STRANGE FISH

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

Table of Contents

STRANGE FISH

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

Chapter I

THE fat man lifted his hat off his bald head and said, “Oh, pardon me. I'm so sorry, Miss Stevens!”

Paris Stevens was often recognized by people she hadn't the slightest recollection of having seen before, so she thought nothing of it. The fat man had bumped into her. He'd apologized. She didn't know him. That was all. Paris gave him a briefly impersonal smile, and skipped on her way.

Skipping was only figurative. It described how she felt. She felt fine, fresh and bright as a daisy in the springtime. It was a wonderful morning. It was a wonderful improvement over hospitals.

She had a new hat, too. It was in the box she carried, a zany of a hat. She'd paid over fifty dollars for it.

Her limousine was waiting at the curb. The car wasn't exactly a block long, but it was the nearest thing to it you could get these days. The chauffeur wore gray−green livery. Paris got in. “Home, Abner,” she said deliciously.

Paris leaned back luxuriously—and a funny thing happened. She remembered the fat man. She remembered his large, round, somewhat cheese−colored face, and his large round moist eyes. The eyes were as expressionless as ripe plums resting in a gravy bowl. Something—perhaps it was the eyes—made the cold−footed ants go up and down Paris' spine.

Bless us to Betsy, what's gotten into me, Paris wondered. I didn't know Fatty. I never saw him before. He's nothing in my life.

The limousine rolled up Fifth Avenue. People on the sidewalks craned their necks to look at the limousine, because such cars were not often seen these days. Some of them said excitedly that there went Paris Stevens. One acquaintance waved at Paris. Gonnerman, the cop at the corner of Fifty−seventh, gave her a grin and a salute.

Golly, it's good to be home, Paris thought. It's good to be home and have a few million dollars and have the cop at the corner of Fifty−seventh wave at you. It's good to be alive, and it's good to have plans, and it's good to know you're in this good God−blessed wonderful United States.

Paris Stevens was a very beautiful girl. But this wasn't a complete description, because Paris was a character. She was more interesting than her looks, if that was possible.

Paris was a career girl—after a fashion. She had a ranch in Oklahoma, and the ranch had more oil wells on it than it had cattle, and she had a perfume business on Madison Avenue which would go back to booming after the war.

Paris was domineering; she frequently said sharp, clever things before she thought, wouldn't take advice, and she did not have a high opinion of men in general. She regarded the human male as a form of bumbling oxen.

She occupied a fabulous Park Avenue duplex, at which the car now stopped.

Abner, the chauffeur, said, “The fat man followed us home.”

“What?”

“I will,” said Abner, “give him a kick in the pants, if you say.”

“You must be mistaken,” Paris said in a puzzled tone.

“No, I ain't,” Abner said. “Take a look. He hopped a cab. It's that yellow Sky−View.”

“I refuse,” said Paris, “to have this beautiful day marred by a fat man.”

She resolved that she would walk into the apartment house without looking back to see whether the fat man was there in a cab, but her resolution slipped, and she took a peek. He was there. His round cheese face and moist plum eyes were looking at her.

She couldn't have explained why she shivered.

PARIS slipped out of her mink and gave it to Callahan, her colored maid. She unwrapped the new hat she'd bought and put the silly thing on her head. It was nice. Of course, Paris thought, the months I went around wearing WAC headgear may have softened me up a little for a thing like this.

Now, suddenly, she was sure that tears were in her eyes. She leaned back, and let them come. It was so good, so awfully damn good, to be away from the grim river of destruction and death, and dogged, awful tiredness that was war. It was so good to feel like crying. She did.

She had been in the WAC about a year and a half, and despite her marked ability for organization and telling people what to do in civilian life, she hadn't risen higher than sergeant. She had, however, gotten across. She

was one of the first WAC contingent to land in Africa, and later she was one of the few of that group who got to England, then into Normandy shortly after the first big strike was made into the Continent. One day a Junkers came over and dropped a random bomb, and it landed practically exactly on the roof of the building where Sergeant Paris Stevens was greasing an ambulance. When she got out of the hospital, they presented her with a medical discharge. That had been yesterday; that is, she had finally been released from what she hoped was the last hospital, yesterday. She was as good as new. Not very strong, but all together again.

She perched the hat on top of its box where she could look at it, and bounced down on a chaise−lounge. She should, she thought, make some plans; and the first plan should be for a vacation.

Actually, she would like to have planned a dozen activities, but the doctor had assured her she had no more strength than the proverbial cat, and she knew he was right. A vacation, then, was the first thing in order.

But that needn't come for a day or two. First, she'd go to a theater, a good restaurant, and buy some more clothes.

That night she went to Viville's, the beautiful restaurant on Park in the Fifties and had onion soup made the way the French weren't making it these days. People came over to her table. Acquaintances. She had looked forward to this first night on the town. But somehow nothing seemed to strike sparks.

At the theater later, she had the same feeling. Emptiness. Something lacking. She just didn't feel as if she belonged to anything.

The play, for instance, didn't take hold of her as it should have. Yet it was a good play; the critics had said it was good, and she knew excellent theater when she saw it. Nothing was touching her, somehow.

She was not pleased, when she went home before midnight, with her first evening on the town. She noticed a serious look on Abner's face, but its significance didn't touch her then.

And when she entered her apartment, loneliness immediately took her. It was a forlorn feeling. Callahan, her colored maid, was out tonight. Callahan had a married sister who lived in Harlem, and Callahan spent her off nights up there. The loneliness wasn't flimsy; it was uncomfortable. It was a dark mood. It was worse than a mood. Paris couldn't understand it.

I have, she thought, no relatives. Not a living soul that I can call family. I'm a rather attractive vegetable, but I'm the only one growing in the patch now. They're all dead.

Good God, what's wrong with me tonight? She dropped down on a chair, and tried to laugh at herself.

Then she had an idea. She picked up one of the telephones—the blue one, which was a direct wire to the room of Abner, the chauffeur, in the garage annex—and got Abner's hoarse voice.

“Abner,” she said. “Why were you looking so gloomy on the way home?”

Abner hesitated, and when he did answer, she knew he was evading. “I'm sorry if I gave that impression, Miss Paris,” Abner said. “I'm feeling perfectly all right.”

“Cut that out, Abner!” Paris said. “You haven't been able to fool me in years. Now out with it. What's eating you?”

Abner sulked for a moment.

“I didn't want to tell you,” he said uneasily, “but I saw that fat man two or three times this evening. I think he was following you.”

The cold ants suddenly re−traveled Paris' spine. The creepy feeling was so strong that she wondered: what on earth is eating me?

She knew that Abner was worrying. He was the worrying type. A cranky old biddy. He'd fret all night, if she didn't ease his mind.

“Don't worry about it,” she said, more lightly than she felt. “Tomorrow, if he's still around, I'll have Gonnerman or some other nice cop change his line of activity.”

“But what's he following you for?” Abner blurted.

“I haven't the slightest shade of an idea,” Paris said truthfully. “Now quit worrying, and go to sleep.”

“Thank you, Miss Paris. Good night.”

“Good night,” Paris said.

She sat there, analyzing the strange fright that had seized her. This morning she'd felt fine, so it couldn't have been one of her indigo days. The change had come that afternoon. She had seen the fat man, and after that things hadn't been the same. The fat man, then, was upsetting her.

It was strange that the fellow should have such an effect on her nerves.

DAYLIGHT was streaking the eastern clouds with flame−colored light when Paris was awakened. It was a bizarre morning sky, packed with clouds that looked sulky and dramatic. It took Paris some seconds to begin wondering what had awakened her.

The east wall of her bedroom was all plate glass, the better to see the breathless view of the Queensborough bridge and the river beyond. But this morning the view seemed composed entirely of the dark clouds.

Paris decided that Callahan had shown up for work, and had made some small noise that had awakened her.

“Callahan!” Paris called.

There was no answer, and the stillness seemed to draw her nerves tight. She wished she had had a gun, but there wasn't one. Guns are not usually kept lying around New York apartments.

Oh, she was dumb! There was a shotgun in the closet with her sports things. She slipped from between the covers and got the gun, a good 12−gauge skeet weapon. She loaded it. By now she felt a little foolish.

She went to the door, holding the gun casually, convinced now that there was nothing alarming.

The fat man was in her living room.

For Paris, it was an awful start, discovering him. She jumped. Convulsive surprise brought her finger tight on the skeet gun's trigger. The gun's roar was ear−splitting.

The shot charge hit nowhere near the fat man. It tore a smear of paper off the west wall, scooping off plaster.

Up straight went the fat man. He had been going through Paris' handbag, the one she had carried last night. He probably jumped a good two inches off the floor.

He was already running when he hit the floor. He made for the door, head back, eyes first on Paris, then on the door. He managed, however, to maintain a coldblooded dignity. He didn't seem really scared. And he seemed furiously angry.

“Stop!” Paris shrieked. “Stop, or I'll shoot!”

He didn't stop.

Paris didn't shoot again.

She pursued the fat man instead. He slammed the first door as soon as he was through it, but didn't lock it. Paris got it open. The fat man was going across the hall to the front door. He yanked the front door open and popped out into the long elevator hall.

Callahan, the colored maid, was standing at one of the elevators. Callahan was talking to Roberto, her boy−friend, who operated the elevator.

“Callahan!” Paris cried. “Stop that fellow!”

The fat man shot past Callahan into the elevator. He grabbed the controls. Roberto said something angry, shoving him away. The fat man hit Roberto just above the belt buckle, a blow that doubled Roberto on to the floor.

The elevator disappeared downward, with the fat man's hand on the control.

CALLAHAN stared at Paris, then at the shotgun, then said, “Cut off my head and call me Hitler, Miss Paris! What on earth is you all doing to that nice Mister Watt.”

“Who?” Paris gasped.

“That nice Mister Ben Watt. Him you was chasing.”

Paris stared at the maid in amazement. “Callahan, you know that guy?”

“Yes'm, I sure do.”

“Who,” Paris demanded, “is he?”

Callahan blinked owlishly. “Why, Missy, isn't he your interior decorator?”

A few questions brought the rest of it out. The man had fooled Callahan. He had told Callahan that Paris had engaged him to do over her apartment; he had said that Paris had ordered him not to worry her or bother her with details. Paris was in the hospital at the time. It was a logical story. The man had acted like an interior decorator. He brought materials, color charts, made sketches.

“How often,” Paris asked, “was he in my apartment?”

“Nearly every day.”

Paris called the police. Within thirty minutes, a police detective was there. Paris had described the fat man over the telephone, and the detective brought some rogue's gallery pictures. None of the pictures were of the fat man.

After the detective had gone, Paris fainted. She just lay back and passed out.

She wasn't out long. After she awakened, she lay still, weak and ill, and thought . . . She was just out of the hospital. She was in no shape to cope with anything violent. She was too weak; she had no spirit for it.

She thought of her ranch in Oklahoma.

She called Callahan.

“Get me a ticket to Tulsa, Oklahoma,” she directed Callahan.

Chapter II

THE morning sunlight was bright on Tulsa's Union Station, on the Philtower Building, and the other buildings. Johnny Toms was at the steps when the pullman porter helped Paris off the train.

“How,” said Johnny Toms. His face was expressionless.

“How,” Paris said. Then she laughed. “Heap long time no see you, Chief.”

Johnny Toms grinned a little. But all he said was, “Sure thing.”

He wore moccasins, corduroy trousers, beaded belt, violent plaid shirt. His black hair was long, combed to look as if there should have been a feather in it. He had a majestic hooked nose and snapping black eyes.

Paris indicated her bags. “Heap baggage,” she said. “Think you can carry?”

“Ugh,” Johnny Toms said.

Paris wanted to laugh again. Johnny Toms was a fake. He was actually about one−tenth Osage Indian, if that. But he liked to give the impression that he was a laconic redskin of the old school.

Johnny Toms was tops as an Indian when he was emotionally moved—when he was very pleased, very sad, or very angry. In his most aroused moments, he practically stopped speaking English.

“How are things on the ranch?” Paris asked.

“So−so.” His dark face was carefully wooden. “Cows got blackleg. Horse crop no good. Cowboys lazy. Losing money.”

Which meant that the ranch would show a good profit this year.

Paris followed Johnny Toms and her bags out of the station.

Johnny had come for her in his personal car, a mark of honor. It was an awful−looking car. It was painted red, green and yellow, with Indian designs. It looked like a Navajo blanket with wheels.

Johnny heaved her bags carelessly in the back. He got behind the wheel by stepping over the door. He didn't bother to open the car door for Paris. He never did. He treated all females as if they were squaws.

“How things in big, dirty city of New York?” he asked.

“So−so,” Paris said.

She remembered the fat man, and shivered. She hadn't been able to put the fellow fully out of her mind.

Johnny Toms tramped on the starter. The engine gave out a series of explosions reminiscent of a 75−mm. cannon. There was no muffler.

Looking pleased, showing off, Johnny Toms drove up Main Street, over to Boulder, back to Main, back to Boulder again, deliberately turned around in the middle of the busiest street. Finally he drove, his car sounding like a battlefield, out of town via the most quiet and dignified residential boulevard.

Johnny Toms looked disappointed. “You sick?”

“Why?”

“You no raise hell,” Johnny Toms said. “You must be puny.”

JOHNNY TOMS, his behavior to the contrary, was not dumb. He had a college degree. Harvard, of all places. He had presented this as part of his references when he applied for his job four or five years ago. He had never referred to it again. Whenever he could, he gave the impression that he had never been to school at all.

But he was sharp, honest and loyal. He had to be sharp to manage the S−slash−S, which was the Stevens ranch. The ranch produced more than livestock. There was oil. The wells were operated under lease by different companies. It was Johnny Toms' job to keep an eye on the oil men and see they didn't get away with anything. It was no job for a baby. Nor for a naive redskin.

But he was certainly an unorthodox fellow.

Paris was eager for the ranch to come in sight. When it did, she got a thrill. It spread over the picturesque Osage country, the red−oak hills, the flat, lush prairie.

The house was low, rambling, of stone. A picture place, but comfortable looking. It looked like a ranch, with corrals, branding chutes, bunk−houses. The oil wells were back in the hills, out of sight.

Johnny Toms stopped his god−awful car in the driveway.

“Big Bird!” he screamed.

The screech wasn't necessary. Big Bird, the Osage woman who had charge of the house, was running to the car already. “Paris, oh Paris darling!” she cried.

Johnny Toms claimed Big Bird was his aunt. This was doubtful. Paris hugged her. Big Bird was wonderful.

Johnny Toms leaned over the wheel of his car, seemingly asleep. Suddenly he said, “Paris, you scared?”

Paris stared at him. “What gave you such an idea?”

“Ugh. What eyes for?” Johnny Toms said, and drove off toward his cabin.

Big Bird had everything ready in the house. “That Johnny,” she said, “gets worse every day. What kind of a show did he put on?”

“He took the muffler off his car and drove up and down every street in Tulsa,” Paris said. “It's a wonder we weren't thrown in jail.”

“Probably had it all fixed up with the police chief,” Big Bird said knowingly. “He's a fake. You know what? I don't believe be has any Indian blood at all in him.”

“I wouldn't be surprised,” Paris said.

“He's glad to see you.”

“Yes, I could see that,” Paris agreed. “His welcome did me a lot of good. I was feeling pretty low when I got off the train.”

She went to her room, which was big, many−windowed and gave a picturesque view of the rolling Osage hill country. The room had a western decorative theme. Guns, blankets, guns, cow brands, hides, guns. Six−shooters and flintlocks and buffalo guns. Paris stared at the walls. The theme of the place was violent.

Uneasily, Paris changed into slacks. By that time, the wild−and−woolly atmosphere of the room had frightened her noticeably.

“Big Bird,” she called. “Will you ask Johnny Toms to come back to the house?”

JOHNNY TOMS said almost nothing while Paris was telling him about the fat man. Johnny was plaiting a horsehair quirt. He gave, seemingly, most of his attention to the quirt.

Paris left out nothing. She was, she realized, relieved to get the story told to someone she trusted. She discovered it made her feel better to go into great detail, so she did.

After she finished, Johnny Toms was silent. He finished three or four plaits in his quirt.

“No idea who this fat boy is?” he asked.

“He told Callahan his name was Ben Watt.”

“That wouldn't mean it was.”

“Naturally.”

“Sounds mysterious.” Johnny Toms looked at her intently. “Women are liars by nature. Maybe you forgot and left out some.”

Paris shook her head. “Some day, Johnny, you are going to get married, and your wife is going to beat you to death. No, I didn't leave out anything.”

“You didn't get in anything in the war?”

Paris grimaced. “In the war, I did what my WAC duties called for. It was thrilling. There was nothing mysterious. Nothing heroic happened to me. War is mostly waiting. The rest is work, awful unending work and, sometimes, being afraid. No, Johnny, I didn't get involved in any Mata Hari work, and I wasn't a spy, and I never saw that fat man before in my life. I'm just a WAC who was in the wrong place and kept a date with a bomb.”

Johnny Toms eyed her narrowly. “Feel rocky, eh?”

“Oh, I'm not a helpless invalid, but I'll say that I've felt better in my time. Don't get ideas about my health. My brain, at least, is as healthy as a dog.”

“Oklahoma,” said Johnny, “will be good for you. Oklahoma great place. Will kill or cure you.”

“Why do you think I came here?” Paris said gratefully. “I know I'll get to feeling better. Not that I feel tough now. I don't. I feel fairly fine, only weak. But I'm scared.”

Johnny Toms made a tossing gesture. “Poof! Throw it away. Forget this fat cookie.”

“That's easier said than done.”

“Nothing to it. You try. Forget fat boy. You left him in New York.”

Johnny Toms went out flourishing the horsehair quirt he was making. Outdoors, he burst into a howling cowboy song. The one about burying him not on the lone prairie. At the end of each verse, he howled like a coyote, honked like a goose and imitated a whip−poor−will. The effect was cheering. Paris knew he was doing it to raise her spirits. She was pleased.

THE wind shifted about six o'clock. There was a bustling little wind storm which a flier would have called a cold front. Then the wind changed. It came from the north, bringing the smell of crude oil from the wells beyond the hills.

Paris sprawled in an easy chair on the porch. She grimaced at the oil odor, but not unpleasantly. Oil was Oklahoma. She didn't know when she dozed off.

Johnny Toms' “Psst!” awakened her. He whispered, “Make like an oyster. No noise.”

Paris sat up. “What is it?”

“What would it take to make you yell?”

“Quite a lot,” Paris said.

“Okay. Don't. Fatty is here.”

Paris stopped breathing for a moment. “Where?”

“I did some broadcasting,” Johnny Toms breathed. “I described the fat boy to the cowhands, then sent them around to describe him to some other people. They described him to the cowhands on the Four−Seven, to the cotton farmers in the valley and their colored hired hands, and to the Osage Indians.”

He fell silent. In the corral, two saddle horses got into a biting and kicking affray. They squealed and slammed their hoofs against each other, against the corral bars. It was a frightening sort of an uproar.

“Fatty,” said Johnny Toms, “is camped on Sugar Creek. He is pretending to be a sport from Tulsa on a fishing trip.”

“That close!” Paris gasped.

Sugar Creek was not more than two miles over the hills.

“Uh−huh,” Johnny Toms said. “Furthermore, he has been showing too much interest in the ranch here. With binoculars.”

“But how on earth did he come from New York so quickly.”

“Airplane, maybe.”

Paris shivered. “I don't understand this.”

Johnny Toms had been talking as any young man would talk. It seemed to occur to him that he was out of character. He became a redskin.

“Heap mystery,” he said. “We go ketchum.”

“You what?”

“Ketchum. Give him works.”

“Kidnapping,” Paris reminded, “is supposed to have a law against it.”

“You object?”

“Not,” said Paris, “in the least.”

“Okay.” Johnny Toms stood up. “We ketchum.”

“When?”

“Now.”

“I'm going along,” Paris said, standing up.

“Nix, you're a squaw,” said Johnny Toms, alarmed.

“I am,” said Paris, “a former member of the Women's Army Corps. I have been shot at. I have been bombed on. I have seen a thing called an invasion, which included more hell than you will ever see here in Oklahoma. So count me in.”

“Heap no good,” muttered Johnny Toms. “Should have kept mouth shut.” He walked away. “Come on. Lucky I saddled horse for you.”

“You fake!” Paris said.

COWBOYS came out of the darkness. They came silently, with expressionless faces. Most of them were Indians or part Indians, but they were as civilized as anybody.

“Nobody prowling around?” Johnny Toms asked them.

They said there wasn't, apparently.

“Thought we heard somebody,” Johnny Toms told Paris. “That's why I asked you not to make any noise.”

They mounted the horses. The horses, Paris discovered, were necessary because Johnny Toms intended to approach the camp on Sugar Creek from the rear. This meant circling, a ride of about four miles. It was a wild section, and there was no road fit for an automobile.

Very little was said during the ride. They followed cattle trails, and the dust underfoot made a thick, silencing carpet. There were Paris, Johnny Toms and four cowboys.

They rode the horses to within a quarter of a mile of the camp.

“There's no need of fooling around about this,” Johnny Toms whispered. “Joe, you stay with the broncs.”

Paris was glad he didn't try to make her stay with the horses. She wouldn't have done it. The excitement was doing something that pleased her. It was driving the fear away.

They walked in silence.

“Skulk,” Johnny Toms warned.

They drew near the camp. It was quite dark now. Paris could see firelight through the trees.

“Fred and Little Toe take the other side. Little Toe, you can croak like a frog. Do it three times,” Johnny Toms whispered. “Buck and Frosty stay with us.”

Fred and Little Toe went away. Their quietness surprised Paris. Indians really can move silently, she thought.

She watched the campfire. There seemed to be a tent of tan canvas, but she could see no one. The fire was a bed of embers, as if it had burned low. A tree frog croaked three times. Little Toe.

Johnny Toms said, “Back me up.”

He began to walk, and to whistle. He whistled Yankee Doodle. A short 30−30 lever−action carbine rested across his folded arms.

They walked into the camp. Nothing stirred. Red light from the campfire coals made the night shadows steady and black.

The campfire had an unpleasant smell. Something had been thrown into it to burn. Garbage, maybe. Still, the smell was more of rags or leather.

“Hello, there!” Johnny Toms called.

A voice from inside the tent said, “You took your time getting here.”

Johnny Toms jumped slightly, then said, “There wasn't any special time mentioned in our invitation.” Johnny's rifle was pointing at the tent, and his dark eyes were intent and suspicious.

There was silence. Fred and Little Toe had come up on the other side of the camp. They stood there motionless in the night. Buck and Frosty were close to Paris.

“Be careful in there!” Johnny Toms said to the tent. He grabbed the tent flap and threw it open. He popped a flashlight beam inside.

The tent was the pyramid type which used a center pole.

The man inside was sitting on the ground, his back against the tent center pole.

He wasn't the fat man.

The fact that he wasn't the fat man was so surprising that everyone was startled into silence.

The man looked at them steadily. His eyes were wide, without luster, without emotion, movement or expression. “Come in,” he said. “I want to ask you about the belonesox.”

Chapter III

THE man's length and thinness and boniness gave him a ridiculous Daddy−Long−Legs look. He sat there against the tent pole with every appearance of being folded in the middle. He wore a dark suit, good heavy cloth. The suit coat had narrow lapels. A foreign design, continental. He was still watching them, but his eyes seemed not to have moved or changed in the least.

“Where's fat boy?” Johnny Toms asked.

“He went away,” the man said.

“Who are you?”

“Porter,” the man said. He seemed not interested in them or their questions, but to have another goal toward which he was driving. “What about the belonesox?” he asked. “Have you got it?”

Paris met Johnny Toms' puzzled glance. She could see Johnny's face in the flashlight glow. She shook her head. Belonesox. What was it?

“Bobby−sox,” Johnny Toms said. “Any particular gal you mean?”

The man's eyes suddenly closed. His lids just dropped, and remained down.

He spelled it out for them. “B−e−l−o−n−e−s−o−x,” he spelled.

Again Johnny glanced at Paris. She shook her head.

“What's it?” Johnny asked the man.

The man's lips came off his teeth. Not a smile.

“Don't waste time lying,” he said.

“Look, we came after the fat man,” Johnny Toms said. “What's his name—the fat man's name?”

The man sitting against the tent pole didn't answer. He kept his eyes closed.

Johnny Toms scowled.

“Ben Watt,” he said. “Is that his name?”

The man opened his eyes. His eyes had changed. They looked as if there were a gray film over them.

“The belonesox,” he said. “My God, we know you got it. But what did you do with it?”

Johnny Toms lost his temper. He stepped into the tent. He said, “Podner, I don't get all this. You better start talking at the beginning.”

“He left me here,” the man said.

“Who did?”

“The fat man.”

“Why?”

“I was dead,” the man said.

He turned his head a little, very slowly. His tongue appeared between his lips, not as if he was licking his lips, but as if the tongue were hanging out. His head skidded off the tent pole, followed by his shoulders. He sprawled out on the earth. His eyes remained open.

Johnny Toms sank beside the man quickly. He grabbed the man's wrist and felt for a pulse. He pulled the man's coat open and gave one glance.

“God!” he said.

PARIS stepped back swiftly. She had seen much of death in England and France. She had never become accustomed to it. Not even a little. The impact on her now, this moment, was as harsh as it had been the first time.

The two cowboys Fred and Little Toe were close to Paris. Fred started to step between her and the body. She avoided him, and moved back into the tent.

Sounding wild, Johnny Toms said, “Get her out of here!”

Paris said, “Stop being a fool, Johnny! I may not like it, but this isn't the first time I've seen it.”

“Not the first—” He stared at her. “Oh, you mean death.”

“Let me see if he's dead,” Paris said.

He was dead all right.

Johnny Toms said, “Look.” He lifted the man's coat to show her.

The knife had a deer foot for a handle. It wasn't particularly unique, because hunting knives are often made with a deer−foot handle. This one had a ferrule and a hand−guard made of white metal. Silver. Carved silver. That silver guard, it suddenly struck Paris, was familiar. But she couldn't place it.

Johnny Toms leaned close to examine the knife. Then he swore. He swore with words that he ordinarily wouldn't have used in front of Paris.

“What is it, Johnny?” Paris asked.

“My knife,” he said. “This is my knife. How in blue and green hell did it get here, into this guy?”

“Johnny, you must be wrong!” Paris said unbelievingly.

Johnny grunted, said, “I'll find out. Look the other way.” Paris didn't turn away. Instead, she objected, “Johnny, the law—you're not supposed to remove the murder weapon from a dead man, I don't think.”

Johnny hesitated. “If that's my knife, it's in a poor place,” he muttered. He withdrew the knife, grimacing. Paris could see his eyes grow thin and horrified as he examined the weapon. “Mine,” he said.

The four cowboys were standing close together. They were uneasy.

“Porter,” said the cowboy called Frosty. “Didn't he say his name was Porter?”

Buck, one of the other cowboys, went away suddenly. They could hear him at the creek, being sick.

Johnny Toms came out of the tent.

“I don't like this,” he said violently. “By golly, there's something queer here.”

“Johnny,” Paris said. “Johnny, I'm afraid I've gotten you into trouble.”

“Listen, if I got into any trouble, it was my own doing. You never told me to look for the fat man in the first place,” Johnny Toms said.

“Thank you, Johnny,” Paris told him. “Hadn't we better call the police?”

Johnny gripped her arm. He was moving her toward where they had left the horses. He was giving orders to Frosty and Fred.

“Go back to the house with Miss Stevens,” he told Frosty and Fred. “Paris, you call the sheriff from the house.”

Immediately, it seemed to Paris, she was riding toward the ranch houses. They rode fast, thundering through the night on the horses, as if fleeing something.

Paris had a clutching fear that the telephone wire would be cut. It wasn't. The fear, she thought as she waited to be connected with the sheriffs office, was silly.

She wondered what she would say to the sheriff. But when his office answered, words came readily.

“This is Miss Paris Stevens at the S−slash−S ranch,” she said. “Will you have the Sheriff come out immediately?”

“He left for there more'n an hour ago,” the voice said. “He should be there now.”

Paris was stunned. She couldn't think of a thing to do except hang up.

SHE looked at the telephone blankly. Fear crawled around her, crowding close. It was worse than any earlier fear. It was close to terror.

“Frosty,” she told one of the cowboys. “Frosty, you go back and find Johnny. Tell him the Sheriff was on his way out here an hour ago. I don't know how that happened. Tell Johnny to—to be careful.”

“Yes'm,” Frosty said. He sounded scared.

The other cowboy, Fred, stayed in the ranch house. He was a solid, stoical man over draft age. He sat there stolidly, and only twice did he get up to investigate suspicious sounds. The first time it was the horses in the corral, fighting again. The second time it was Johnny Toms.

Johnny was worried. Worried enough that he didn't think to talk like Tonto in the Lone Ranger.

“It's lucky you sent Frosty with word the Sheriff was coming,” he said. “That saved me some sweating.”

“What happened, Johnny?”

“You remember smelling something burning in the campfire?”

“Yes, leather or cloth or—”

“Leather. A pair of my gloves. I have the gloves specially made by Willer in Tulsa, who makes Indian gloves. Anybody can see they're Willer gloves, and the Sheriff will take them—there's enough of the gloves that didn't burn that the Sheriff can do this—to Willer. And Willer will know he made them for me.”

Paris felt as if she was freezing.

“That knife was mine,” Johnny added.

“Johnny, was it what they call a frame−up?”

“A frame right around us,” he agreed. “And it was smooth and fast work. The fat man knew I had found out about his camp. How he found that out beats me. But he surmised we would visit his camp—wait! Oh, no! Maybe he didn't!” Johnny became silent.

“What other way—”

“I'm giving the fat man credit for too much brains,” Johnny said violently. “Here's what he did: He figured you came to Oklahoma because you had a protector here, and he concluded I was the protector. So he fixed this frameup to get me in jail. He got into my cabin and took the knife, the gloves, and God knows what else. That would be easy. Then he—he killed that Porter, and telephoned the Sheriff.”

“But, Johnny, you couldn't be convicted of such a thing.”

“It would get me thrown in the clink, which probably was the idea,” Johnny said gloomily.

“But why—”

“To get me out of the way, so I couldn't help you.”

“I mean, why is all this happening?” Paris exclaimed.

Johnny pushed out his jaw grimly. “I wish I knew.”

JOHNNY was scared. He wasn't trembling, and the fear wasn't getting him down. But he was disturbed. Part of his worry was, understandably, about himself.

Paris saw that he had the knife with the deer−foot handle. He was examining it. Suddenly he strode out of the house, was gone about ten minutes in the darkness, and came back without the knife. Paris knew he had hidden the knife.

“Are you sure you put it where it won't be found?” she asked.

He shivered. “I hope so.” He sprawled in a chair, frowning. “It will take the Sheriff five or six hours to find out those were my gloves in the fire. Say daylight at the most. Then he's going to be out here with a hatful of questions.”

“Maybe,” Paris suggested, “we should tell him the truth.”

“That bothers me,” Johnny said. “Let me think.”

He scowled at the floor for a while. He said, “This scares me. I was never up against such a thing before.” He continued to scowl. Then he looked up suddenly. “You ever know my cousin Theodore?”

“The one in Army Intelligence?”

“That's him. Here, I want to show you a letter from Ted.” He went away, evidently to his cabin. He came back with a typed letter and said, “Here's the part that I want you to see.”

Paris read the paragraph. Theodore, she gathered, was in England, and lately he had met a civilian with whom he was impressed. Theodore mentioned meeting the man in much the same spirit that he would have said he'd met Bob Hope or General Eisenhower. The man's name was Doc Savage. Johnny was watching her intently.

“Mean anything to you?” he asked.

“I've heard of Doc Savage.”

“So have I, but I probably wouldn't have thought of him if Ted hadn't mentioned him in this letter.” Johnny grinned at her. “What do you think?”

Paris stared at him, surprised. “It sounds—well—a little wild.”

“I know. But what happened to us tonight is wild. All I know of Doc Savage is what I've heard, which is that he is a trouble−shooter. Something like a private detective, only he doesn't work for fees. He works on things that are unusual enough to interest him. And if this business of the fat man doesn't come under that heading, I'd like to know what would.”

“You're talking,” asked Paris, “about getting Doc Savage to investigate this?”

“Yes. What do you think of it?”

“I don't know,” Paris said. “I've always associated Savage with big things, international affairs. Fantastic adventures. We're not very important, Johnny.”

“My neck is as important to me as anybody's,” Johnny Toms declared. “Is it okay to buzz this Savage on the telephone?”

“Go ahead. It's all right with me.”

Johnny grinned. “I know how you feel. Maybe I won't have any luck. But at least we will have tried.”

“We don't even know whether he is in America.”

“His headquarters is in New York,” Johnny Toms said. “The long−distance operator should be able to get it.”

PUTTING the long−distance call through to New York took twenty minutes. Whoever answered the telephone was evidently not Doc Savage. Johnny Toms looked worried. He said, “I've got some strange trouble down here. Could I talk to Doc Savage personally?”

A moment later, Johnny looked astonished. He stared at Paris, breathed. “By golly, I got him!”

Then Johnny was telling the story. He began with the fat man's appearance in New York, on Paris' trail. He told briefly who Paris Stevens was.

Johnny finished his story and listened.

He hung up.

“What do you know about that!” he muttered. “He's coming down here!”

Chapter IV

DOC SAVAGE looked at the telephone thoughtfully. He was surprised himself. The call had caught him while he was working in the laboratory. The lab was a part of his headquarters suite. The work he had been doing was routine research into the stress−strain factors of plastics, monotonous and not too important. He was in a mood to welcome excitement. But he wondered if he hadn't jumped too quickly at this thing, whatever it was.

He swung around slowly in his chair, facing the window. New York City at night was spread below him. His place was on the eighty−sixth floor of one of the tallest midtown buildings. Below was the string of lights that was Broadway, beyond that the dark panel with the jeweled beading of lights that was Central Park. New York City at night. It was, beyond doubt, one of the world's great sights. It never failed to give him a bang.

“Monk,” he called.

Monk Mayfair was one of his aides. Monk was a chemist, a noted one. Complete with title, he was Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair. Monk was short, wide, hairy, as homely as a movie actor's nightmare, and had one bad trait of doing almost anything for a gag now and then.

Monk came in. He had taken the Oklahoma call.

Doc said, “Did you listen in on that call on the other phone?”

Monk nodded. “Yeah, I stayed on the wire.”

“I suspect we had better check on the thing,” Doc Savage said sheepishly. “Better find out whether there is such a ranch and a ranch foreman named Johnny Toms, and whether the call actually came from the ranch. And I suggest you get hold of Ham Brooks and have him check on the girl, Paris Stevens, and find out what he can.”

“You haven't,” Monk asked suspiciously, “any particular reason for the order of business you just mentioned?”

“Eh?”

“If you don't mind,” Monk said, “I'll check on the girl, and let Ham have the Indian.”

“Fight it out with Ham,” Doc said.

Ham was Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, the lawyer of their group. He was a dapper man addicted to excitement, a Harvard accent and fine clothes. He detested pork in any form, which was the reason everyone called him Ham.

Doc Savage went back into the laboratory. He felt guilty about the way he had rushed away from the lab work at the prospect of excitement. He resumed the job he had been doing when the phone rang.

What I had better do, he thought, was let one of us see if there's anything to this matter in Oklahoma. Monk probably. Monk has the worst case of itching feet.

He was thinking that when Monk appeared in the door and said, “Phone again, Doc. Some nasty−sounding guy.”

The man had a gruff voice.

He said, “Mr. Savage, I imagine my directness may surprise you. I hope it does. I also hope it impresses you. Because I am going to make a threat, which is this: If you tamper with this matter of Paris Stevens in Oklahoma, you are going to be sorry and you are going to get—I believe a good word is—smeared.”

And bang went the receiver.

DOC SAVAGE was blankly astonished for a moment. Then he called, “Monk! Trace that—”

“Don't put your receiver back on the hook,” Monk said. “I'm tracing it already. But don't hang up. As long as you keep your receiver off the hook, I think this automatic dialing system they use will hold the connection.”

For the next five minutes he talked, authoritatively, threateningly, violently, to different people in telephone company wire rooms. The matter of tracing a telephone call in New York City was not something to be tossed off glibly. It was, in fact, something that couldn't be accomplished without prior arrangements. Monk finally got the job done.

“The number that called,” Monk said, “was Marshland 0−9007. Here's the address. Doesn't sound bad.”

“Good,” Doc said. “Now you and Ham start collecting information. Light at it in earnest.”

“You going to that address?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe,” said Monk hopefully, “we'd all better go.”

“The job you picked was investigating that girl, Paris Stevens,” Doc reminded him. “She is supposed to have been a WAC. Find out where she served, where she was wounded, and get the low−down on her record. If you can get hold of anybody who served with her, do that. Talk to them on the telephone. Dig up everything.”

“You,” Monk said, “are trying to hog the excitement.”

“How do you mean?”

“By going out to that address alone,” Monk said. “That guy sounded tough, so you know there'll probably be some trouble.”

“Probably it will be a wild goose chase,” Doc told him.

Monk eyed him uneasily. “Don't wait until it's too late,” he warned, “to give me and Ham a ring.”

“Of course.”

“Wait a minute,” Monk said. The homely chemist went into the storeroom, and came out packing a thing which looked like the hand movie cameras with which picture hawkers stand on the streets and take photographs of pedestrians while passing out cards offering prints at three−for−a−quarter.

“This,” said Monk, “is a gadget Long Tom Roberts made before he went to China.”

“What is it?”

“A walkie−talkie radio in disguise,” Monk explained. “You put it up to your eye and press the button you're supposed to press to take pictures. Press the button about half way down to receive, and all the way down to talk. The speaker is this tiny thing on the back that looks like a scale to tell you how to set the camera for different light.”

“What am I supposed to do with it?”

“Call us if any excitement develops,” Monk said. “We'll keep a receiver tuned in.”

Doc took the gadget with him, convinced he would have no use for it. He did not expect to find the man who had made the threatening telephone call. After making such a call, no one would be likely to hang around the neighborhood. What Doc did hope to find was something about the man who had made the call.

It was getting daylight when he reached the street.

THE telephone number was Marshland 0−9007. The Marshland exchange was a Long Island one, assigned to a section of homes in the five−to−ten−thousand−dollar bracket.

Doc Savage drove past the front of the house with a hat yanked over his eyes to conceal his face. The home was neat, white, had a painstakingly trimmed look.

A residence—the fact that the telephone call had come from a private home surprised him. He might, he thought, get some line on who had threatened him, after all.

He took the direct course, and went to the front door and knocked. He waited. He knocked again, his knuckles making an emphatic racket. There was still no response.

A porch light was beside the door. He reached up, unscrewed the bulb out of that, and rested it between the door knob and the door jamb. It would rest there, but would fall if the door were to be opened.

He went around to the back door. He knocked. There was no answer. He pounded again, said, “This is the police! Open up!”

The part about the police was only technically correct. He had a commission in the New York police department, but it was honorary.

A moment later, he heard a pop of a noise from the front of the house. The light bulb had shattered. He went around the house, taking long strides.

A small sheep of a man was standing in the door, looking nervously at the broken light bulb. When he saw Doc, he started to run. But after he had taken three or four nervous jumps, he stopped.

He stared at Doc.

“By any chance,” he asked nervously, “are you someone named Savage?”

“That's right,” Doc said.

The small man made worried gestures with both hands.

“I don't know what to do!” he wailed. “Maybe I had better talk to you.” He began to sidle back toward the front door of the house, taking short steps. “Will you—won't you come in?” he asked uneasily.

THE living−room had a very new, very cheap sofa and chair set and a new, cheap rug. There were two straight−backed chairs, a floor lamp, a table and a radio which weren't new and didn't match. The place didn't, somehow, look lived in. The old furniture had different degrees of gloss.

The small man proceeded to flutter. He jiggled his hands, changed feet, and actually seemed so disturbed that his ears moved.

“I have a brother,” he said. “That's the whole trouble.”

He fluttered some more, did some glaring at objects in the room, and finally fell into a chair.

“Dammit!” he said violently. Then, still more violently, he said, “Dammit! I'm not going to tolerate any more out of him!”

Doc Savage gave part of his attention to the man and the rest of it to the room. The walls were papered, and the paper was not new. There were patches on the paper here and there where the color was different, spots where pictures had hung.

The small man had blue eyes, hair about the gray of a cottontail rabbit's back, and a soft−looking mouth well−shaped for pouting. He looked as if he wanted to beat his fists against something.

“Chapman,” he said. “Do you know my brother Chapman?”

“The name isn't familiar,” Doc said.

“He must know you,” the man said in a distressed voice. “He must.”

“What is your name?”

“Schulte. John Schulte. My brother's name is Chapman Schulte. Wait a minute.” The little man bobbed to his feet and darted out of the room and came back with a photograph in a shiny frame. “This is Chapman, taken five years ago.”

The photograph was of a sullen−looking thick−necked man with an upstanding thatch of dark hair and domineering eyes. There was not much family resemblance. A trifling amount around the mouth, possibly.

“Don't know him,” Doc said.

“You don't! That's very strange!”

“Just what,” Doc asked, “makes it strange?”

“Why, the things that have happened. The—the rather frightening things that have happened.”

“For example?”

There was more hand fluttering. “Maybe I had better tell you all I know just as it happened.”

“That,” Doc said, “would be an excellent idea.”

The small man nodded violently. “That's what I want to do. Yes, indeed. Chapman, my brother, has always been the wild dog of the family. He ran away from home when he was thirteen, and we didn't hear from him until he was eighteen, when the police contacted us in an effort to trace him. Chapman, I am afraid, had become a crook. He had perpetrated a robbery at the age of eighteen, for which he served a small sentence. Six months, I think.”

He looked miserably at Doc. “We are a peace−loving family, you understand. Righteous, law−abiding people. I think the shock of Chapman's misdeed contributed to the early death of our mother.”

Doc said, “I take it you and your brother have never been closely associated.”

“No, never.” The small man folded his hands piously. “You see, I studied for social service. I intended to study for the ministry, but after due thought, I chose social service work instead. It may sound inhuman, but I must confess that I have not, not for a number of years, felt any feeling of true brotherhood for Chapman. However, he has had a certain—”

“Get to the point,” Doc said.

“I AM getting to the point,” the small man said with unexpected vehemence. “Chapman has had a certain evil influence over me. Over my conscience, I should say. He dulls my finer instincts. He brings out in me certain feelings of which I am ashamed.” He fell to twisting his hands together.

Doc asked, “Are you trying to say that you've known of some crooked work Chapman has pulled, and you kept quiet about it?”

The small man flopped back as if he'd broken a handcuff which had been restraining him.

“That's it,” he said eagerly. “I have known where Chapman was when I knew the police were hunting him.”

“The police after him very often?”

“Often enough,” the small man said seriously. “Chapman is a sinister sort. I want to emphasize that. Most reprehensible.”

Doc leaned back wearily, and suggested, “If there is a point, you might get at it.”

The small man leaned forward.

“About a week ago Chapman moved in on me,” he said. “He arrived without warning, and he had something afoot. I could tell he was engaged on a piece of business, and that it was something shady. He stayed at my house. He had visitors. He had them at night, and he admitted them through the back door, and he wouldn't let me see them. I think, however, that one was a tall man and one was a short man. I know such a description will have no value to you.

“But here is the situation: Something is afoot in South America. In Brazil. It is something very big and it is something that is going to touch you, Mr. Savage. I gathered—may I ask, do you own certain rubber−producing properties in Brazil?”

“Yes.”

“Evidently this devilment of Chapman's concerns such property. At any rate, the fellow was sure you would be called in to help in the matter—meaning, you would be called on to oppose Chapman in his devilment. I mean, they were scheming against someone who was sure to call on you for help. All this I gathered.”

He looked at Doc Savage uneasily, hopefully.

“So they concocted a trick for getting you to a different place where you would not receive the summons for help,” he continued. “They selected some young woman named Paris Stevens. They began to terrorize her. They scared her into fleeing to Oklahoma, and they further terrorized her there so that she would send a wild appeal to you for aid.”

“What methods,” Doc asked, “did the terrorizing take in Oklahoma?”

“I don't know. Not pleasant, I fear. I heard them intimating that they were going to use a fellow named Porter. Chapman hated Porter, I gathered. And he was going to make use of Porter some way in Oklahoma. The girl was to be so utterly frightened that she would call you, and you would go out there, and be away from New York when the call came to you for help.”

Doc said, “Porter was murdered in Oklahoma.”

The small man became loose in his chair, his eyes roundly open, his hands slack on his lap. “Murder!” he mumbled. “Oh, God!”

“Where is Chapman?”

The small man shuddered. “He's gone. He threatened you in a telephone call he made from here. Then he left in a great hurry.” He looked up. “Chapman was fleeing, wasn't he?”

“Was he?”

“He must have been. He had completed arrangements to decoy you to Oklahoma, then he fled.”

Doc Savage looked at the small man intently.

“Where,” he asked, “would Chapman go?”

“To Brazil, to a town named Villa Franca. Wait a moment.” He went away again, came scampering back with a bit of paper with a name and address pencilled on it. “I copied this down after eavesdropping on Chapman. It is where he was going. Here.”

The name was Pedro Vascelles, and the town was Villa Franca, the street the Via de Havanas.

“Chapman overestimated his power over my conscience,” said the little man proudly. “He didn't think I would tell anyone about him. So he wasn't too careful to keep me from eavesdropping.”

DOC SAVAGE stood up suddenly. “I had better be moving.” He took the picture of Chapman. The small man followed him to the door, working his hands as if he was pulling taffy.

The small man said, “If I can be of any help—”

“You may be called on,” Doc said.

The small man watched Savage go down the walk, get in a car and drive away.

“Be called on!” the little man said violently.

He went downstairs, prudently calling, “Take it easy! It's me!” when he was on the steps.

The basement had a recreation room, almost entirely bare of furniture. The three men in the basement were cautiously distributed, one behind the furnace, another behind the fuel oil tank, the third back of a concrete post.

“He's gone,” the small man said.

They came out cautiously. “He take that story?”

“Seemed to.”

The three seemed doubtful. They weren't thugs. Not palookas of the dem, dese and dose variety. They were normal−looking men.

“Maybe,” one of them said, “the smart thing would have been for you to have brought him down in the basement, where we could have filled him full of lead.”

“That would have been damned effective, if it worked,” the small man agreed. “Trouble is, maybe it wouldn't have worked.”

“He's on his way to South America?”

“Let's hope to Jehovah he is.”

The three men began stowing their artillery out of sight. They ran to guns of the flat type, automatics. Each had two, and they didn't carry them in their clothing. They had leather briefcases for the guns and ammunition.

“Now we go after Mayfair and Brooks, eh?” one of them said.

“Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks. That's right.”

“How'll we do it?”

“The direct way might be best,” the small man said. “If they do not go to South America with Savage, we will have to see what luck we have shooting them.”

Chapter V

DOC SAVAGE had driven two blocks, turned right a block, turned right again, driven four blocks, then made another right turn. This round−about business had put him where he could watch the house he had just left.

He got the camera−radio Monk had given him, and fiddled with it. The gadget struck him as silly. He didn't have much faith in its working. To his astonishment, it functioned perfectly.

Monk was over hopeful of excitement.

“We'll be right out, Doc! Where are you?” were his first words.

“Keep your shirt on, Monk. I am not in trouble. At least not in need of help. I think we have a lead to something.”

“You find the guy who talked rough over the phone?”

“Not exactly. I found one out of the same nest, though.”

“Yeah?”

“The address was a residence,” Doc explained. “The yard and shrubbery was all neatly trimmed. It looked as if the grass and the shrubs had grown carelessly most of the summer, then given a thorough job of trimming in the last few days.

“Inside the house, there was evidence of a recent job of furnishing. Some furniture new, some from second−hand stores. On the second−hand furniture, different kinds of polish had been used, indicating it had come from various sources. There were un−faded patches on the living room wall paper where pictures had been hanging.”

Monk said, “That sounds as if the house had just been moved into.”

“That's right.”

“I don't,” Monk said, “see where that means much. Or am I thick−headed?”

“A little sheep of a man was there. He gave the impression he had lived there quite a while. He didn't actually say so, but he gave that impression.”

“You think he was lying?”

“He was lying, all right,” Doc said. “He told me a glib story about a brother named Chapman who was up to some devilment in Brazil, didn't want us to investigate it, and so had rigged this thing to call us to Oklahoma where we would be out of the way.”

“Now I'm mixed up.”

Doc explained it again.

“Oh!” Monk said. “Trying to make us think Oklahoma was a wild goose chase so we'd rush off to Brazil, which would really be the goose chase?”

“That's my guess.”

“It,” Monk said, “sounds far−fetched.”

“Well, it's not,” Doc said. “Here is the clincher. He showed me a picture of brother Chapman. Taken five years ago, he said. But it just happens that I have been fooling with photography recently, and happened to know that the portrait paper on which the picture was printed has not been on the market more than three months. The paper is easily identifiable by its patent matte surface.”

Monk was puzzled. “Why didn't he say the picture had been made recently, so as not to get caught.”

“He may have overlooked that. Just told the first lie that came into his head.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I am watching the house now, to see what happens next.”

“Want us to do anything?”

“No. Except go ahead and find out all you can about Paris Stevens and this Indian, Johnny Toms,” Doc said. “What have you found out so far?”

MONK became enthusiastic. “Say, I'm looking forward to meeting Paris Stevens. She combines looks and brains, from what I hear. More than the usual share of both.”

“Has your research,” Doc asked, “progressed beyond what the girl looks like?”

“Well, she hasn't much family left,” Monk said. “Her parents were lost when their yacht sank about fifteen years ago. No brothers or sisters. She has an Uncle named Alec Stevens who was an ace in the first World War, and got a hatful of medals. Another uncle—her mother's brother this time—is named Bill Hazel. Her mother's family name was Hazel. There was a scandal about Bill Hazel ten years or so ago, something about a

big hooking he handed somebody in the stock market. He skipped the country and hasn't been heard of since. She has two cousins, Felix and Joe Stevens, and a second−cousin named Robert Hazel. Felix and Joe are fighter pilots, both aces, and Robert got a medal a few weeks ago."

"That sounds like a family of action," Doc suggested.

"You said it!" Monk declared happily. "I'm having some pictures of Paris sent up to me."

"There might," Doc said dryly, "be more to it than the girl. What about Johnny Toms?"

"The Indian? Oh, Ham's working on that." Monk chuckled gleefully. "He don't know yet that I handed him the Indian and took this beautiful gal. When he finds out, he won't be happy."

Doc asked sharply, "What are you trying to do, start another fuss over a girl?"

"Not me," Monk said. He was too innocent.

"Well, don't," Doc said. "I'll call you later. Someone is coming out of the house."

"Okay," Monk said hastily. He was plainly glad to get away from the subject.

The small sheep of a man had come from the house. He stood on the front porch for a while. Then he made an elaborate matter of examining the shrubbery in the yard. Casing the neighborhood.

Doc Savage's car was black, low−priced, one of thousands of similar cars in the city. There were at least four other cars like it parked within sight. He hoped the small man would not notice it. Apparently he didn't.

He went back into the house and came out with three other men.

They walked four blocks and went into a subway station. The downtown side.

It wasn't a busy neighborhood. Doc knew he hadn't the slightest chance of following them into the station without being observed. He was stumped. He had to take a chance.

HE drove toward the next subway station in the downtown direction. He put all the car had into it. He would need luck, because it was physically impossible to drive an automobile through the traffic and outrun a subway train. Not for any distance.

He slid in to the curbing, raced for the subway steps. He had a nickel ready when he reached the bottom, and went through the turnstile. There was no train in the station, and no nearby rumble. He had made it.

He went to the far end, the front end, of the platform to wait. It was his best bet, since none of the coaches would pass him as he waited there.

Shortly a train came thundering. He stood close to the platform edge, about where the door of the first coach would be when the train stopped.

If they're in the first coach, he thought, it'll be a mess. The doors slid open, and he went inside. They weren't there.

From then on, it was a matter of working back through the coaches carefully. Mostly the doors between the subway coaches were open, but even when they were closed, there were windows in them.

The small sheep of a man and his three friends were in a car about the middle of the train.

From the next coach ahead, Doc watched them.

They got off in midtown. Thirty−fourth Street.

Doc Savage was uneasy. They were near his headquarters now. But the four behaved innocently. They went to a bar in the neighborhood, a large one, and loafed.

Doc watched from a small fur shop across the street. As nearly as he could tell, the four men did nothing but loaf at the bar. Then they got one telephone call, or the sheep did. It was a short call. He didn't make it. He got it.

The narrow margin by which he'd kept their trail when they boarded the subway was worrying Doc. He was afraid of losing them. He decided to get Monk and Ham on the shadowing job.

He had left the trick radio gadget in his car when he abandoned it hastily. So he used the fur shop telephone. Ham Brooks answered. Ham had a courtroom voice, the deep, modulated voice of a studied orator.

Doc said, “Four men left that house. The sheep and three others. They are downtown now.” He named the bar where the four were loitering. “Better get down here and help me keep track of them. You and Monk both.” He gave a general description of the men.

Ham immediately asked, “Who is this girl Monk is investigating? How come?”

“How come what?”

“The big palooka is more interested in her looks than in whether she's a crook. You should hear him!”

Doc became indignant.

“Cut that out!” he said sharply.

“Okay,” Ham said. “But I think this Monk put something over on me.”

Doc asked dryly, “Is your indignation going to permit you to get down here and shadow these fellows?”

“Oh, sure. We'll be right down.”

THEY weren't right down. Eventually ten minutes passed. Fifteen. Five should have been ample for Monk or Ham or both to show up. They hadn't come.

The four men in the bar had been looking at the clock above the back−bar mirror. The sheep compared his wristwatch with the clock. They appeared to resign themselves to a considerable wait, and picked up their glasses and went to a table.

Then a waiter came. Not to get their orders. To tell one of them he was wanted on the telephone.

The man went to the phone. He came back in a hurry.

The four got up and left the bar.

Doc looked around uneasily for Monk and Ham. They weren't in sight. There was nothing to do but follow the men himself.

He trailed them two blocks. They met four other men. Two of this four were strangers. The other two were Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks.

Doc Savage stared at the group. A coolness crawled into his nerves. He wasn't close, but he could see the strange expressions on the faces of Monk and Ham. Something was wrong.

No guns were in sight. No hands were in pockets, which was the way a man on the street was supposed to hold a gun and avoid suspicion. But one of the men with Monk and Ham had a small newspaper−wrapped package. Doc decided the package was a gun, and that the man had his finger thrust through the paper, resting on the trigger.

Doc watched long enough to decide they were going to come back toward him.

He swung over to the curb and walked along looking into parked automobiles. The third one had the keys in the ignition lock, the door unlocked. He slid under the wheel.

He waited for the group across the street to get past.

This, he thought, is car stealing. Not good. But Monk and Ham across the street, being kidnapped, wasn't good either.

He got out his business cards and put one in the glove compartment, stuck another between the wire spokes of the steering wheel. Having done that, he felt a little less guilty.

The group of men passed on the other side of the street. He pulled out slowly. It was his guess that they had a car waiting.

Then they started across the street. They strung out, four ahead in a group, two behind with Monk and Ham.

Doc fed the car gas. He headed for the four in the lead.

He hit all four of them with the car. A moment before he struck them, he cut the motor and yanked the emergency brake on hard.

The four went down. One screamed. One went under the car. The other three were just knocked down.

Doc came out on the driver's side. He went after the man with the newspaper parcel. Astonishment held the fellow long enough for Doc to reach him.

Doc hit him. He hit him in the middle, not wanting to break his hands. The man doubled, still kept hold of his package. Fire and noise and lead came out of the package. The bullets, two of them, drove into the blacktop street covering. The newspaper began smoking. Doc hit him again.

Monk and Ham both closed with the other man. The fellow was digging at his clothing, obviously for a weapon. Monk used his fists. Ham struck with the edge of his hand at the fellow's throat. It happened very fast, their blows a rattle of sound. Then the man was sinking.

Doc said, “Run!”

He got the newspaper parcel, tore the newspaper off and found a large new−looking revolver inside. He turned toward the four he had hit with the car. But they were not an immediate danger. In two or three seconds they would be, but not now.

“Run!” he yelled.

Monk and Ham got going.

On the sidewalk across the street and about five doorways east there was one of those sidewalk elevator shafts open. Two iron doors in the sidewalk which open like butterfly wings as the cage rises from below. They were open, but the platform wasn't up. It was a perfect foxhole.

“Into the hole!” Doc said.

They went down into the shaft, jumping because there was no time for formality. They landed on cardboard boxes, and these crushed. Back in the darkness of a basement, a voice began screaming profanity at them. The boxes contained ladies hats, it appeared. By jumping on top of them, they hadn't done them any good.

In the street, gunfire.

“Get in the back,” Doc said.

They scrambled out of the elevator enclosure. In the semi−darkness of the basement, they collided with things.

Down the elevator hole, gunfire.

Doc watched the opening, saw a hand, drew a bead with the gun he had taken from the newspaper. His bullet smashed a hand against the concrete and steel rim of the hole. It also drew a storm of gunfire. At least four guns firing downward.

The fellow doing the cursing stopped that. He said, “Oh, my God!” twice. Then they could hear him getting out of there.

“He's got a good idea,” Monk muttered.

But then the men with the guns went away from the hole.

THE stillness which followed was complete except for a new sound, water running. One of the bullets evidently had punctured or broken a pipe.

Monk said, “I'm going upstairs and see where they went.”

“Don't be a fool,” Doc told him. “They haven't fired all their ammunition, probably, and they might be waiting.”

“Give me your gun.”

“Stay down here,” Doc said impatiently. “How did you two get caught?”

Monk said, “They were waiting down in the lobby for us. Waiting at the elevator, two of them. They just stepped out and told us what to do.”

“After,” said Ham, “they showed us they had guns.”

“Any idea what they intended to do with you?”

Ham Brooks said, “I can tell you every word they said. One said, 'Where is Doc Savage?' And Monk said you had gone to South America in a hell of a hurry.”

Monk shivered. “Then one said, 'Why not pop it to them here?' to the other one. And the other one said, “They may be lying about Savage. Better get the truth out of them first. Anyway, if they were knocked off here, Savage would hear about it and come back.'“

“Was that all they said?”

“Just about all. The rest was just stuff about where we should walk and what we should do.”

“Mostly it was do nothing,” Ham said. “Doc, they were going to kill us.” His voice had turned strange.

Ham looked as if the significance of the thing was just getting to him. As if he was just realizing that death had taken a clip at him. He didn't lose color. But he got a funny look.

Doc looked at them narrowly. “How come they caught you flat−footed? You knew there was something going on.”

Ham glanced at Monk. They exchanged looks. Guilty.

“We weren't on the ball, was all,” Monk said.

Doc was skeptical.

“Sure you didn't pick the wrong time to quarrel about a woman?” he demanded.

Monk blurted, “How did—” and then changed it to an innocent look and said, “Of course not!”

Doc let it drop.

After a while, they went out on the street. The sheep and his friends were gone. The police had arrived. So had the owner of the car Doc had taken. For the next two hours, there were questions and explanations.

“It's too danged bad we lost the trail of those fellows,” Monk said wearily. “What do we do now?”

“We go to Oklahoma,” Doc told him.

Chapter VI

THEY took a plane to Oklahoma. One of their own. An amphibian. They took off from the river into a south wind, turned left and rode the N−side of the Newark radio beam outward. They picked up the A−side of the Bellefonte beam beyond Allentown, Pennsylvania. Monk handled the ship.

Ham Brooks reported on what he had found out about Johnny Toms.

“A character,” he said. “Manages the Stevens' ranch and keeps a guardian eye on the Stevens' oil wells.”

He had talked to Tulsa and Bartlesville, Oklahoma, about Johnny Toms, he explained. He hadn't found out anything that was really important. Except that Johnny Toms was well−known. He was quite a guy, evidently.

Ham changed from the subject of Johnny Toms to that of Paris Stevens as soon as he could.

“That girl must be as rich as Croesus,” he said. “I hear she doesn't exactly put your eye out, either.”

Doc made no comment on that. He hoped the girl was as homely as a mud fence. Monk and Ham would come nearer keeping their mind on business, if she was.

“You better keep your eye on the ball,” Doc said.

Ham looked uncomfortable.

Doc delivered a lecture.

“We don't know what this is, but we do know that it has some size,” he said seriously. “Johnny Toms, when he called from Oklahoma, said that a fat man—who possibly had some friends helping him—had murdered someone named Porter and framed Toms. Hardly had I hung up the telephone when we got a threat from more of the gang located in New York. That means a large group involved in the affair.”

Ham nodded, but didn't say anything.

Doc became more emphatic. “Those men moved fast. They pulled a smart trick, and pulled it quick. Take that sheep fellow. I doubt if he had time to rehearse the story he told me. But it was a good story. It nearly fooled me. And if we hadn't had some mighty good luck, they would have killed you and Monk before you got started.”

“I wouldn't call it luck,” Ham began. “You were smart enough—”

“It was luck!” Doc said sharply. “I got half a dozen lucky breaks! You can't depend on that sort of luck. From now on, take this thing seriously. It's dangerous. There are several men involved. And they're so excited that they're willing to murder at the drop of a hat. So be careful! Keep your heads cut in!”

“And keep women off our minds,” Ham said dryly. “I get it.”

Doc shut up. He was convinced his lecture hadn't done much good.

He got out a Tulsa sectional aëronautical chart and tried to locate the S−slash−S. The Stevens ranch. Large ranches sometimes had landing fields marked as auxiliary fields on the chart. But this one didn't.

It was late afternoon when they let down on the runway at Tulsa Municipal. They faced the tower, got the green light and taxied over to the line.

“Someone around here should know if the Stevens ranch has a field,” Doc said, and went to ask.

He found a man wearing cowboy boots. Or the man found him. He wondered, later. At the moment, he didn't see a thing suspicious about it. The man looked like a native and willing to talk.

“S−slash−S ranch?” the man said. “Oh, sure. They got a field, but it's not designated so it's not on the chart. Got your chart? I'll show you.”

The man in the cowboy boots indicated the field on the chart. He was a slender man who spoke English carefully, and not with an Oklahoma twang. He was full of information.

Doc thanked him, and they gassed and took off.

HAM said, “Somebody's there.” He said this as they were doing a rectangular course, dragging the S−slash−S landing area.

It was a man. They couldn't tell much about him from the plane. Gaudy shirt. Light hat. He was alone.

Doc put the ship into the wind, did a slip, a fishtail, and the wheels were on the ground. They rattled along for a while. Monk and Ham got out with stakes and lines to tie down the ship. There didn't seem to be a hangar large enough. There was one hangar, not too new, but it obviously wouldn't take anything larger than a lightplane.

The man with the loud shirt and light hat came toward them.

“Howdy,” he said. “I'm Johnny Toms.”

His voice was enough like the voice Doc had heard over the telephone for him to be Johnny Toms. He was a young man, leathery, brown, black−haired.

He added, “I'm glad to see you. Heap glad. But I'm damned surprised you came.”

“What surprises you?” Doc asked.

“We,” Johnny Toms said, “ain't important people. I was just surprised when you said you'd help us, is all.”

“You're not so unimportant,” Doc told him. “The minute you had called us, almost, we started having trouble in New York.”

“The hell you say!”

“They began trying to decoy us to South America, or murder us,” Doc said.

“Well, I'll be damned! Things ain't too good here.”

“What has happened?”

“Well, we caught the fat man,” the other said. “You'd think that would help settle things. It didn't. He won't talk.”

“What have you done to make him talk?”

“I threatened him. I beat him good with words. Then I beat him some with my fists. No dice. Maybe you better work on him.”

“Where is he?”

“Over the hill here.” He looked uncomfortable. “To tell the truth, I'm hiding him from the Sheriff. The Sheriff might think it was kidnapping, I was afraid. I'm glad you came. By God, I'm glad. You want to look at the fat man?”

Doc Savage said he wanted to look at the fat man. Monk and Ham confessed to the same desire.

THEY walked. Monk asked, “Toms, how did you happen to meet us?” Their guide said he'd just done the obvious thing. They would come by plane, wouldn't they? He'd heard Doc Savage usually traveled by plane. Most important people did, these days. This was the only good landing area in the neighborhood. He'd just done the natural thing, and met them. However, he'd thought they would be here earlier. He'd been awful tired waiting. He'd almost, a time or two, given them up.

“Where is the fat man?” Ham asked.

“In a cabin over the hill,” their guide said.

Doc Savage walked silently. His mind wasn't easy. Something bothered him. He didn't know what it was, not for a while. It was a vague sort of a sensation, but unpleasant. It was as baffling as the feeling you have before a cold; knowing something is wrong, but not being sure what. Only this wasn't a physical discomfort. It was in his mind.

He began to get it. To understand. It came to him slowly. It turned into an uneasiness, and this increased. Before long, he was frightened. Scared, but he didn't know why.

He didn't try to put the feeling out of his mind. He knew better. It wasn't wise to ignore such a thing. His subconscious—or wherever it was you stored your common sense—was trying to warn him. That must be it.

He was quite sure that it was a warning. A man who operates a thundering machine in a factory becomes so steeped in the operation of the machine that he can sense subtle changes in the machine before anything in the way of actual trouble develops. A stranger might not dream anything was wrong. But the operator knows. It was like that with Doc and excitement, danger. Something was wrong now.

He got it finally. But he got it so darned slowly that he was ashamed, shocked at his stupidity.

This man, this fellow who said he was Johnny Toms, wasn't an Oklahoman.

Doc asked, “You lived around here all your life, Toms?”

“Sure,” the man said.

That was it. Not an Oklahoma accent. There wasn't really such a thing as an Oklahoma accent. Still, there were regional speech characteristics. Maybe everyone didn't know it, but there were. For instance, there had been the Dr. Henry Lee Smith radio program, quite popular before the war, with its specialty of telling people what state of the Union they were from, and frequently what part of the state. Smith missed sometimes. But he didn't miss as often as one would expect. He did it by having the people he was testing speak sentences made up of key words, which were pronounced differently in different states.

Doc dug into his mind frantically for some key words. He had studied regional American speech. But he had forgotten what he'd learned, he realized. Like so many things he had put into his mind, it hadn't stuck. He was supposed to have a remarkably developed mind. He grimaced. Remarkable, nothing! He couldn't think of a single key word to test the man's speech for Oklahoma regionalisms.

FINALLY Doc did what everyone has to do sometimes. Played his hunch.

He stopped.

He said, “You're not Johnny Toms.”

The man looked surprised. Which proved nothing. If he was genuine Johnny Toms, he would have been surprised.

Doc said, “You don't have an Oklahoma accent.”

“What the hell do you know about an Oklahoma accent? There's no such thing, anyway.” The man sneered at him. “Listen partner, I've got troubles. I'm in no mood for kid stuff.”

Doc frowned at him. Doc frowned impressively. “Another thing, in the second telephone call to me, you said that you had found out what it was all about.”

This was a lie. There had been no second telephone call. The lie, Doc felt, was justified. It was a trap. The other fell into it.

“I was wrong,” he said. “I wasn't as smart as I thought I was.”

There had been no second call, and he had said there was because Doc had said so, so that was that. An impostor.

“All right,” Doc said casually. “Let's go.” He said this so that the man would turn and start on over the hill. The man turned. Doc reached for the fellow.

The man must have been expecting. Something—it was Doc's shadow on the ground, Doc realized later—warned the man. The fellow ducked wildly. He fell to the ground. He tumbled on to his back, like a puppy, hands and feet up. But now he had guns in both hands. He could shoot all directions without bothering to whirl.

Monk and Ham were taken completely by surprise. They just now realized something was wrong.

Doc, having missed the fellow, stumbled. He was on his knees. There wasn't a chance of him reaching the other before the guns got going. He again did what he could, which was grab a handful of dust—it was a dusty spot, fortunately—and slam it into the man's eyes.

The dust blinded the man.

Doc said, “He's a fake!” That was for Monk and Ham.

The fellow's guns began going off. He was, Doc realized with the first shot, something of a wizard with handguns. He was nothing to fool with. He was blinded now, but he was still nothing to fool with.

Almost under Doc's right elbow was a small ditch. It was from the edge of this that he had snatched the dust. The ditch was typical of the cow country, a cowtrail which had washed to a depth of eighteen inches or so.

Doc rolled into the ditch. It made a fair foxhole. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Monk and Ham making for shelter.

HIS first thought, when he was in the ditch, was that he had made a mistake. Possibly he had. Perhaps he should have tackled the man, and tried to get the guns away from the fellow.

But from the way the man was throwing lead around, his guns would soon be empty anyway.

Monk and Ham stopped running. Their foot−pounding ended in a scuffling, sliding, proof they had dived behind something or into something. Probably another ditch.

The man's guns kept going bang and bang. The last few shots, he grew cunning. He would listen, then shoot at sounds, or what he imagined were sounds. Doc, by tossing some small clods from the ditch sides, made him some sounds.

Doc realized with horror that he'd lost track of how many times the man had fired.

“Monk?”

“Yes?”

“How many times has he shot?”

“I didn't count,” Monk said.

“Ham?”

“I didn't count either,” Ham said.

The man had stopped shooting.

The skin crawled on Doc's back. He knew he had to do something. Were the man's guns empty? Was that why he had stopped firing. Or had he gotten the dust out of his eyes? Maybe he could see that there wasn't a target,

and was waiting for one.

He might be reloading the guns, on the other hand. It was a devilish predicament, and Doc knew he would have to put his head out of the ditch and see what was going on. Soon. In the next five or ten seconds. A little time, but it seemed like a lot.

Then the situation solved itself. Or was solved—by a rifle shot. A shot from some distance. But first there was the scream—*sock!* of a high−powered rifle bullet going past and getting into a body.

Doc lifted his head quickly. Surprise made him pop up for a look.

He saw the man leaning backward. The man was drawn up very stiff and tight, his shoulders pulled up almost to his ears, his mouth a wide awful hole of effort, his fingers splayed out and rigid with muscular spasm, the cause of such a muscular convulsion being the bullet which had hit him in the head. He was leaning backward and now he was falling. The muscular tightness was an instant's thing, and was out of his body quickly, so that he really fell loosely, like sacked flesh as he landed on the earth.

Chapter VII

DOC SAVAGE sank back into the ditch. He said, “Keep down, fellows.”

“What happened?” Monk demanded.

“Someone shot him.”

“Who?”

Doc didn't answer.

There was stillness. The shooting had silenced the birds which had been in the surrounding red oaks. A bob−white had been whistling somewhere, but now the bird was still. Two crows had beaten up out of the woods and were flying low and fast, leaving.

Doc lay very still, listening. There was a breeze and it brought him burned powder smell, evidently from the dead man's gun, because there was also the smell of blood. Doc shivered. Blood, he thought, doesn't exactly have an odor. It is more of a presence, of sickness.

Finally Monk said, “Whoever shot him must be a friend of ours.”

“Keep out of sight,” Doc repeated.

He considered the situation for a while. He was frightened. It was natural, he supposed, to be scared. But it wasn't a comfortable thing to stop and think about. One shouldn't think, shouldn't analyze personal feelings at any rate, in such a situation.

He squirmed out of his coat. He got the coat off without lifting from the ditch. He rolled the coat into a cylinder. It was a brown tweed coat and made a brown cylinder somewhat the color of his own bronzed face. On it he put his hat.

He lifted hat and coat a little above the rim of the ditch and a bullet went through it instantly, so close to his fingers that he dropped the coat in terror.

“Who was that shot at?” Monk asked.

Doc loosened the tightness in his throat by swallowing.

“Me,” he said.

“Good God!”

“Keep down.”

“Maybe if we yelled at whoever it is—”

“It wouldn't be smart to believe any kind of an answer we got,” Doc said.

Monk said that damned if he knew what to do.

“You stay there,” Doc told him.

Doc went down the ditch, crawling with his elbows. The ditch was crooked, and the earth was crumbling and dusty. It got into his pockets and down his neck and into his shoes.

It was hot. The Oklahoma sun was suddenly an intolerable blazing furnace door.

He came to the end of the ditch. It simply ended in a flat bottom, petered out on a meadow on which there was no bush, rock or grass clump large enough to conceal him. He could go no farther.

He waited. Five minutes, ten, and fifteen. There was no sound, movement, nothing to be seen, of the enemy. Doc put his hat up again on the coat. Monk and Ham did various things to draw attention. None of it got any results.

Then there was engine sound in the distance. An automobile. Or a truck. Truck, Doc concluded.

DOC SAVAGE left the ditch cautiously. Nothing happened. He called, and Monk and Ham joined him.

“I don't get this,” Monk said. “Why did whoever it was go away?”

“Listen,” Doc said.

The truck was laboring, having tough going. Doc walked up a sharp hill slope, reached the top of the hill, and found that he could see the truck.

There was a stretch of brakes country in front of them. Rough. Washes and hills, gullies and cut−banks, pimple−shaped little red−oak−covered hills. Country that was impassable for an automobile or a truck.

The truck had stopped beyond this section. Five men got out, three out of the front seat, and two out of the back of the truck. They stood and looked about, shading their eyes.

One began taking rifles out of the front seat of the truck.

The others fooled around the back of the truck. They lowered the tailgate, which made a ramp down to the ground. The truck had been backed up to a little jump−off, and the tailgate made a gently sloping ramp.

They took five saddled horses out of the truck.

The truck, the five men, the horses, were about half a mile away.

The five mounted the horses. All of them carried rifles, either across the pommels, or in saddle−sheaths under the stirrup leathers.

They rode first to the flat meadow where the plane stood. They stayed on their horses for a while, riding slowly around the plane, examining it. Then one got off his horse and inspected the inside of the plane.

Now someone yelled at them.

The yell came from the hills nearby. It was a deep−throated voice with a touch of foreign accent. “'Allo! 'Allo!” the voice cried. “Be you the sheriff?”

A big voice from the horseman said that hell yes, this be the sheriff. He said it quizzically, in a way that was distinctly Oklahoma.

Now a man burst out of the red−oak thicket on a hillside. He didn't run toward the horsemen. Instead he beckoned.

“Come here!” he yelled. “The dead man's over here!”

“Blazes!” Monk said suddenly, sickly.

Doc said, “Keep out of sight. I am going over and see what I can find out.”

THE red−oaks were all sizes. Some were no more than knee height, stunted little trees with large green irregular leaves. The largest ones were probably fifteen feet high, but tall trees and short trees all grew together. It was a jungle, but a good place to move silently.

Doc had worked within earshot of the spot where the body lay by the time the sheriff—and his posse, for that was what it obviously was—had reached the place.

The stranger, the one who had come out and shouted to the sheriff, had a leathery, hungry, wolfish look. He had a very straight back, a ramrod carriage that made him give the impression of having a boil on the back of his neck.

He said, “Over here! Over this way!” He kept saying it loudly until the sheriff got close and interrupted.

“You the fellow who called us?” the sheriff demanded.

“That's right. Yes, I called you.”

“You don't sound like the same guy.”

“Well, I'm Laudbecken,” the stiff−backed man said.

“Laudbecken was the name given over the telephone,” the sheriff said. “I'm Sheriff Will Clausen. Now what the hell's going on here?”

Will Clausen looked as if he should have been behind a grocery counter instead of sheriff. Which probably meant that he was an excellent sheriff.

Laudbecken said, “When I got back here, they were gone.”

“Who was gone?”

“Let me get it all straight,” Laudbecken said. “I'm an oil lease scout. Independent. I work for myself. I had been up to look over the Stevens leases, and was driving back following a ranch road, and I saw that plane yonder come down and land. So I came over to investigate.”

“Why'd you do that?” Clausen interrupted.

'“Well, shucks, curiosity. I figured the plane must be in trouble or it wouldn't land here. You know how some people are, running after fires? I'm like that about airplanes. Maybe that had something to do with it.”

“All right. You saw the plane land. You ran over to see.”

“I left my car back over the hill yonder, on the ranch road.”

“Okay. You came over here. Then what?”

“I didn't get all the way. It's a good thing I didn't. Because they might have shot me, too.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“They shot a man. They shot him with a rifle. They were talking to him first, and then they shot him.”

“Where's he?”

“Who?”

“The one they shot.”

“Over yonder.”

“Did he come with them?”

“I don't think so. I think he met them.”

“Where did they go?”

“I don't know. They left. They went away while I was gone to telephone you.”

“You didn't tell me there was a man murdered.”

“I was excited. I should have. I told you there was a shooting, though. I remember I told you that.”

“Yeah, you did. But you didn't say anything about a murder.”

“I'm sorry.”

“That all you know?”

“Yes. No. That is, I can describe them. And I saw where they buried the rifle.”

“Okay. Let's get busy.”

THEY went over and looked at the dead man. Doc Savage was not as close now. He could not hear what they said, not all of it. He did hear the Sheriff ask his deputies if any of them knew the victim. They didn't.

Then the stiff−backed man, Laudbecken, conducted the posse to a nearby ditch. He dug around in the sand in the bottom of the ditch and came up with a carbine rifle.

“This is what they shot the man with,” he said loudly.

Two of the posse ran to look into the plane. They looked inside, then one climbed in.

Shortly the one who had climbed in put his head out and bellowed.

“I found some thirty−thirty shells in here,” he shouted. “What calibre's that gun?”

“Thirty−thirty.”

Doc Savage had cold chills for a while. He thought he had been scared before, but it was nothing to what was happening to him now. He didn't tremble visibly, but he examined his hands to see if he was.

He crawled back, being very, very careful not to be seen, and found Monk and Ham.

He told Monk and Ham, “We walked into the quickest frameup I ever saw.”

“We didn't shoot the fellow!” Monk blurted.

“It would take a month of Sundays to prove we didn't right now,” Doc said.

“Did we have any thirty−thirty shells in the plane?”

“No.”

“How did they get in there?”

“Planted. They must have done it while we were lying in the ditch expecting to be shot at any minute.”

Ham was scowling. “Listen, Doc, I've been thinking,” he said. “That Sheriff got here no more than thirty or forty minutes after we landed. Nobody could go to a telephone and call him and get him out here that quick. He was called either before we landed or just about the time we landed.”

“Just about the time we landed, probably,” Doc said. “They had a man planted near a house where there was a telephone. He saw our plane land, and he immediately put in the telephone call to the sheriff. They already had their plan.”

“You know, or are you guessing?”

“Guessing,” Doc said. “But I'll bet it turns out that is the way they did it. They may have even had more than one plan, and used one when the other failed. They probably intended to start a shooting affray with us, and have the sheriff show up during it, and get us all mixed up in trouble with the law. The idea was to get us in jail and delay us. When we discovered that the man who met us was a fake, they simply shot him, planted the gun in the place where they buried it, and hid the cartridges in our plane. Then that fellow waited for the posse to show up so he could load the whole thing on to us.”

Monk said, “Damn him! He won't get away with it. He should know that.”

They fell silent. They could hear the Sheriff. He was sending one of his men to the truck. He was shouting instructions.

“Get hold of Blackie Johnson and have him bring his bloodhounds,” the officer yelled. “It's too danged dry to see their tracks. But maybe the dogs can do some good.”

The man who was going to the truck turned around and hollered, “Why don't you get some of the Indians around here to try to track them?”

“Hell, the Indians ain't trackers these days,” the Sheriff yelled. “That went out of style fifty years ago. Go get Blackie Johnson's potlappers. Tell him to bring Old Blow. Old Blow is a damned good dog.”

Ham Brooks shivered. “They're putting this right around our necks,” he muttered.

Monk looked at Doc uneasily. “Think it would do any good if we walked out and tried to straighten the thing out?”

“That would be playing into their hands,” Doc said. “That is what they want us to do, apparently. Anything to keep us from getting to Paris Stevens and Johnny Toms.”

“Then see them is what we'd better do.”

“That's what we'd better do,” Doc agreed.

THE S−slash−S ranch was not on the Oklahoma City regional aëronautical chart. The chart was in the plane, anyway. But the verbal description they had gotten at the Tulsa Municipal airport gave them the location of the ranch. It was not far.

They began walking.

Doc did some thinking about the man in cowboy boots who had given them directions in Tulsa.

“That fellow back in Tulsa,” Doc said gloomily. “We had better not forget him.”

“By Jove!” Ham said, with the Harvard accent he used when he was upset. “You mean he was a stinker?”

Doc frowned. “To gear this for our arrival the way they did, they had to know when we left Tulsa. And they had to know we were coming here. Of course they might have guessed that we would come by plane and that we would land here, because it was the logical thing to do. But to time it as they did—that wasn't luck. That was good snaky headwork.”

They were impressed. It was startling to discover, or suspect they had discovered, that they had fallen into a trap in Tulsa.

If whoever they were after—or whoever was after them, which was more like it—had the acumen to post a man in Tulsa, it was further unpleasant evidence of what they had already begun to realize. They were up against a foxy intellect. Someone who was three or four jumps ahead of them.

Monk muttered, “Wonder how many guys are mixed up in this, anyway?”

“It's not one or two, we can see that,” Ham told him gloomily.

They pushed through some more brush, and Doc said, “That must be the ranch yonder.”

The ranch was sprawled pleasantly in the Oklahoma sunlight. The buildings were neat, white. The scene looked placid. Four or five cowboys were sitting under a cottonwood tree. One was working on a tractor and the others seemed to be watching.

“Do we walk right up?” Ham asked uneasily.

Doc started to say that he would go alone, then changed his mind. He could see that Monk and Ham were getting jittery. With the sort of temperaments they had, another session of hiding in the brush or in ditches while things happened would not do them any good.

When they walked up to the group under the tree, the cowboy working on the tractor stopped operations, put a foot on the tractor front wheel and said, “Hy'ah.”

“This the Stevens ranch?” Doc asked.

“That's right.”

“We want to see Paris Stevens,” Doc said.

“That would be kind of tough to do,” the cowboy said. “She and the foreman, Johnny Toms, pulled out of here this morning.”

CHAPTER VII

THE cowboy was long and rusty looking and had large ears. Doc wondered if they had heard the shooting. They should have, but they might have thought it was someone hunting. Still, they should have seen the plane come down, and granting they had a natural amount of curiosity, should have ridden over to see why the ship

had landed. But they hadn't.

“They say where they were going?” Doc asked.

“Who?”

“Miss Stevens and Toms.”

“Oh, them. No, they didn't say. It was back east somewhere though. New York, maybe.”

“You sure they went to New York?”

“Nope.”

“What makes you think they did?”

“Miss Stevens lives there. Maybe she didn't go there. I don't know.”

Doc stood there. He felt foolish. Thwarted. As if he had reached for something, and found it wasn't there. The feeling, together with the embarrassing conviction that he had been made a sucker of from the time things started happening in New York, made him self−conscious. He couldn't think of anything more to say.

“Hot day,” he remarked.

“Yep.”

“Something wrong with the tractor?”

“Hydraulic gadget is out of whack. I just fixed it, I hope.”

Another self−conscious silence.

“Any drinking water around?” Doc asked.

“Sure. Try the windmill over there. It's cooler.”

Doc went over to the windmill. Monk and Ham followed him. None of the cowboys came along.

“They weren't too full of information,” Monk said in a low voice. “What do we do now?”

“The first thing the Sheriff will do,” Doc surmised, “is come over here and warn the ranch hands to be on the lookout for us. So we had better get away from here.”

Ham said, “Those cowboys don't look excited. I guess they don't know anything is going on.”

“It's hard to tell,” Doc said.

They walked back the way they had come. The cowboys remained under the tree. The one who had been working on the tractor had started the engine. He was listening to it run.

Doc and Monk and Ham went into the scrub oak woods. They walked slowly. There was some doubt as to just what they had better do next. Doc was worried about the bloodhounds. The Sheriff had said he was going to put dogs on their trail, and they would have to do something to defeat the animals, if they were going to stay out of jail. Doc had noticed from the air that there was an oil field back in the hills. He was tempted to head in that direction, and trust that the smell of the oil would confuse the dogs.

Then he heard someone coming quietly from the direction of the ranch.

“Get set,” Doc warned. “One of the cowboys is following us.”

IT turned out to be the cowboy who had been working on the tractor.

He stopped in front of them, looked at them, then got papers and tobacco and made a cigarette, continuing to examine them at intervals.

“You got here pretty quick,” he said.

“As quickly as we could,” Doc agreed.

“Pretty fast traveling, to have come all the way from Denver.”

“We came from New York,” Doc said.

“That's the right answer,” the cowboy said. “Now what did the telegram that brought you here say?”

“It was a telephone call.”

“That's the right answer too.” The cowboy lighted his cigarette, broke the match, and dropped it. “I take it you're Doc Savage.”

“That's right.”

“My name's Frosty,” the cowboy said. “We weren't sure about you when you walked up that way. We weren't sure, and also we didn't know who might be looking. After you walked off like that, we figured you must be Savage.” He nodded at Monk and Ham. “We couldn't figure these two, though.”

“This is Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks, two of my assistants,” Doc told him.

“That's good, too,” Frosty said. “Well, you'll be wanting to see Miss Stevens and Johnny Toms, won't you?”

“Didn't they go to New York?”

“Heck, no. We just said that.” Frosty jerked a thumb. “Miss Stevens and Johnny took to the brush. They're holed up in a shack on an oil lease.”

“Why?”

“To keep away from Bill Clausen. Bill is the Sheriff. He's got Johnny staked out for a little killing that happened last night. Johnny doesn't want to be in jail, so he's hiding out. And Miss Stevens is scared, so she's

hiding with him.”

“Can you take us to them?”

“No. I'll show you how to get there, though.”

He accompanied them about a quarter of a mile, then stopped and pointed at a hilltop about two miles away. “See that oil derrick,” he said. “The wooden one. All the rest of the derricks are steel rigs. That's the only wooden one. You go there, and sit on a pile of pipe you'll find there.”

“Is that all?”

“That's all.”

Chapter VIII

THEY walked for quite a while after they left the cowboy. They reached it suddenly. They heard the oil field sounds for some time first, the chugging of pump engines and the monotonous squeak of draw−lines in guides. Then suddenly there were oil wells all around them.

The wells were in a shallow sand, evidently, because one engine was pumping four to eight wells through the medium of a turntable and long rod−lines which ran out in all directions to the wells, like the spokes of a wheel.

There was the smell of oil. The vegetation became scrawny, oil−poisoned. The earth in many places was bare and oil−soaked. In other places the grass grew tall and rank and unwholesome. They stumbled over discarded timbers lying in the grass, and into ditches.

The steel derrick was on top of a hill. It was evidently a deep test which had been drilled within the last year. A rotary rig. Old pump mud was caked and gray around the rig floor. The sump ponds were full of water on which glistened the iridescent rainbow hues of oil film.

Oil must have been hit, and flowing naturally, because there was no pump. Just a Christmas tree, the assembly of pipes and connections at the derrick floor, by which the oil was conducted from the well. A pipe led off toward a cluster of lease tanks not far away.

Nearby was a pile of ten−inch casing. About a dozen joints, battered and obviously ruined in the process of drilling, and not yet hauled away for scrap.

They sat down on the pipe and waited. They were in plain sight. They felt conspicuous. But they were not there long.

Another cowboy sauntered up. This one was apparently a full−blooded Indian, but he was dressed like a farmer. He didn't wear cowboy boots.

He seemed uncertain as to just what he should do.

“You see anything of a friend of mine?” he asked finally.

“Frosty, you mean?” Doc said.

The Indian looked relieved.

“Frosty send you?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. The lease shack is over this way.”

It was over another hill, a battered looking old building beside a road that was a string of ruts. The Indian didn't go all the way with them. He went back toward the rig, apparently to resume watching.

MONK didn't exactly whistle when he saw Paris Stevens. But his mouth got into the shape, as if it wanted to. And Ham whispered viciously, “You missing link! You knew she was a dish when you grabbed the job of investigating her.”

Paris Stevens was plainly glad to see them. But she was embarrassed. She didn't know what to say, so what she said was conventional. She was glad to see them. She was Paris Stevens and this was her foreman, Johnny Toms.

“How,” said Johnny Toms.

That was about all Johnny Toms said for the moment.

But Monk and Ham took a dislike to him anyway. Their feelings were not based on any doubts about Johnny Toms' character. They were just irritated and jealous because the fellow had such a pretty girl with him.

Paris Stevens said, “Won't you come inside. I think we had better. We might be seen standing around outside.”

The inside of the lease shack was about what they expected it to be. Nothing much. Places like these were inhabitated by the oil field worker called a lease louse or a lease monkey. His job was to tend the pumps, make minor repairs, and generally keep an eye on things. It was employment which, for monotony, ran a close second to sheep−herding.

With the five of them in it, the shack seemed crowded. There was a fire in the iron stove, in spite of the heat outdoors. A coffee pot bubbled on the stove.

Paris Stevens glanced at Johnny Toms. “You want to tell them the story, Johnny?”

“You tell,” Johnny Toms said.

Monk glanced at Johnny Toms, wondering just what kind of a clown he was, anyway.

Paris began talking. She told them about finding a mysterious fat man trailing her in New York, become scared, and coming to Oklahoma, where she found the fat man on hand immediately. She told how they had discovered the fat man was camping on Sugar Creek, how they had gone to investigate, and found the dying man named Porter. She described how Johnny Toms had been framed for killing Porter. About the knife which belonged to Toms, and the custom−made gloves which could be traced to him.

Exactly what they had feared had happened, she explained. The Sheriff had traced the gloves to Toms through the maker in Tulsa, so she and Toms had gone into hiding. Waiting, she said, for Doc Savage to arrive.

She and Johnny Toms had not known what else they could do, except hide. They were scared. She frankly admitted it.

The cowboys on the S−slash−S were helping them. That is, they were offering what assistance they could offer without getting into trouble. She had told them not to do anything that would get them caught, and they had promised not to. But she was worried about them getting into a mess. She was deeply grateful for their assistance, though, and she was sure they would help all they could.

That was her story.

She didn't have the least idea—or said she hadn't—what it was all about.

Doc Savage had listened in silence, showing attentive interest, frequently nodding to show that he understood points. His interest had kept the girl talking rapidly.

Now Doc said, “I don't want to alarm you further, but here is what happened to us as soon as we got your telephone call.”

He told her about the attempt to decoy him to going to Brazil—minutely describing the small sheep of a man as he told the story—and how it had failed.

He mentioned the picture which had been one of the things that had tipped him that the sheep's story was false. The portrait which the sheep had said had been made five years ago, but which was on paper that had a novelty matte surface which had gone on the market no more than six months ago.

Doc mentioned the name of the man in the portrait. Chapman. Chapman Schulte. He described the man, his sullen look and thick neck and his upstanding thatch of dark hair, his domineering eyes.

Doc's story concluded with the narrow escape of Monk and Ham in New York, the flight to Oklahoma, and the trap into which they had fallen on arrival, and which had resulted in them being framed for a murder.

He said, “They worked the same trick on both of us. Killed somebody and framed it on to us. They're cold killers and they're smart.”

Suddenly there was the feeling that everything had been said. And they were nowhere. It was the sensation of having looked into a purse thoroughly and finding it empty, robbed. The result was a heavy silence.

Paris Stevens got up uneasily and moved the bubbling coffee pot on to the back of the stove.

She said, “You'll have dinner with us, of course. It just dawned on Johnny and me a while ago that we hadn't eaten a thing since last night. We were so excited.”

This sounded, somehow, eminently practical. As if it was the first thing that had been said that made sense.

Or so it struck Monk. By now, he was captivated by Paris. He had listened to her talk, and he was enthralled. She was quite the loveliest thing he recalled having seen.

He happened to get a look at Ham, and the expression on Ham's face made him want to kick Ham. Ham was enthralled, too.

Damn the luck, Monk thought. Ham is a handsome son of a gun, and he'll be stiff competition. Monk resolved to seize the first possible opportunity and use it to tell some kind of a lie about Ham. Something that would torpedo Ham's chances.

It's lucky there's a pretty girl around to take my mind off our other troubles, he reflected.

Johnny Toms spoke. It was his fourth word since they had met.

“Belonesox,” he said.

Paris Stevens started violently. “Oh, I intended to ask you about that. And I completely forgot it. My mind must be failing.”

“Belonesox?” Doc said. “What about it?”

“Mystery,” Johnny Toms said.

Paris explained, “The man we found dying in the camp on Sugar Creek wanted to know if we had the belonesox,”

“Did he spell it out?” Doc asked.

“Yes. B−e−l−o−n−e−s−o−x.”

“That,” Doc said, “is the way to spell it.”

Paris was surprised. Johnny Toms blinked at Doc.

“You ketchum?” Johnny Toms asked.

“A fish,” Doc said.

Paris didn't say anything. Neither did Johnny.

“The belonesox,” Doc continued, “is a fish that is somewhat of a curiosity. It belongs to the general classification called viviporous. It has long pointed jaws that curve over vicious teeth. The fish is so fierce that he has to be kept in an aquarium by himself.”

“Aquarium?” Johnny Toms said.

“Or fish bowl,” Doc said.

“Small?”

“This fish isn't large, if that is what you mean,” Doc explained. “Not the kind of a fish that would make you a square meal. It belongs to the aquarium type of fish.”

Johnny Toms thought about this profoundly for a while.

“Now know less than did,” was finally his verdict about his state of mind.

“Good Lord, this is confusing,” Paris said. “What on earth could a fish have to do with this?”

Doc frowned thoughtfully. “You say the dying man, Porter, wanted to know if you had it?”

“Yes. He seemed to think I, or we, should have received it.”

“Did you?”

“Receive a fish? No.”

“Have you recently received anything?”

Paris made a bewildered gesture. “Oh, I have received lots of things. You know how it is when you are in the hospital and have a lot of friends. They send you things. I was in a hospital for WACS for quite a while, and I got lots of flowers and little gimcracks and things.”

“But no fish?”

“No fish.”

PARIS began getting some food together for them. Monk noticed with considerable admiration, that she knew how to cook. The kitchen and raw material facilities of the lease shack were limited, but Paris was throwing together a nice meal. Monk was impressed. It always astonished him when he discovered a very pretty girl could cook.

Paris, however, was preoccupied. When she was not busy with the food, she stared thoughtfully from the window. Something was rattling around in her thoughts.

Finally she said, “Mr. Savage, when you traced down the threatening telephone call you got in New York, you found a little sheep of a man. And he showed you a picture he said was of his brother, Chapman, whom he blamed for making the call to you.”

“Yes?”

“You said Chapman had an upstanding thatch of dark hair, domineering eyes, and was thick−necked and somewhat sullen looking?”

“Yes.”

“I wish,” Paris said, “that I knew more about how this rascal brother looked in the picture.”

“If there were a pencil around here,” Doc told her, “I might supply that.”

Johnny Toms grunted, got up and found a pencil and a ten−cent writing tablet. Doc took these. He went to work sketching. As an artist, he would probably never produce any work that would hang in the Metropolitan. But he was fairly adept at sketching, although his drawing ran to the caricature. He was inclined to exaggerate the character points. This was good, in the present case.

He reproduced, as nearly as he could from memory, the face of the sheep's rascally brother, Chapman.

He showed this to Paris.

The effect surprised everyone.

“Bill!” she gasped. “That's Bill!”

Chapter IX

THE omelette Paris was cooking on the stove sizzled softly. The coffee color was pleasant. Outside, over the sound of the cooking, the chugging of the lease pumps and the squeaky grunting of the pump lines which ran to the oil wells, all made a lazy background for suspense. For suspense had certainly come into the cabin, and suddenly.

Doc Savage, confused, dug around in his memory of the report Monk had made of his investigation of Paris Steven's background. He recalled that Paris had an uncle named Bill Hazel.

“Your Uncle Bill?” he asked.

She nodded. “Uncle Bill Hazel. The sketch looks just like him.”

Johnny Toms grunted. “That guy!” he said. Evidently he didn't have an exalted opinion of Uncle Bill Hazel.

Doc Savage said, “All the dope we have on Bill Hazel was that he got into a scandal a few years ago when he was accused of swindling someone in a Wall Street deal. He had to leave the country.”

“You've been investigating me!” Paris said.

“Naturally. No reflection on you, however. We did not know you, so we were finding out what we could.”

She nodded. “Well, I suppose you want to know more about Uncle Bill.”

“Yes.”

“He was my mother's brother. My mother's family name was Hazel. Uncle Bill would be”—she paused to probe her memory—“forty−six years old, about. He is the youngest of the family.

“Bill was always a sort of a scamp. He is a suave fellow. You wouldn't think that from his looks, because he gives the appearance of being crude and brutal. But he isn't. He is as smooth as honey in milk.

“Bill is the mental type. He is inclined to judge people entirely by their brains, and his heroes were always people who made a mental sort of a living. Promoters, writers, stock manipulators, inventors. His admiration for brains mounted to a fetish. I think that did more than anything else to make Bill a—well—a shyster.

“There is no doubt that Bill was a crook, but he was genteel about it. He didn't go out and rob people obviously. He just took it away from them, and did it so slick sometimes that they didn't quite know what had happened.

“I don't know the details of the Wall Street deal that got him into trouble. It was something about getting to be an official of a company and changing the par value of the stock on the strength of assets that didn't quite exist. Anyway, the government was going to get him, but he skipped the country first.”

“When,” Doc asked, “was that?”

“About five years ago. I haven't seen him since.”

“Know what happened to him?”

“He went to France, I understand. But I'm not sure. Naturally he didn't keep in touch with anyone, because he might have been arrested and brought back.”

“Then you don't know where he is?”

“No.”

Doc said, “You belong to an adventurous family.”

“Bill's the only crook!” she said instantly.

DOC was a little embarrassed. He had said the wrong thing without thinking. He hastily assured her that he hadn't meant that she came from a family of rascals or anything of that sort. He said that he just meant adventurous. Like Paris herself being in the WAC and on an active front and being wounded. He got the idea he wasn't helping things.

Blast it. I shouldn't be embarrassed, he thought. This girl must be having some kind of an effect on me.

He went back to questioning, and asked, “Does Bill Hazel have any brothers?”

“He does not,” Paris said briefly.

“Then the little sheep man couldn't be his brother?”

“He could not.”

“And you don't know the sheep?”

“I do not.”

“And you don't know anything about a fish?”

“I do not.”

The atmosphere was crisp, so Doc dropped matters for the time being.

The food was good. It was not elaborate, but it had the crisp taste which a good cook gets into her work. But it was not quite as wonderful, Doc reflected sourly, as Monk and Ham made it sound. Monk and Ham both brought forth the most flowery compliments about the cooking. Paris seemed to eat it up, Doc noticed. He

became disgruntled. The darn girl, he reflected, *was* getting under his skin.

Monk and Ham split their buttons to wash the dishes.

An Indian arrived. A cowboy from the ranch. Johnny Toms went out to talk to him.

Johnny came back inside.

“Ranch okay,” he reported. “Can go back.”

Monk told him, “Well, well, you broke a record and used five words in one speech. Just what do you mean?”

Johnny Toms scowled at him. “Safe,” he said.

“Okay, okay,” Monk growled. “But let's have a full report.”

Johnny Toms evidently decided he didn't like Monk. He examined Monk intently.

“Nuts,” he said.

“My God!” Monk blurted.

They went outside. The cowboy was still there, and to questioning, he replied that the Sheriff had visited the S−slash−S ranch, and apparently had swallowed the story about Paris and Johnny having gone to New York or somewhere early that morning.

“What about the bloodhounds?” Doc asked.

The cowboy grinned. “We spoiled that.”

“How?”

“Oh, we scattered some pepper around over your trail. Then one of the boys drove off toward Tulsa in the car, and later came back and said he had taken you fellows to Tulsa. We backed that up by saying you had hired him to take you to Tulsa. So the Sheriff is in Tulsa now, hunting you, probably.”

“You'll get into trouble!” Paris gasped.

“We won't worry too much about that,” the cowboy said.

THE S−slash−S ranch was as peaceful−looking as it had been during the afternoon. It was now the cool of the evening. The cowhands had brought in a string of saddle horses and corralled them. Calves were bawling in another corral. There was, since the wind came from the hills, the slightest odor of crude oil.

Doc liked the ranch. The place was a judicious blending of the attractive and the practical. It was the kind of a ranch which was nice to look at, and obviously made money. The two did not often go together.

Doc had no intention of remaining on the ranch for long. There was too much chance of getting caught by the Sheriff, but that was not all of his reasons. He didn't like the idea of sitting around. It would get him nowhere.

To get out of this mess, he suspected they would have to do some active scrambling.

The catch, of course, was what to do?

Paris seemed to take it for granted they would stay for a while. She talked to Johnny Toms, and Johnny in turn got the cowboys together.

About half the cowboys, according to Johnny Toms' plan, were to spread over the neighborhood and hunt for the fat man, the sheep of a man, the fellow who had told the lie to the Sheriff, the man in the cowboy boots who had directed Doc and his aids to the landing area near the ranch—in short, look for enemies. The cowboys were to enlist the aid of all of their Indian friends in the neighborhood who could be trusted.

There was a hot discussion about what Indians could be trusted to keep their mouths shut. Also what Indians had wives who would talk their heads off. The squaws, it was the general opinion, would be the real gossip carriers.

Johnny Toms supervised this discussion expertly, and got the cowboys on their way.

Monk gazed after Johnny Toms.

“That guy,” Monk said, “can say more than one word at a time, after all.”

“He's a funny duck, though,” Ham said.

Doc Savage decided to look over the ranch vicinity himself, to be sure it was safe. This did not mean that he distrusted Johnny Toms and the cowboys. Doc was in the habit of checking on important things to see that they were done. Also, he was impatient, anxious to be doing something. He hoped that while he was prowling around the ranch, some kind of an idea would come to him.

Doc's prowl around the ranch consisted of standing in the dark shadows—it was night now, and a black one—and listening, thinking. Between times, he poked into the buildings he came to, to find out what was inside.

He found two cowhands guarding the buildings. They were alert, and discovered him, although he moved with stealth. He was satisfied with their guarding job. No one would be able to get too close. The cowboys told him that other cowboys were farther away from the ranch buildings, watching the roads and paths. They had, they explained, done another thing to make it difficult to approach the ranch without being discovered.

Doc came finally to a bungalow. He surmised the place was Johnny Toms', the foreman being the only one who would logically rate private quarters. Because he was checking, and passing up nothing, he decided to take a look through a window to be sure.

He was thinking about that when Johnny Toms appeared in the door.

TOMS stood looking out into the night. His manner was nervous, which was understandable. But it struck Doc that he was furtive. Or possibly it was what Toms did next which gave him the impression of furtiveness. Because Toms drew the window shades.

It could be nervousness. Doc frowned. Yes, it could be nervousness.

Johnny Toms had pulled down the windows. Apparently he hadn't locked them.

Doc moved rapidly, picked a window that hadn't squawked when it was put down, and lifted it gradually. He put it up about a foot. There wasn't enough breeze to stir the shade.

He hesitated, wondering what to do about the shade. He didn't feel it would be safe to raise it. Finally he got his pocket knife out, opened the sharp blade, and deliberately made a slit in the shade. He got away with that.

An eye to the shade, he discovered he was looking into Johnny Toms' living−room. It was a rustic−looking place, the decoration motif being western and Indian. Headdresses on the walls, moccasins, Indian clubs, drums, a few bows and arrows and spears. The chairs were bottomed with buckskin.

Johnny Toms was moving a floor lamp to a corner of the room. He adjusted the shade so that it would throw its strongest light into a glass tank of an affair on a rustic stand table.

The tank was a small, home aquarium.

Toms scowled into the aquarium for a while. Then he moved away and came back with one of the arrows off the wall. While he was getting the arrow, Doc saw that the sole occupant of the aquarium seemed to be a fish.

Toms deviled the fish for a while with the arrow. The fish attacked the arrow industriously, fiercely. Toms started to put a finger into the aquarium, changed his mind, and dug up a buckskin glove.

Thrusting his right hand encased in the glove into the water, he finally cornered the fish, brought it out, and began inspecting it.

He examined the fish from all angles, intently, carefully.

He swore.

He put the fish back in the aquarium and returned the aquarium to where it had been standing in the corner.

He undressed, turned out the light, raised the windows and the shades, and went to bed.

Chapter X

DOC SAVAGE went back to the ranch house. He found that no one had gone to bed, that Monk and Ham were keeping Paris Stevens up and talking an ear off her. Doc listened to Ham talk.

Ham was telling a story about the time they had made a forced landing in an African jungle, their plane having been forced down. The story, during the first part of the telling, was mildly complimentary to Monk, who was listening with a puzzled expression.

Doc could understand Monk's puzzlement. The whole story was a preposterous lie. But Ham, as he made it up out of full cloth, did a convincing job. He used names of places and times, and put in little anecdotes of what had happened to give it convincing color.

After he had listened a while, Doc believed he saw the motive behind Ham's lying. He was surprised that Monk didn't see it, too. But Monk was taking it in. Monk smirked when Ham described little feats of heroism

and common sense which he, Monk, performed.

When Ham got to the point of describing the pygmies which had made them prisoner, Monk was so sucked in that he nodded emphatically at each point, confirming the whopper. The pygmies, Ham explained, were vicious little characters. Utterly vicious. The strange part of their character makeup, Ham explained, was that they approved and admired nothing which was not nasty, vicious and unwholesome. Monk, and Ham and Doc, Ham explained, had languished in the captivity of these filthy, abhorrent little people for some time.

At this point, Monk woke up. For a moment, he had a ghastly expression.

“Yes, indeed,” Monk said hastily. “Let me add a few details which Ham is leaving—”

“I'm telling the story,” Ham protested hurriedly.

“I was there, too, wasn't I?” Monk demanded. “Let me tell about the feasts which the pygmies prepared.”

Ham wasn't enthusiastic. He started to object.

Monk rushed ahead with words, saying that the feasts were an important ceremony with the pygmies. They celebrated the adoption into the tribe of someone the pygmies admired, someone of the same depraved character as themselves.

“Imagine our horror,” Monk said smoothly, “when we discovered that they were adopting Ham, here.

Ham closed his eyes tightly. He had been sucked into his own trap.

Paris Stevens gasped, and stared nervously at Ham.

“We never could figure out why the pygmies got the idea Ham was a brother under the skin,” Monk said blandly. “The little fellows were excellent judges of character, we had noticed, as most rascals are. You may have noticed yourself how mean, nasty−minded people show a dislike for nice people which seems almost instinctive. We couldn't see why they took a liking to Ham.”

Ham turned somewhat purple.

“That's a lie!” he muttered.

Monk looked falsely contrite. “Oh, I'm sorry I told that part of it,” he said, giving the impression he was protecting Ham.

Doc Savage joined them. This sort of thing was frequently getting started between Monk and Ham. It was the bane of his existence.

“Miss Stevens is tired,” Doc said firmly. “She didn't get any sleep last night.”

AFTER Paris had gone into the house, Ham gave his personal opinion of Monk at the moment. It was a complete opinion. Ham left nothing out, using about fifty words to express himself.

“Listen, you shyster lawyer, you were telling that lie so you could pull the same thing on me. I almost fell into the trap, too,” Monk told him.

“Both of you,” Doc said, “listen to me.”

He sounded sufficiently irritated that he got their attention immediately.

“You're itching to start one of your interminable quarrels,” Doc said. “Stop it. Stop it right now. As you two get older, those fusses grow more violent. They take your mind off your business.”

Monk and Ham were silent.

Doc examined them to see if they resented his interference, decided they didn't, and continued.

“Johnny Toms,” he said, “has a belonesox.”

Monk and Ham were at once violently interested. “The mysterious fish, you mean?” Monk demanded.

“I don't know whether it is *the* fish or not,” Doc told them. “But it is a belonesox.”

He explained how he had watched Johnny Toms in his cabin, deviling the fish with the arrow, then taking it out to examine it so intently.

Ham said, “I didn't trust that one−worded Indian the minute I saw him.”

“Me either,” Monk agreed.

Doc expressed no opinion. He felt that Monk and Ham's opinion on the point wasn't worth a great deal, both of them being jealous of Johnny Toms. There wasn't any reason for the jealousy, Doc believed. Paris seemed to show no emotional interest in Toms.

“We didn't,” Doc reminded them, “get much sleep ourselves last night. I suggest that we sleep a little. By relays. I'll stay awake for a while, then one of you can take my place.”

“What about the fish?” Monk demanded.

“It was nothing but a fish, as far as I could tell.”

“You get a close look at it?”

“No. But I plan to before we leave here.”

“Incidentally,” Monk said, “when do we leave here?”

Doc shook his head. “The cowboys and the Indians are scouting the neighborhood. We'll wait and learn whether they find anything.”

Satisfied, Monk and Ham went off to bed. Doc heard them formally agreeing to take different bedrooms, although the previous arrangement had been for them to bunk in the same room. They were as polite as two ambassadors.

They've got a fuss started after all, Doc reflected. They weren't shouting insults at each other. They usually did. This row was going to be a quiet, bitter, polite affair, apparently. Doc snorted his exasperation. For years he had been trying to persuade Monk and Ham to get along together amiably.

DOC was sitting on the porch—it must have been an hour later—thinking about the mystery of the pretty WAC and the fighting fish, and getting nowhere, when one of the cowboys came striding up.

“Somebody coming,” the cowhand reported. “One guy. In a taxicab. Tulsa cab.”

Doc listened, heard no sound of a car, and asked, “Where?”

“About five miles down the road by now, I reckon.”

“How,” Doc demanded, “did you find this out?”

The cowboy chuckled. “Oh, we fixed up a little flashlight code. Little Toe Jackson and me used to be Boy Scouts, and we still remember the Morse code. So Little Toe went to watch the road to town, figuring the Sheriff would come that way if he came back unexpectedly.”

“This isn't the sheriff?”

“No. This is a stranger.” The cowboy frowned at Doc. “What you going to do, stick around?”

Doc was undecided what he should do. “I'll stick around,” he said. “But I'll stay out of sight.” He went in to arouse Monk and Ham. Both of them were asleep. Ham was making mumbling noises, angry ones. He awakened, and all three of them stood inside an open window and waited. They could hear the car now. Monk aroused Paris Stevens.

The cab arrived shortly, a black shape chasing its own headlight glare. They saw a dark figure alight, and stand beside the front door, evidently paying off the cab. The taxi then left. The figure came toward the ranch house.

“Hello, there,” he called. “Anybody home?”

The cowboy said, “Who're you?”

“Is this the Stevens ranch?”

“Yeah.”

“Is Paris here?”

“Who are you?” repeated the cowboy.

“Listen, fellow, I asked you a question,” the newcomer said sharply. “Answer it!”

The cowhand wasn't impressed.

“Nuts to you, city slicker,” he said.

The stranger became indignant.

“I'm William Randolph Hazel,” he said angrily. “Now will you kindly tell me whether my niece is here?”

This, Doc thought, must be Uncle Bill Hazel, the family black sheep.

DOC SAVAGE was wondering if Paris Stevens, who stood in the darkened room at his elbow, had been startled into silence. Or wasn't this man her uncle? He was, evidently, because she gripped Doc's arm. “It *is* Uncle Bill!” she gasped.

Doc was silent. Just what should they do now.

Paris solved the problem by walking out into the night.

“Hello, Bill,” she said.

“H'yah,” the man said. “What are you going to do with your errant Uncle, run him off?”

“Come on inside,” Paris said.

They came into the house. Paris turned on the lights. Uncle Bill Hazel stared at Paris. Then he whistled his astonishment softly.

“Hey, you can't grow up on me like that. It makes me feel old,” he said. “Where's the pigtails, freckles and knobby knees you had when I left?”

He was a big man. Wide. He was like his picture, and yet he wasn't. The picture hadn't contained his personality. The man was hearty, blunt, slangy. He had an aggressive, predatory look when his face was in repose, but it vanished when he grinned. Grinning, he was a likeable cuss.

Paris introduced Doc Savage, Monk and Ham. Bill Hazel was impressed.

He told Paris, “So you know it's big−time, and you got big−time men to help you. That's sensible.”

Paris frowned at him. “What are you talking about?”

“The fish.”

“The belonesox?”

“That's right.” Uncle Bill Hazel looked relieved. “So you got it! I'm damned glad—”

He stopped. Johnny Toms had appeared silently in the door. Johnny had strapped a big frontier single−action six−shooter and holster on his hip. It gave him a garish air, like a cowboy in a musical comedy.

“Hello, Johnny,” Uncle Bill Hazel said.

“Ugh,” Johnny Toms said. “Surprise.”

Uncle Bill Hazel laughed. “Still like to play at being an Indian, eh Johnny?” he said. He turned to Monk and Ham and Doc and said, “You know something about Johnny, here? He's not much more Indian than Adolph Hitler.”

“I like the Hitler comparison,” Johnny Toms said sourly.

“Touchy, eh? Dish it out, but can't take it, eh?” Uncle Bill Hazel said amiably. “Okay, forget it, Johnny. I always did think you were too big a boy to play Indian games, and you didn't like me for thinking it.” He turned to Doc Savage again. “Johnny is a fine boy, but he likes to act like Hiawatha. Johnny is a Harvard man. You wouldn't think it, would you. Harvard Law School, yes, sir.”

Watching Johnny Toms and Bill Hazel, Doc Savage decided there was more than a mild dislike between the two. It must be a strong feeling to carry over five or six years, and pop out again as swiftly as it had.

“While you're telling secrets,” said Johnny Toms grimly to Bill Hazel, “you might tell us why you turn up this way.”

“What way did I turn up?”

“Like a buzzard in a cyclone,” Johnny Toms said.

Bill Hazel grinned. “Well, it's an interesting story. I'll tell it. But how about something to eat? Where's your Oklahoma hospitality?”

Paris called Big Bird, the Indian woman who presided over the functions of the ranch house, and told her Uncle Bill was hungry. Big Bird looked surprised to see Bill Hazel, and being no weasel with words, she said, “I thought they had you in jail somewhere by now. What do you want to eat? A steak?” She went out without waiting for an answer.

“I love this.” Uncle Bill Hazel chuckled. He took a comfortable chair. “I love a home−coming like this. It's just as if I had left yesterday.” He leaned back and grinned at them. “It's damned few places in the world you can go back to and find them the way they were yesterday.”

Then he fell to studying Doc Savage.

“Heard of you, Savage. It's a little unusual to hear about an American the way I've heard of you, in France, in Germany, in Africa, the far corners of the earth. Glad to meet you. Should have met you before.” He blinked admiringly at Doc. “You in this thing?”

“Yes,” Doc told him.

“Had any trouble so far?”

“Some.”

“You'll have,” said Bill Hazel, “a hell of a lot more.”

Doc was forming an opinion of Bill Hazel. The man must be close to fifty, and he was as composed as if he were paying a Sunday afternoon visit, which probably meant that he had been around trouble so much that he was comfortable in its presence. Doc had met the type before. He had learned that it was good to be afraid of them.

Bill Hazel was still looking at Doc.

“What,” he asked, “do you think of a man who tells half a story?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“It depends,” Doc said, “on what he does with the other half.”

Bill Hazel nodded. “I wish I had the other half. I surely do.”

He squirmed comfortably in the chair. He loosened his tie. Then he took some papers and a small folder from his inside coat pocket. He held these documents in his hands, idly, and began talking.

“THIS story,” said Uncle Bill Hazel, “is a part of the present situation in Axis Europe. So I'm going to review the Axis European situation for you, so you'll understand.

“The first point to get in your mind is that Hitler is out of the picture. He's a cooked goose, and Germany is licked. I hardly need tell you that. The Hitler gang is out on its ear—supposedly.”

He looked at them dramatically for a moment.

“Supposedly. Get that—supposedly,” he said. “There is a lot going on in Germany. Under cover. Wolves trying to be sheep. Nazis carrying olive branches. Devils trying to look like angels. You've heard of Johann Jon Berlitz?”

Doc Savage nodded. “The man the Allies are apparently going to accept as a satisfactory new German leader?”

“That's right. I work for him.”

Doc Savage looked intently at Bill Hazel for several seconds. He couldn't read the man's face at all. Hazel, big−voiced and at ease, was inscrutable.

“You are here in Oklahoma,” Doc asked, “but you work for Johann Jon Berlitz, who is going to be the new political head of Germany?”

“Sounds a bit far−fetched?”

“Yes.”

“It's true.”

“You'd better prove it,” Doc said.

“I can't,” Bill Hazel said. “I can't prove a word of it. But you can. You can get on the telephone to Berlin in Germany—if you can, and I imagine a man of your consequence could—and check on me. You'll find I work for Berlitz.”

Johnny Toms made an unpleasant clucking noise.

“You've come up in the world, Uncle Bill,” he said, “from picking pockets on Wall Street.”

Bill Hazel chuckled amiably. “Don't be nasty, Johnny. Or if you do, at least be clever. Actually, I'm doing a great thing for the world. Or trying to.”

“Oh. You're heroic now?” Toms said coldly.

“That's right. You ever hear of Erodus Helv?”

Doc Savage started. He looked at the others and decided that he was the only one who had heard of Helv. He wasn't too surprised. Helv's part in the horror that had trapped Europe for ten years or more was not widely known.

Bill Hazel smiled at them. “Babes in the wood,” he said. “You don't know the devil when he is called by name.”

“What,” Johnny Toms demanded, “are you talking about?”

“Erodus Helv. The bloody boy himself. Helv the Butcher, Helv, the fiend who personally with a Mauser pistol in his cursed right hand shot to death twenty−six captured American fliers—which was actually, sickeningly incredible though it seems, one of the smallest of the many murder−orgies in which he indulged.”

Johnny Toms frowned. “Never heard of him.”

“Okay. But the Allies have. He's wanted. He's one of the most wanted men in the world today. He is right at the head of the list of war−atrocity criminals.”

“What are you driving at?”

Bill Hazel said, “It's simple. I was hired by Johann Jon Berlitz to find war−criminal Erodus Helv. I got a clue to Helv's whereabouts. Helv's men got on my trail. I had to get rid of the clue fast, but get rid of it in a place where I could find it again. So I shipped it to Paris, my niece. It was a fish.”

“But I never got any fish!” Paris gasped.

“That,” said Bill Hazel, “complicates things.”

Chapter XI

DOC SAVAGE now took a back seat, as far as a part in the conversation was concerned. He sat back and watched. He listened to Uncle Bill Hazel elaborate the matter of the fish. Hazel seemed acutely conscious that the story had its silly side.

The fish, he explained, had been shipped from Occupied Europe. The fact that it had come to the United States was due, Bill Hazel explained, to his being frightened and excited at the time. He had been terribly scared, because Helv the Butcher's men were hot on his trail.

To make a long story short, Hazel said, he'd given the fish to an American transport command flier to bring to the United States and give to Paris Stevens. He had told the flier it was a gift for his niece Paris, and he'd discovered that the flier had seen a picture of Paris somewhere, so the aviator had been enthusiastic about it. Since the Transport Command Pilot had brought the fish in, it had escaped scrutiny by the customs, and had avoided the red tape and censorship which ensnarled ordinary packages sent from Europe these days.

That was about the whole story. Bill Hazel himself had come to America. He'd had quite a bit of trouble doing that, because of his police record. He admitted frankly that he had used the underground which made a business of getting the more impatient European refugees into the United States.

If they doubted that he could get into America in a hurry via the underground, he wished to point out that shady doings had been his business for some time. He knew the ropes in Europe. He was in a position to know about such things as undergrounds.

And so here he was. He settled back, knitted his fingers together over his stomach and smirked at them.

“Have I convinced you?” he asked.

When no one said anything, he turned to Doc. “What about you, Mr. Savage? Any questions?”

“Two,” Doc said. “The first one: What is there about a fish that would tell where this arch−murderer, Helv, can be found.”

“I don't have the least idea,” said Uncle Bill Hazel. “I will explain that by saying that I didn't have time to find out. Helv's men were hot on my trail. They didn't give me time.”

“Maybe,” Doc said, “the fish doesn't mean anything.”

“Oh, yes it does,” Uncle Bill said. “I can assure you it does.”

He's telling the truth, Doc decided. Some of the other stuff may have been lies. It probably was. But about this he is telling the truth.

“You say you had two questions?” Hazel asked.

“Number two,” Doc told him, “is this: Who is the fat man?”

Uncle Bill Hazel looked interested. “What fat man?”

Doc Savage described the fat man who had first turned up in New York on Paris Stevens' trail. He had not seen the fat man himself, so he used the descriptions Paris and Johnny Toms had given him. The fat man's name, or one of the names he had used, was Ben Watt. That was the name he'd given Paris' colored maid in New York, when the fellow had been keeping a close watch on her apartment by pretending to be an interior decorator.

Bill Hazel listened, as intrigued as a bird who had heard a worm underground, until Doc finished.

Then he said, “Jove! By Jove! That fellow answers the description—oh, it couldn't be!”

“Be what?”

“Be the Butcher of Hell himself. Erodus Helv.”

Johnny Toms made a loud scoffing noise. “Of all the bull−slinging lies,” he said.

“Johnny,” said Bill Hazel mildly, “you have a peasant mind. Localized. You can't conceive of things happening in the outer world and spilling over into Oklahoma.”

Paris said disapprovingly, “Johnny, let's not call people liars so freely.”

“Ugh!” said Toms, becoming an Indian again.

They spent probably forty−five minutes talking about the affair. Monk and Ham, being sensible for a change, did a good job of questioning Bill Hazel so that he filled in details. The sort of details they fished for were those which would draw a picture of the man as a liar, if he was lying. Doc, listening, nowhere heard anything that would prove Hazel was lying.

There is no denying, Doc thought soberly, that it is a wild improbable yarn. But then for several years the world had been full of wild improbabilities. Something like this could be true. Wilder things had happened. Still, the fish part was pretty hard to take. There must be something more sensible to it than that.

One of the cowboys came in. He reported that the other cowhands had located no trace of the fat man, or any other suspicious strangers. But they were still hunting. They had enlisted the aid of various Indian families in the Osage hills, and these were helping comb the country.

One of the cowboys had gone to town to find out about the man who had joined the Sheriff shortly after Doc's plane landed, and told the story accusing Doc Savage of murder.

Johnny Toms announced grimly that there seemed to be nothing they could do but wait. “We're doing all we can,” Johnny said.

Uncle Bill Hazel laughed derisively. Doc thought for a moment that Johnny Toms was going to walk over and hit the old fellow.

They decided the sensible thing was to get some sleep. Doc Savage went to the bedroom he was to occupy. He was untying his shoes when someone scratched on the window screen.

It was Johnny Toms outside.

“Mr. Savage, can you come with me a minute?” Johnny whispered. “I've got something important.”

DOC found the window screen was stuck. He left by a side door, and met Johnny Toms under a cottonwood tree. Johnny whispered, “This way.” He walked toward his cabin.

Outside the cabin, Johnny halted. He seemed uncomfortable. “I've done something wrong, I'm afraid,” he said finally. He sounded ashamed. “I didn't realize it was bad. But this talk about that Helv, that murderer, scared me. I wouldn't want to help a guy like that.”

He turned and went into the cabin. He turned on the light.

“A show−off, that's me,” he said. “I figured if the thing was important, I would keep it a secret to myself, and solve it. I'm ashamed of it now, but that's what I did.”

“The fish, you mean?” Doc asked.

Johnny's mouth fell open.

“You—you knew about it?” he gulped.

“Yes.”

“Good God! What you must have been thinking about me!”

“Not necessarily,” Doc said. “Shall we take a look at the fish?”

The fish was just that—a fish. A belonesox. Not particularly rare. Just an oddity. A fierce, unlovely thing with the disposition of a fiend. A disposition like a Nazi murderer such as Helv.

This last idea was very appropriate, Doc thought. A fish counterpart of Nazi mass−killer Helv.

“Got a flashlight?” he asked.

Johnny Toms had a light, a strong one. They held the fish in front of it, and the light was almost as effective as an X−ray. They could see fairly well what was inside the fish. There was nothing in him that didn't belong there, apparently.

“Secret writing on his skin, you suppose?” Johnny asked.

“Somewhat improbable.”

“You mean the fish doesn't mean anything to you?”

“Not a thing.”

Johnny Toms swore violently. He seemed bitterly disappointed. “I thought I had something!” he said, almost wailing, he was so discouraged.

Doc put the devil of a fish back in the water. He was glad to get rid of it. The fish was giving him an unpleasant feeling, it was so fierce−looking.

“Now,” Doc said, “tell me how you happened to get hold of the fish.”

“Paris received it.”

Doc looked at him sharply.

“Oh, don't misunderstand!” Johnny said hastily. “Paris told the truth. You see, she didn't know she got the fish.”

“That,” Doc told him, “sounds as skippy as some of that stuff Uncle Bill Hazel had to tell us.”

“Sure, I know. But here's the way it was. Paris has been in the hospital. She was pretty sick. She doesn't say much about it, but there was a long time when the doctors didn't know whether she'd make it. For over two months they wouldn't let her have visitors, and wouldn't let her get mail, even. Flowers and packages and everything that came for her were turned over to her maid, Callahan, to keep for her.”

Doc asked thoughtfully, “The fish came and was turned over to Callahan?”

“Sure. That's it. And if you don't believe me, you can ask Callahan. Callahan put on ten pounds eating the candy and good things that were sent to Paris in the hospital.”

“How did *you* get the fish?”

“This way: I was in New York when Paris was so sick. They wouldn't let me see her. I hung around and hung around, and finally I got tired of not being able to see her and packed up and came back to Oklahoma. I brought the fish.”

“Callahan—”

“Yes, the maid gave it to me to keep. The fish bit a hole in Callahan's finger, so she didn't think much of him. She said she didn't want a fish around that liked dark meat, and she would feed him to the cat if I didn't take him. So I took the cuss. It was a funny−looking fish, so I brought it out here to keep until Paris got on her pins.”

IT occurred to Doc Savage that everything that was happening was too damned logical. It was as logical as could be, but it was getting nobody anywhere. Or rather, every time he opened a door which should lead to the light, there would be still more darkness beyond. Johnny Toms sounded as if he was telling the truth. But was he?

“But you didn't tell anyone about the fish.”

“I didn't think it was important.”

“But when he was dying, Porter, the man you are accused of killing talked about a belonesox—”

“Sure he did. But I didn't know a belonesox was a fish. To me, a fish is either a catfish, a carp, a bass or a sunfish. I didn't know what belonesox was. I didn't know until tonight, when I met you, and you told us a belonesox was a fish.”

“But even then,” Doc reminded him, “you didn't say anything about having the fish.”

Johnny Toms flushed. “Like I said, I thought I would grandstand. I thought: Gee whizz, Johnny, you've got the fish. You've got the solution right there in your cabin. You can solve the mystery and be the big shot.”

Johnny turned to Doc in exasperation. “You know whose fault it was I got such an idea? Them two pals of yours, that's who!”

“How come?”

“Aw, them and their smart cracks and their wise looks. The way they looked at Paris, mostly.”

Doc told him, “Paris is a very pretty girl, and sure to be looked at.”

“Yeah, well I didn't like it.”

Doc examined Johnny thoughtfully. “You're in love with her?”

“Me? That's a laugh,” Johnny said violently. “Who am I to get ideas like that? I'm just the foreman of the ranch, the guy they laugh at around here. The guy who amuses them, that's me.”

A vehemence got into his speech, spurting out of him like boiling water out of a faucet.

He added, nearly shouting, “You know how much money Paris has? Millions. Them oil wells where we were today, she gets a seventh royalty on everything that comes out of them. And we didn't see all the wells either. Listen, when I fall in love, I'll use my head and pick a local squaw to do it with.”

Doc thought: He's in love with Paris, all right.

“All right,” Doc said, “Let's get back to business.”

“What more business is there?” Johnny demanded impatiently. “We've looked at the fish. We're no smarter than we were.”

“What did it come in?”

“I don't get—oh! Oh, you mean what was the fish in? This thing here.” Johnny went to a closet and dug around inside.

He unearthed a container of the sort used for shipping aquarium fish. Doc examined this. The thing was no makeshift; it had been designed and manufactured for the specific purpose of shipping aquarium stock. It was a standard model, Doc believed, although he was not a specialist on fish and had not seen many such containers before.

The thing was designed so that it would contain water and fish, and it had a glass window so that the men handling it during shipment could tell what it was. There was an arrangement for aërating the water. It was also plentifully labeled for what it was, a shipment container for valuable fish. Doc found the manufacturer's name and address, the Elco Tank Company, New York. The container, he noted, was battered and scratched, but it still had an appearance of newness.

“We'll take this apart,” Doc said.

He took it apart.

He tried every test on it he could think of, and inspected it minutely for such things as microscopic writing, unscrewing the lens from the flashlight and using that for a magnifying glass.

He finished with no more knowledge than he'd had when he started, except that it was a well−made container.

“Keep drawing blanks, don't we?” Johnny Toms said.

Chapter XII

DOC SAVAGE left Johnny Toms in his cabin, advising him to get some sleep. Doc walked to the house. He found Monk and Ham, who were standing guard together.

“What the dickens!” Monk exclaimed. “I thought you were asleep!”

“I've been fishing,” Doc said dryly.

“Catch anything?”

“Enough.”

“Eh?”

“I think,” Doc said, “that we can now proceed to light the fuse. I think the dynamite is all in place and ready to be exploded.”

Monk said, “Blazes!” softly. He stood up suddenly. Then he sat down again. “You mean you've got—”

“Heads and tails of it,” Doc said.

“I was wondering,” Monk said, “if it had a head or a tail. I haven't been able to see any. What are you going to do?”

“Light the fuse.”

“How?”

“With a telephone call,” Doc said. “It isn't an ordinary phone call, and we may have trouble getting it through. In fact, I doubt if we could get it through at all. But the Army command office in Washington might, so we will ask them to do it.”

Ham said, “The phone is right inside this door.”

“And probably tapped,” Doc told him. “No. We'll talk from a neighbor's house, one on a different line.”

They went out quietly into the yard and found one of the cowboys who was standing watch. The cowboy told them the nearest telephone was about five miles away, along a side road, a farmer named Creely. He described the location of Creely's place, and said that Creely was half Indian and knew what was going on on the ranch, and would help them.

Doc took a S−slash−S station wagon. Monk and Ham were consumed by curiosity, and wanted to go along. He did not object. They started asking questions.

Doc gave meaningless answers to their first questions. Then he stopped answering them entirely. Monk and Ham became disgusted, and fell silent. They weren't irritated. Just resigned. They had run into this reticence on Doc's part before.

Doc was embarrassed. As a matter of fact, something was happening to him that frequently happened. He was ashamed of his plan. The thing was wild. It was so wild he didn't want to discuss it, not wishing to sound silly.

The plan, when it first hit him, seemed very good. It came with one of those flashes, an instinctive certainty that it was the answer. But it wasn't the kind of a plan you could keep thinking about and continue to believe it would work. In short, it was pretty wild stuff, and he didn't want to sound like a fool explaining it.

Nothing happened to them during the drive to the Creely ranch.

CREELY was a pot−bellied half−Osage buck with a big grin and a double−barrelled shotgun of the kind frontiersmen used to call a Zulu. He was coöperative.

Doc got Washington on the wire, got a series of army officials.

“I want to talk by phone to Johann Jon Berlitz, the man who is about to be recognized by the Allies as the German leader. I want to talk to him immediately,” he told everyone he got on the wire.

The thing stretched out. Berlitz was in Europe, and it was a trans−Atlantic call. But the mechanical complexity of the call was a small matter. The official red tape wasn't. It began to look as if the matter was going to have to be okayed by an International conference and the United States congress.

Doc kept at it patiently. He was yelled at, but didn't yell back. When he got a flat no, it was impossible, from one source, he started on another. The lateness of the hour made it difficult, too. No one with that much authority seemed to be on duty in the Pentagon in Washington.

He was surprised when he finally did get an okay. The matter was irregular, mysterious, and he had no official rank warranting such a thing.

Creely stood around looking nervous, probably wondering if he was going to get stuck for part of the costs of this.

For some time, the long−distance operators in New York, London, France and in−between points fussed at each other. Then there was a squabble with a German−speaking secretary who objected to calling Berlitz from conference.

Johann Jon Berlitz had a blunt voice with oil on it. The voice of a man who was used to saying things he meant, but not yelling them at people, and having the things he wanted done. He spoke German.

Doc identified himself. Berlitz said, “Oh, yes, of course, in a vague tone which indicated he had never heard of Doc.

Doc said, in German, “I am calling to verify or disprove the statement made by a man named Bill Hazel that he is working for you.”

There was silence over the wire. It seemed startled.

Then, “He is there?” Berlitz demanded.

“Yes.”

“The town, the location, please.”

Doc Savage gave the nearest town and the approximate direction and distance from there.

“What about Bill Hazel?” Doc asked. “Is he in your employment?”

“Does he say he is?”

“Yes.”

“He should be more discreet. This matter is supposed to be confidential.”

“All right, if Hazel is working for you, that is what I wanted to find out,” Doc said.

“Wait! This mission Bill Hazel is on—is it near completion?”

“Very near, I think.”

“You mean he has the—ah—the fish?”

“It will be in his hands shortly.”

“I see.” There was another silence. “Thank you.” Click went the receiver.

Doc Savage frowned at the telephone for a while. He was possessed of a feeling of unreality, of unnaturalness. The fish. That was it. Having somebody in Europe, someone of the importance of Johann Jon Berlitz, ask him if the fish was found.

This stuff about a fish was getting hard to take.

THEY started back to the ranch in the station wagon, and Monk said, “Where do we stand now?”

“The fuse is lit,” Doc said.

“Eh?” Monk made an exasperated gesture. “Just what did this fellow Berlitz, in Germany or wherever he is, say about Uncle Bill Hazel?”

“Said Hazel was working for him.”

“Well, that's what Hazel said, too,” Monk complained. “So where are we now? We don't know nothing we didn't know before.”

“That's right. Nothing more.”

“What do we do now?”

“Get ready for the explosion,” Doc said.

“When will it come?”

“That,” Doc told him, “is one of the bad points. I can't tell how long the fuse is or how fast it will burn. But we had better not lose any time.”

They reached the S−slash−S and parked the station wagon quietly. The cowhand who had told them where Creely was came toward them. Another cowboy was with him, this one the fellow who had gone to town to learn what he could about the man who had accused Doc Savage and the others of murder. He had some information.

The accuser of Doc, Monk and Ham had disappeared. The Sheriff had let the man loose with a request to remain available, which the fellow had promised to do. But the man had promptly disappeared. But the vanishing hadn't cleared Doc and the others of being wanted for the killing. The Sheriff was still seeking them.

“Probably gone to join his gang,” Doc said.

The cowhand thought so, too. He added that the guy was in a ticklish spot for having told such a whopping lie, and had probably known it, hence the disappearance.

“How many men have we got around the ranch now?” Doc asked.

“Us two,” one of the cowboys said. “Oh, yes, Johnny Toms. And that old guy who came earlier tonight, Uncle Bill Hazel.”

“Where are the others?” Doc asked uneasily.

“Off watching the roads, or scouting through the hills for the fat man, or persuading Indians to hunt the fat man.”

“All right,” Doc said. “Now, here is what I want you to do. Stay right here, both of you. Keep your eyes and ears open, but don't investigate any strange noises unless you hear someone yell for help.”

“You sound,” said one of the cowboys, “as if something is going to happen.”

“We hope,” Doc told him.

DOC went to the house. He told Monk and Ham, “There is a chance this thing may break around Paris. I doubt it, but it may, and if it does, she will need protection.”

“I'll take care of that,” Ham said enthusiastically.

“We will,” Monk corrected.

Doc said wearily, “Do you two know what is going to happen to you if you fluff this? If you are caught woman−fussing when you should have your eyes open? You are going to get your heads shot off, is what!”

Chastened, Monk asked, “What do we do? Stick around outside Paris' room?”

“No. Better wake her up and get in there with her.”

“How long,” Ham asked, “before this explosion is coming?”

“It may be immediately, and it may not be for days,” Doc told him.

“Just what shape will the blow−up take?”

“First the fat man will show up,” Doc said. “He will have his friends with him, or close behind him. There will be several of them. The ones who were in New York have probably had a chance to get out here by now. So there will be a hatful of them.”

“After the fat man comes, then what?”

“Then it will be every man for himself. This is the way you had better look at it: Anything can happen. You have no friends. You had better believe nothing you hear and half what you see, and act accordingly.”

“Why,” Monk asked, “aren't you telling us the whole story?”

“Because your job is to take care of Paris Stevens, and I don't want you distracted,” Doc told him. “And the other reason is that I don't know the whole story.”

“You're sure acting as if you do.”

“I just kicked the bush,” Doc told him. “Now I'm waiting to see if anything in the shape of a skunk pops out.”

Monk and Ham moved away silently, and Doc heard them tapping softly on Paris' bedroom door. He heard whispers, then heard Monk and Ham being admitted.

Doc himself went outdoors. He stood there in the darkness. Some clouds had gotten in front of the moon, and the night had suddenly become sooty. The odor of the distant oil wells was heavier, oppressive.

The heaviness that had come into the night suddenly got on Doc's nerves, putting him on an edge. In a moment, he was perspiring. And there was the tightness in his stomach.

Now he had the unreasoning, sickening conviction that he had made a mistake. Made a fool of himself. Jumped at something that was utterly improbable and untrue. There was no reason for him being less sure now than he had been before. But he was much less certain.

He went back into the house. He knocked on the door of Uncle Bill Hazel's room.

Bill Hazel hadn't been asleep. He hadn't undressed. He had a bathrobe around him, however, and looked as if he might have been trying to sleep.

“Yes?” Hazel said. “Something wrong?”

“No, everything is fine,” Doc told him, trying to put hearty casualness in his voice. “I just thought I would tell you we checked up and found your story was true.”

“Checked?”

“Telephoned to Johann Jon Berlitz, in Europe,” Doc said.

Bill Hazel's eyes turned fixed and glassy and his skin got the color of the lead in a pistol bullet.

“You did?” he said sickly.

“Berlitz said you were working for him,” Doc said.

“That's good,” Hazel said in a still sicker voice. Then Hazel shut the door in Doc's face.

Doc Savage thought: I was right about this! I do believe I was right about it!

He walked out into the night feeling much better.

Chapter XIII

THE fat man arrived shortly. The first awareness of him was the tobacco odor that clings to the clothes of a pipe smoker. Doc caught the smell as he lay in the blacker darkness under a spring wagon near Johnny Toms' cabin. Doc had one ear to the ground listening for footfalls, an old Indian trick, but it had flopped. Ben Watt, the fat man, must be in sock feet, which it developed he was.

He had his shoes in one hand and a leather briefcase in the other, Doc saw when Johnny Toms opened the door of his cabin, after turning on the light at the fat man's soft knock.

“Turn the light out, you dope!” the fat man said bitterly.

Johnny Toms said, “Ugh!” He was transfixed for a moment. Then he blurted, “You better beat it! They're looking all over for you! Doc Savage is here. So are two of his men. You'd better not fool around with them!”

“Turn out the light, dammit!”

Toms extinguished the light. “Go away!”

“No. I got something for you.”

Toms was suddenly terrified. “What do you mean?” The fear in his voice was as real as words.

“Let me inside.”

“No, I—”

“Damn you, I've got your money here,” the fat man said.

Johnny Toms didn't say anything for a while. Then he opened the door wider. The fat man went inside. Toms closed the door.

Doc went around to the side of the cabin, to a window. The same window at which he had, earlier in the proceedings, watched Johnny Toms examine the fish. The window was still up. The hole he had made in the curtain was still in it. He could see and hear.

Doc was leaning forward to put his eye against the slit in the curtain when he suddenly realized someone was stalking him.

Someone was nearby in the darkness! There was a small sound, the sound dry grass makes when stepped on. Tiny, but definite. The breath, he thought wildly, of death.

His nerves began crawling. It couldn't be one of the cowboys, he was fairly sure of that. It must be one of the fat man's crew. Doc remained frozen. The other, he suspected, had seen or heard him approach the window.

Inside the cabin, the fat man said, “All right, there it is. Fifty thousand dollars, all American money, none of it in too large bills. That's what you wanted.”

“I—I've changed my mind,” Johnny Toms said. The terror had built up in him. It was taking the roundness, the deepness—the manly sound—out of his voice.

“You backing out?”

“I—I'd better.”

“Why?”

“A man named Savage—Doc Savage—is here. I'm afraid of him.”

“I know about that,” the fat man said. “Don't let it bother you.”

“But—”

“I've got half a dozen men crawling in on this ranch right now,” the fat man said. “They'll get Savage. They'll get Bill Hazel.”

Doc Savage caught a movement in the darkness. A place in the night changed shade slightly, and he knew his stalker had moved closer.

A HURTING came into Doc Savage's chest, making him realize he had stopped breathing. He started breathing again, with an effort, and the first breath nearly rasped in his throat. He watched the spot in the darkness, concentrating on it with a tension that began tying him in knots. Could the skulker see him well enough to shoot? He couldn't be sure. He couldn't recall when he had been more scared.

The fat man in the cabin began talking to Toms again, speaking rapidly.

“I don't know what story Bill Hazel told. I don't care. The truth is this: Bill Hazel was working for us, for the Nazis, during the war. He was on Goebbels' staff. He was one of several Americans and Englishmen, traitors who were well−paid, who did propaganda broadcasts on the radio.

“Hazel developed himself some connections in Berlin, and that's how he got his hands on certain films. He's had this particular film several months. I don't think he got it all at once, and this wasn't the only film he got. He had a bunch of them. But this one turned out to be the jackpot. The way things are going now, it is dynamite. He knew it.

“Hazel's object, of course, was to collect these films and then use them after the war to extort hush−money from men who had done executions for the Nazis, and wouldn't want it known after the war.

“To shorten the story, he tried to sell this particular film. He wanted too much money. So we got on his trail, and he fled.

“We were so close behind him, he had to get rid of the film, so he put it in that goldfish tank and shipped it with an American flier to his niece. He told the flier the fish was a present to his niece, and the flier fell for that.”

The fat man swore bitterly for a moment.

“We broke our necks getting to New York, but we couldn't find what became of the fish and the tank,” he continued. “We stuck around, searching. Bill Hazel showed up. He had two men helping him. Two men. One of them was the man Porter, who died on Sugar Creek. We caught him prowling around my camp. We killed him—framing the job on to you.”

“That's another thing,” blurted Johnny Toms. “How am I going to get out of that?”

“We'll get you out of it.”

“I don't see—”

“Wait a minute, let me finish. We caught Bill Hazel's other man last night, too. Then we heard you telephone for Doc Savage in New York. We had the telephone wire tapped. So I telephoned my men in New York—I had left some of them there in case the fish−tank should be back there after all—and they tried to get rid of Savage. They didn't have much luck. They notified me Savage had left New York, probably for Oklahoma. I had a man in Tulsa, at the airport. He managed to meet Savage and tell him where the airport field was. Then he phoned me that Savage was on his way out here. We had Bill Hazel's man meet Savage, telling him we wouldn't kill him if he would lead Savage into a trap. But we shot him. We made it look as if Savage had done it. We thought the Sheriff would arrest Savage. He didn't. Savage got away. So now there's nothing for us to do but finish it up with a bang. We're desperate, you understand.”

Johnny Toms demanded, “Why are you telling me the whole thing?”

“Because, brother, you're in it with us now. You're selling us that fish−tank. And you've got to know what the real story is, so you will tell an entirely different story.”

“Do—will I have to tell a story?”

“Maybe not.”

DURING the silence that followed, Doc Savage waited with his teeth clenched until the sides of his face felt dull, lifeless. The man stalking him was moving closer, an inch at a time. He was certain of this. But he didn't know exactly where the man now stood. He had, and it was a horrible sensation, lost track of the fellow.

In the cabin, the fat man said, “Let's have the tank.”

“How are you going to clear me of that murder charge?” Johnny Toms asked.

Wildness had come into Johnny's voice. A frenzy.

“You remember that knife of yours had a sheath? The knife that was used to kill Porter, I mean.”

“Yes. It's missing—”

“Sure it's missing. I've got it. I'll plant it on Bill Hazel's body. Give me some more of your stuff, moccasins or something. I'll plant them on Hazel. You can say Hazel framed you.”

“That might not work. They may not believe it.”

“With Hazel's police record? When they find out Hazel was a traitor to the Nazis? Listen, they'll believe anything against him.”

Johnny Toms said, “All right.” He moved around. “The tank is here. I'll get it.”

At this point, Doc Savage did one of the hardest things he had ever done. His eyes weren't doing him any good in the darkness anyway. His ears would be more help. He put an eye to the slit in the curtain—his hand had been keeping the spot covered so that the bit of light wouldn't show from it. The light inside Johnny Toms' cabin was very pale anyway. From a reading lamp over which Toms had tossed a folded sheet, Doc discovered.

Toms was on his knees on the floor. He had a short iron rod with a complicated arrangement of iron on one end—a branding iron—and was prying up the floor. The boards were evidently loose, because they came up readily.

He brought up a fish shipping tank. Not the one he had shown Doc. This one was larger, more elaborate. And foreign−made.

Toms handed the case to the fat man. “This is it.”

The fat man scowled at the case for a moment. Then he began to rip and pry at it.

“It's got to be in the base,” he said. He kept twisting, rending. “Yes. Look.”

He had torn open the solid−looking base. He brought out a reel of film. Eight millimeter stuff. Home movie size. It was a four−hundred foot reel, and four hundred feet of 8−mm. home movie was quite a lot of picture.

The fat man held the end of the film to the light. “This is it,” he said.

“You sure?” Johnny Toms asked.

“Positive.”

“Then I better tell you something,” Johnny Toms said.

“Eh?”

“Earlier tonight, I brought Doc Savage out here. I told him how I got hold of the fish and the tank. I showed him the other tank, the one I bought in Tulsa, and told him it was the real one. That was where I made my mistake, showing Savage the fake tank.”

“What do you mean?”

“Because,” Johnny said. “I had intended to tell Savage the whole truth, but I lost my nerve.”

The fat man started to fumble for something, a gun probably.

“I'm damned if I go through with a thing as dirty as this,” Johnny said.

And he hit the fat man with the branding iron. He used the iron like a tomahawk. Buried it in the fat man's skull.

DOC SAVAGE put his hand over the slit in the window shade. He got away, well to the right. Then he took his hand off the hole, moving it to the left very slowly to give the impression he had moved in that direction.

Nothing happened. He hadn't fooled the skulker.

He tried another trick.

He said hoarsely, in German, *“Vorgesehen! Vorsicht! Achtung!”*

The German words—a general warning to be careful—upset the skulker.

“Wer da?”

the man growled.

Doc got his location from that. He lunged, came in from the side, driving both fasts. He didn't hit a vital spot, but he upset the man.

The skulker seemed to have a small machine gun. Whatever the weapon was, it put out about ten bullets in one red−guttering, ear−splitting bawl.

Doc tramped on the gun, got it against the ground. Then he drove his knees down on the skulker's chest, and there was a dull snapping noise of ribs. Doc found his throat with his left hand, and hit the man's jaw as hard as he could, three times, with his fist.

With the gun in his hands, Doc got to his feet. He was shaking.

“Johnny!” Doc shouted. “The house! Help Monk and Ham guard Paris!”

Johnny Toms wailed, “What's happening?”

“Get to the house!” Doc shouted. “Be careful!”

He heard Johnny run out of the cabin, pound toward the ranch house.

Doc shoved up the window. Nothing happened. He tore the curtain out of the window. Still nothing happened. So he went in through the window headfirst.

The fat man was spread out on the floor, moving a little, dying.

The reel of 8−mm. film was on the floor. Johnny Toms hadn't taken it.

Doc got the film. It wouldn't go in any of his pockets. He shoved it inside his shirt, under his belt.

Then Doc went outdoors.

“In the house,” he shouted, putting all the power he could into his voice. “Be careful! There's five more of them around!”

He had to cough because he had hurt his throat, and after he had coughed, he heard one of the cowboys.

“What do we do?” the cowboy asked.

“Do your best,” Doc said.

“Who are they?”

“Nazi agents. Supposed to be five. Maybe more.”

“That's interesting,” the cowboy said calmly.

DOC SAVAGE ran toward the house, and in the house a man began screaming. The screams started on a low note of rage and fear and continued that way for a while, five seconds or so, whereupon they changed to a ghastly whinnying. It was Uncle Bill Hazel. There was no doubt but that he was dying.

Doc changed his course, made for Bill Hazel's bedroom. He reached the window.

The lights were on inside. There were three men in the room, only one of whom was not dead or dying. That one, the man who had directed them at the Tulsa airport, was standing over Uncle Bill Hazel, holding a long knife. Hazel was sitting on the floor trying with both arms to hold his insides together. The other man, the one already dead, lay on the floor. Evidently Hazel had killed him before he was knifed.

The man with the knife seized Hazel's hair, jerked his head back, and slit his throat.

Then the man ran to the window, put both hands on the sill to climb out. He fell out on to the ground, loosely, after Doc smashed him over the head with the light machine gun. He did not move after he hit the ground.

Out by the cottonwood tree where the tractor stood, there was a commotion of words. Then one shot. Then more words.

One of the cowboys called, “Mr. Savage!”

“Yes?”

“How many'd you say?”

“Three left,” Doc said.

“That's what we've got,” the cowboy said. “Three. One is leaking a little, but he'll survive.”

Chapter XIV

THE first planeload of Army Intelligence bigwigs arrived from Washington a little before noon. The Sheriff of the county, confused by the whole thing, was glad to turn the prisoners over to someone who knew what to do with them. Hazel was dead, along with the fat man and the one Hazel had killed. The others were alive, and all but two of them in need of repair. The one the cowboy had shot wasn't badly off. The fellow who had slit Hazel's throat, and whom Doc had clubbed with the machine gun, had a fractured skull. That was worrying Doc.

The men from Washington had brought an 8−mm. movie projector. While one of them was setting it up, Doc gave a brief summary.

“You remember when Count Ciano, the son−in−law of Mussolini, was executed? Mussolini had a movie made of the execution. It was in all the newspapers about that.” Doc paused.

“Yes, I recall now,” said one of the intelligence men.

“Bill Hazel was working for the Nazis and he got the films during the war,” Doc went on. “He tried to collect blackmail with this particular reel, and the man he was trying to blackmail set his agents on Hazel. Hazel got the films to the States, and came over himself to collect them. The agents followed him. That's what it was all about.”

Another of the men said, “I wonder how the pictures happened to be taken in the first place?”

No one answered him.

They watched the film.

It was a weird film. A horror. It was documentary, a record of executions of war prisoners by a Nazi Gestapo officer. Between each shot, there was a record of the date, place and time of the executions. Then there would be another documentary shot of the Gestapo officer either shooting, beheading, machine−gunning, or using poison gas. At no time were less than two victims put to death. At times there were so many—these were in the machine−gun slaughtering—that they could not be counted without stopping the film for the purpose.

One of the intelligence men suddenly said, “Oh, God!” and shut off the projector.

Doc Savage got up hurriedly and went out into the morning sunlight. Into the fresh air. The others came outside also, looking sick from what they had seen.

“You can see,” Doc said, “why the film was so important.”

Ham Brooks didn't see. He said, “I don't get it. That picture is a record of the killings one Nazi officer handled personally in the war. But there were lots of those murderers. Did I miss something?”

Doc asked, “Haven't you seen newspaper pictures of Johann Jon Berlitz?”

“Berlitz? Oh, the German the Allies have been thinking they would allow to form a German government now that the war is on its last legs?”

“Have you seen pictures of Berlitz?”

“No.”

“You just did.”

“Eh?”

“Berlitz is the Gestapo officer shown handling the murders in that film,” Doc said. “In other words, the Allies were about to let the worst kind of a Nazi head the new German government, without knowing it.”

Ham looked so completely shocked that one of the Intelligence officers reassured him.

“Don't worry about it. We have already arrested Berlitz in Europe. That was done immediately after Mr. Savage telephoned us following the fight here last night,” the Intelligence man said.

Ham shivered. “This scares me.”

“It scares us, too,” the Intelligence man said.

LATER in the day, Doc got Johnny Toms out of trouble. Johnny was scared stiff. He had, he admitted, intended to sell the film to the fat man, Ben Watt, when Ben Watt approached him at the ranch. The deal had been made shortly after Johnny had telephoned Doc for aid, when the fat man had turned up and made Johnny an offer for the fish tank.

Johnny hadn't, he explained, known what it was all about until then. He hadn't known it was a film, even then. The fat man hadn't told him. The fat man had just wanted the tank. So Johnny had hidden the tank, and hurriedly gotten another one from Tulsa, in case someone asked him to produce a shipping tank in which the fish might have arrived.

It was Doc's feeling, and the Army men agreed, that Johnny's change of heart when he learned the real significance of the film warranted dropping any charges they might have lodged against him. So that was what they decided to do.

Monk Mayfair had something on his mind.

“Doc, you knew hell was going to break loose last night. You said there would be an explosion and there was. How'd you know?”

“The telephone call to Berlitz, in Europe.”

“You suspected Berlitz before you made the call?”

“No. But I did after I called him. He got rid of me as quick as he could. And it struck me that he wanted to get a message to his agent, Watt, to get on the job. And I realized the filthy truth. Also, Bill Hazel was horrified when I told him I had checked with Berlitz about him. That was more evidence.”

“How the blazes did Berlitz get hold of his men here so quick?”

“Short−wave radio. German government station. One of the Nazi agents has confessed to that.”

“Oh,” Monk said. “Well, I guess this is wound up. You going back to New York right away?”

“Why?” Doc asked suspiciously.

Monk looked sheepish. “Well, Paris invited me to stick around for a vacation. I think I will. Ham is horning in on it, too. And I was just wondering if you could think of some reason for taking Ham back with you, while I stayed here.”

Doc frowned. He was exasperated.

“Let what happened to Johnny Toms be a lesson to you,” he said. “Johnny was in love with Paris Stevens, but he was too proud to do anything about it because he had no money. The temptation to get a lot of money by selling the fish tank was almost too much for him. He nearly fell for it.”

“Why look at me?” Monk asked.

“Aren't you perpetually broke?”

“Sure.”

“Well, falling in love when you're broke upsets you psychologically.”

“Who's falling in love?”

“What do you call this eye−popping you and Ham are doing at Paris?” Doc demanded.

Monk grinned.

“We're just wolves,” he said.

THE END