Tumble* given?"

"Sure."

"Then you feel pretty good about everything, don't you?" I said.

"Shouldn't we?"

"I suppose so. You managed to kill Waldo Loring without anybody suspecting you."

"Thanks," Harold said. "I'm glad to hear it. I was having some doubts."

I had caught Doc Savage's eye. He had given me the slightest nod of approval. Not that he probably hadn't guessed all this far ahead of me, but he liked the way I was checking it.

"Was the envelope named Keeper?" I asked Harold.

"That's right, dear."

I thought Doc Savage had shaken his head slightly.

"So you killed Waldo Loring, Harold?" I asked.

The melon face looked at me. It became different.

"Baby, if I said yes to that, what would then have to happen to you?" Harold asked.

I knew why Savage had been shaking his head. He had known that I would talk myself into something. I had. Harold was still watching me and the melon face was now something that even the devil wouldn't like.

Chapter XI

IT was a ranch. It had to be a ranch, because they couldn't just camp out on the desert, for that would be a little conspicuous. But what surprised me was that Mr. Montgomery had owned the ranch for quite a while. Long enough for his name to be painted on the mailbox and for the weather to peel away most of some of the letters. The mailbox was one of those capacious ones, big as an elephant's stomach, which you see along the roads out in the open spaces where the mail-order houses do most of the business.

There was also a LAZY-M RANCH printed on the mailbox, and from that there was two miles of dusty road, then a squat adobe ranch house and bunkhouse and corals made in the Mexican fashion, of living devil's-walking-stick cactus.

A reception committee of three rifles and Mr. Montgomery, his daughter Colleen, and his flunky, Roy, was on hand.

Harold peered out of a window. He could read Mr. Montgomery's moods readily, it seemed.

"My brother is angry," Harold said.

I really believed then that Harold and Mr. Montgomery were brothers. And I was sure of it when I saw them together, for there was a sameness to their fatness, and they had identical ways of over-using words.

Mr. Montgomery used plenty of words when he saw Harold. All profane words—they came from the gutters of many parts of the world and some of them from the best dictionaries, and the last ones were even

worse. The total of it was that Mr. Montgomery felt Harold had wrecked everything. Not in those words. Not in words that anybody would want to say the way they were being said by one brother to another.

"All done?" Harold asked.

"No."

"Okay—this is just to fill in while you get your breath, brother. . . . You make me laugh. Me ruin the pitch by grabbing Savage and the lady sleuth? Why, you fat jackass, you shot that phony Indian twice. Shot a federal gent—that's who that Coming Going was. You're wanted for that. You're hiding out here. How could you be in any worse fix?"

"But you—you weren't suspected." Mr. Montgomery yelled at him. "Savage didn't even know you existed. You could have played Harold Keeper, the half-wit the girl had inherited, and strung along and kept tail on Savage for us."

Harold went yok-yok bitterly. "That was your stinking idea, brother, and I'll tell you what I think of it sometime when I have half a day," he said. "It didn't work. Savage caught on before I even got the chair warm."

He went on to tell Mr. Montgomery exactly what had happened. Half the words he used were brotherly opinions that came to him as he went along.

"We've got old Waldo Loring's chart of where the ship lies on a bank in water shallow enough for any fourteen-year-old kid in a bathing suit to reach," Harold finished. "Waldo is dead. Nobody knows for sure what was what—even if Waldo had the ship spotted and for sale. Savage, the lady sleuth, Savage's big monkey, are all here. We can dead them, too. Then we can take a nice trip until the skies clear. Now tell me more that's wrong?"

The recital had sobered Mr. Montgomery.

"Why didn't you shoot Savage on the spot?" he yelled.

"And make the world a present of his body?" Harold yelled back at him. "That would make some stink, that would."

Mr. Montgomery said, "Oh!"

Harold continued bellowing. "But if you want the plain truth, I was afraid to kill him. I'd rather assassinate a president."

Mr. Montgomery started to sneer. Harold stopped that.

Harold said, "Now you tell me why you didn't knock off Monk Mayfair? Or even the Loring girl. I want to hear it."

Mr. Montgomery was slow with his answer. "Come in the house," he said.

"You were afraid yourself, that's why?" bellowed Harold.

"Come in the house."

I said, "Glacia is here!" I think I said it, because nobody else looked as if they had made the funny little wailing.

Glacia was dead. That was what I thought. Mr. Montgomery had killed her, and killed Monk Mayfair, and that was why he wanted his brother to come into the house. He wanted to display the handiwork.

We all went into the ranch house. It was still night, and the lights were on. Kerosene lanterns, two of them smoking from poorly trimmed wicks. The stuff in the house had been used hard a long time ago, and then not used for a few years. Nobody had taken the trouble to brush away dust, and Glacia's face and clothing had collected quite a bit of it.

Glacia was a mess. A thoroughly scared mess, but she looked wonderful because she was alive. She had only to be breathing to be gorgeous. She looked at me, and she bleated, "Oh, Mote, they've got you, too!" And she turned—or turned as much as she could, tied to a table—and called Mr. Montgomery words I didn't know she knew. She didn't equal Mr. Montgomery's recent performance on his brother, but she did make herself clear.

It wasn't about herself that Glacia was angry. It was for me, because they were bothering me. I wanted to fold my knees, just fold everything, and sob. Because Glacia, although half of the time she might be mean and self-centered, would come through when someone else was in real trouble. Not that I'd been afraid she wouldn't pay off in blue chips. Or had I? Maybe that was why I wanted to cry.

Monk Mayfair was tied to a table. Under a table, really. So was Glacia. There were two heavy tables, evidently from the days when the place had a heavy complement of hungry cowhands, and the prisoners had been placed under these, roped to the four legs. The whole effect was ridiculous, but I could see that it was efficient. Mr. Montgomery's imagination had been at play, probably.

Monk Mayfair had first word. "How's Joe Lybeck?"

"As fine as anyone can be in the hospital," Doc Savage said.

Who was Joe Lybeck? for a minute I didn't get that one. . . . Coming Going. Joe Lybeck was Coming Going.

Monk pointed at Harold with chin and glare. "That one was my downfall," he said. "I hadn't placed him as in this. Him and the lawyer. I tried to tell you to watch out for her inheritance—meaning Glacia's inheritance, which would be so-fat here—just as they got to me."

"How did they trap you?" Doc asked.

Monk said, "I am ashamed to say it, but they didn't. They just walked up and pointed a gun at me. I tried to talk to you and he smashed the radio, and brought me here."

That seemed to settle that, so I asked Glacia, "How are you, dear?"

"I'm great," she wailed.

"They scare you much?"

They had scared her enough that she didn't want to try to tell me how much. Instead, she howled, "There's something so damned undignified about being tied under a table. You feel like a dog." And she burst into tears.

Mr. Montgomery liked to make little speeches so well that he made us one now. He said, "Yes, indeed, there are few less dignified places than under a table. If you want to undermine an individual's morale, just tie him under a table—"

"Oh, shut up," Harold told his brother.

"All right, brother," said Mr. Montgomery.

"Words all over you all the time like fleas," Harold complained.

They looked at each other. They weren't angry. They just looked at one another, and the question being argued visually didn't have a thing to do with words. It was: Who is going to do murder wholesale. Kill the prisoners. You? Me? Roy? Lawyer McBride?

They both looked at Roy.

Roy said, "Huh-uh. Not Roy." He got it out in little gulps, as if someone was trying to give him poison.

They looked at Attorney McBride. But not for long. He was more than pale; he was beginning to turn a cyanosed blue. He wouldn't be slaying anyone. He might even die himself, unaided.

Finally they glanced at Colleen, and she didn't say or do anything, did not even smile.

Doc Savage spoke. His voice doubtless wasn't as quiet, even, unfrightened as it seemed. It couldn't have been. But compared to the other voices that had been making words, it was deep peace. It made me realize how terrified everyone else was—the brothers of the job of killing us, and us of being killed.

Savage said, "This is a logical time for our side to be grasping at straws. Will you take that into account, listen to me a moment, and accept the fact that what I say isn't straw-snatching?"

"Shut up!" Harold said.

"It won't take long. Two sentences," Savage said.

"Let him say two sentences," Mr. Montgomery growled. There were beads of perspiration on his forehead, neck, the rim of his jaw, the places where nerves were close to the surface.

Savage said: "You carry a cane habitually, Mr. Montgomery. Don't you know that portable radio gadgets can be made small enough to fit in a hollowed-out cane of the size of yours?"

Nobody said anything for longer than I was able to hold my breath. Then Harold asked, "You got that stick here, brother?"

Mr. Montgomery said something that had no sound. It did not seem to be the word yes, but it was assent anyway.

"The girl sleuth had one in her purse," Harold advised. "It was smaller than a hearing-aid."

His brother wheeled and went into another room and came back carrying the large walking stick. He brought it close to one of the kerosene lamps. The sweat on his palms had made shiny spots on the nodular surface of the wood. He put his eyes much closer to the stick than the stick was close to the lamp, and for something like two minutes the loudest noise in the room was made by a fly walking across a window pane.

When Mr. Montgomery lifted his face, it had come apart. His jaw had sagged far down in his chins and only the rubbery lips were visible.

"It may be just a scratch," he whimpered.

Harold screamed, "Has that stick been tampered with?"

"A scratch. . . . It may only be a scratch," Mr. Montgomery said, using stark horror instead of breath to make the speech.

"Break it!" Harold yelled. "Goddam it, break the thing open. Let's see what they've done to us. How the hell could they have gotten that stick?"

Savage said, "We've been watching you for days. Mr. Montgomery was very careful with that walking stick. He stood it in the left rear corner of the clothes closet each night."

Mr. Montgomery bought that.

"The left rear corner—oh my God," he wailed. "They did! They—"

"Break it open!" screamed Harold.

Savage said, "The purpose of a tiny radio transmitter, of course, would be to keep accurate tab on your whereabouts. The other agents working with me will naturally have located you here and—"

Somewhere somehow I had gotten the idea that Doc Savage never told a lie. Where the notion came from, I don't know. But it was a lie. There was no radio in the walking stick. Or maybe, the way he had told it, he had merely stated a hypothetical possibility so convincingly that it seemed truth.

Because, when Mr. Montgomery brought the cane up—high over his head—to slam it down on the table and smash it into bits, every eye was on it. Every eye, all of everybody's attention.

It was buildup. That was all. Done wonderfully. Everyone thought there was a gadget in the cane, and nobody was thinking about anything else.

Savage stepped to Harold and sank hand, wrist and some forearm into Harold's midsection. The effect was somewhat as if a partly inflated inner tube had been squeezed, causing the rest of the inner tube to suddenly fill out. Both Harold's arms flew out from his sides, stiffly; he looked like something in a Macy parade.

A bright object flashed past me. Harold's gun.

Going about his business, Savage brushed against Colleen, knocking her into my arms. I went to work on her. Her hair first, with both hands.

Roy tried to run backward and use his gun at the same time, but it wasn't a success. His feet merely beat up and down on the floor, and his hand raked the rifle hammer twice, trying to cock it, but couldn't get

the hammer far enough back to stay on cock. He was trying vainly to fire the uncocked gun when Savage hit him.

Mr. Montgomery appeared to be frozen in an attitude of high sacrifice, holding the walking stick aloft. Probably that was an illusion, the result of things happening rather rapidly.

Monk Mayfair was having convulsions under the table. Trying to take the legs off the table. He seemed quite disappointed with the results—as if he'd never entertained a doubt but that he could jerk all four legs from the table with ease. But he wasn't doing it. He began to yell.

Most of this impressed itself on me in a detached fashion, because Colleen was doing enough to me that I could hardly be classed as a spectator. Colleen knew some sort of judo. Anyway, I was very busy trying to keep her from taking off one of my arms.

The lawyer, McBride got a running start and left his feet head-first for a window. His window-diving technique was correct. He hauled his coat up over his arms and head to protect his face as he hit. But there was a detail he hadn't noticed. The window was covered on the outside with heavy planks spiked in place. He knocked himself out neatly.

The ranch house shook a little, possibly from Mr. Montgomery falling, and I think I yelled for fifteen minutes for someone to detach Colleen from me. Somebody finally did.

Chapter XII

IT was exactly 8:10 a. m. and the sun had finally managed to climb over the tops of the mountains in the west. It was throwing a great deal of angry light, and already some heat, over two blanketed and feathered phony Indians who were stuffing the luggage of a departing guest in the back seat of a sedan. The automobile departed, and the redskins began an argument concerning the tip they had received. It was a dime, and the argument was about exactly what word they should use to describe the guest if they wished to refer to him during the day, which they probably would.

Coming Going said, "Let me look at that map again." Later he said, "Now this is what I like. A regular honest-to-God treasure map."

Monk Mayfair suggested, "The old guy didn't show much imagination."

"Who wants imagination? If old Waldo Loring had any imagination, he'd have known anybody who would buy a shipload of uranium these days would knock his brains out. . . You say Mr. Montgomery had this on him?"

"Right in his hip pocket."

"Tell me more," Coming Going urged. "What was really in the walking stick?"

"Nothing," Monk said. "We hadn't touched it. Doc just remembered that you had searched the room, and said the cane was standing in the closet while they were asleep."

Coming Going grinned happily. "I wish I had been there."

"I would have sold you my part of it cheap," I said.

"Mote, you were wonderful!" Glacia said delightedly.

I nodded. "That's right. I gave the star performance. I was the only one on our side who got licked."

They had converted a second-floor room with an eastern exposure into a hospital room for Coming Going, alias federal agent Joe Lybeck. . . . Presently Doc Savage came in with the news that the fat brothers and Colleen and Roy were locked up, and

that attorney McBride had nothing more serious than a fractured skull.

Then Savage asked Glacia and me if we would care to have breakfast with him. He got an acceptance halfway through the invitation.

"We certainly played hard to get that time," I told Glacia when we were in our room trying to make ourselves look as if we hadn't been up all night letting people frighten us.

"He's a gorgeous hunk of man," Glacia said. She hung stars on the statement.

I was starting to put on a shoe, and I just sat there with it in both hands. It was all right, probably. Glacia was Glacia, and a little thing like last night wasn't likely to change her. But she was so damned objective. She knew what she wanted, and went after it. It was pretty obvious that right now she had Doc Savage in mind. And was I upset about that? I'll tell the world I was.

I put the shoe on carefully. I straightened the seam of a nylon. I hoped I looked cool and collected, because I wasn't. It had just dawned on me how interesting life could be. It probably wouldn't be. But possible? Who knows?

They don't shoot you for hoping.

THE END