THE PURE EVIL

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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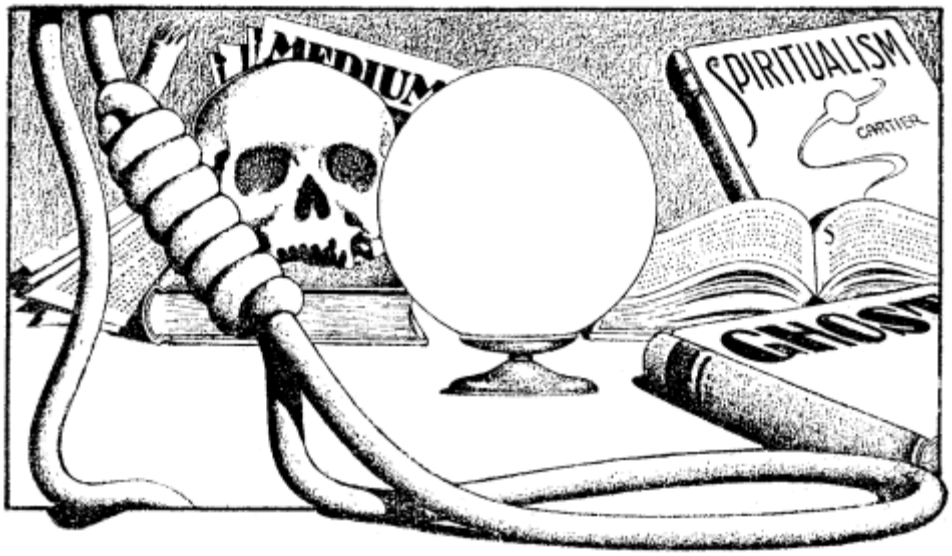

THE PURE EVIL

by Kenneth Robeson

Chapter I

HE drove his little roadster lickety-split to work that morning. His age was twenty-four, and he was a long boy with freckles and all grin.

He got whistled at warningly by a traffic cop on Pollard Avenue, but Gail smiled at the cop. “Hello, Gordon,” she said to the cop. And so the cop waved them on.

And he in turn whistled at a girl at the corner of Truce and Lansing. Gail laughed at that. “That’s the Riles girl,” she said. “Her boy-friend is Nick Pardo, and he will take you apart if you don’t watch it.”

His grin shone all over his face.

“You always take care of me, don’t you?” he said.

Gail smiled. Gail was his sister. It was probably true, what he said.

His name was an easy Yankee one. Daniel Adams. Dan Adams, and he drove his little car with dash and pulled a cloud of the grey coastwise dust along the road to A.A.E. Station 3. He stopped before the tan brick building and the effect was that of a kid who had slid down a bannister.

Gibble was standing there. Gibble threw away his cigarette.

“Good morning, Gail,” he said with enthusiasm.

“Good morning.”

Dan Adams hopped out and palmed the roadster door shut and pointed his finger at his sister. He said, “You be careful of that car, baby. Was you to ding one fender, I’d be ruined.”

“I’ll be careful of the car,” Gail said. “I’m always careful of the car.”

“Sure,” he said. “But be special careful.”

"I'll be extra one-hundred-and-ten-volt careful," his sister said, and she put the car in gear and drove way and down the road. She and the car were going approximately seventy-two miles an hour when they disappeared.

"Careful, she said!" he complained.

Gibble grinned. He said, "She's quite a girl, that Gail."

Dan looked at Gibble. Gibble was a fairly average-sized man who looked small, and a moderately neat man who looked sloppy. The color of his face, eyes and hair were all shades of sand.

"Gibble, you make it out here every morning when she brings me to work, don't you?" Dan said.

"Huh?"

"Your time worth much, Gibble?"

Gibble said, "Huh?" again.

"Don't waste it, Gibble, if it is," Dan said. "And you'll be wasting it, boy. I can tell you that."

Gibble didn't say anything, and Dan went into the Station and sailed his hat onto a hook and got his schedule sheets and tracking data forms from the locker and went into the tracking room. Not the tower one where the radio equipment was, but the one where they were conducting the experiments in short-range tracking. He told Steigel, the man working the early trick, hello and goodbye. He settled himself, spread out his cigarettes and matches, and that was the way Steigel saw him when he said his so-longs and see-you-tomorrows from the door.

That was the last time anyone saw Dan Adams when he seemed to be exactly right.

The tracking statistician was fortyish, thin-faced, brainy, wore prim mannish suits the year around, and was named Miss Bradley. Miss Bradley's job was correlating all the figures and graphs from the radar experiments, putting them in shape for digestion by the men with the large brains. She had formed the habit of dropping around to the trackers every two hours to pick up their sheets.

Miss Bradley came in, leaned across Dan's shoulder and got the sheets, turned away, and was at the door when she did a double-take. She wheeled back and frowned at Dan.

"Watch out, that expression might freeze on your face," she said.

Then Miss Bradley's lips slowly parted. Her mouth made itself into a hole and remained so.

Dan Adams neither moved, spoke, breathed. His complete suspense was impressive. He was—Miss Bradley thought of this now, and remembered it later—like a man who had found a poisonous snake in his hands, six inches from his eyes. In the radar scope, for example. The scope screen was about six inches from his eyes.

Time passed. A great time, it seemed to Miss Bradley. Twenty seconds or so. Then Miss Bradley started trying to say something, and tried for a while, and succeeded in making a kind of hiss. She was shocked. It was odd to see a man so frightened that when you tried to make words you only made a hiss.

Now Dan arose slowly and stiffly in his chair. In rising, he could have been pushing against weight, hundreds of pounds of weight. His terror weighed that much. And now he brought both hands in front of him and pointed at the radar scope. Pointed wordlessly with both hands.

Pointing, he made a few wordless sounds. Miss Bradley couldn't have identified them.

Miss Bradley, from where she stood at the door, couldn't see the scope screen because of the external illumination control hood. Actually, only from a position directly in front could the scope be viewed successfully. So Miss Bradley started to move—frightened, fascinated, the nape of her neck getting cool—to a spot where she could see the screen.

And now Dan screamed. He shrieked, high and girlishly, as if terror had taken all the virility from him. It was a raw thing, that yell, a bloody nerve torn out, a shred of living flesh.

Now Dan's intensity took to frenzied action. His hands clamped to his chair. He swung the chair. A heavy thing, serviceable steel, it ruined the scope with the first wild overhead blow. But he didn't stop. He struck and struck, and glass whizzed in the air and skated on the floor and the place was full of guttering purple light from electrical shorts and the acrid lightning-bolt odor of voltage discharges. The man, white-faced, his cheeks all gouts of muscle, continued to swing the chair, beating the scope as if it were a reptile.

"Oh my God," whimpered Miss Bradley, and she wheeled and ran for help. She found Gibble and a man named Spencer who was a maintenance technician.

"Dan—he saw something in the scope—oh, hurry!" wailed Miss Bradley, grabbing her own words out in unstable groups.

Gibble said, "Huh?"

But the other man, Spencer, was quicker, and he ran into the scope room. Dan was still wielding the chair. There wasn't much left of the scanning part of the scope, wires, battered metal and glass dust, but he was at it yet.

"Cripes, eleven thousand bucks worth of scope!" Spencer blurted. Not that he cared that much about eleven thousand of Associated Aircraft's Experimental's money. Being maintenance, that was merely what he thought of to say. Then he yelled, "Dan! What in the hell!"

Dan didn't turn. He stopped pulverizing the wreckage. He stepped back, holding the chair cocked, staring at the mess on the floor as if it was still dangerous.

Gibble came in now. Gibble varied his routine slightly from "Huh," and said instead, "Whew! Whooeee!"

"Dan!" Spencer called. "Dan, what happened?"

Dan still didn't turn his head, didn't take his eyes from the unidentifiable conglomeration that had been the radar scope and cabinet. But he knew they were there. He began backing away—one step at a time, the chair still cocked for defense.

Spencer said, "Dan, what on earth got into you."

He watched Dan begin shaking, a trembling at the knees first; then a progressive increase in tremor set the young man's entire body to twitching. There was, or seemed to be, an accompanying loss of color, a greater gouting of facial muscles. Dan came to the wall, his back against it, and he began to slide his shoulders along the wall toward the door.

"Spencer," he said, vaguely and as from a distance.

"Okay, Dan. Take it easy."

"I want to go to a church."

"What?"

"I want to go to a church. I want to go quick. You take me there, will you? You got your car here."

"What church?"

"I don't know. The first one you think of."

"Don't you go to a church?"

"No, but I got to go to one now."

He had said all this without noticeably taking his eyes off the scope ruin, and he had not lowered the chair nor loosened the tension in any way.

"Sure, Dan, sure," Spencer's voice had gone up a little. "Sure, I'll take you. If you have any particular church in mind, that's where we'll go."

In a tone of thin high tension, Dan Adams said, "Isn't any house of God a refuge from evil? That's what I want, a refuge from evil."

"Okay, I'm a Presbyterian. I'll take you there," Spencer said. Then he went over and cautiously laid hold of the chair Doc held. He said, "You won't need this chair, will you? Be all right to leave it here, won't it?"

Dan was silent for a while, back jammed against the wall, shaking. In the most defeated, hopeless voice Spencer had ever heard, he said, "A chair wouldn't be any defense, would it?"

"Defense against what?"

Dan hesitated again, silently. Spencer didn't think the pause of particular importance at the time, but later he realized the other man had made a hair-raising decision.

"You wouldn't want to know what," Dan said sickly.

"Want me to take the chair, Dan?"

"What? . . . The chair? Oh, all right."

Spencer took the chair and put it in Gibble's hands, using the act as an excuse to whisper, "I'm taking him to the First Presbyterian. Get on the phone and have a doctor there."

"Maybe the police—" Gibble began.

"Don't be a damned fool! If you were sick like that, would you want the cops hammering on you with questions?"

Gibble said unsympathetically, "If I busted up a scope, I would sure expect somebody to ask questions." But he didn't telephone for the police.

The car ride that followed aged Gibble. He found, toward the end of the trip, that he

had to stop glancing at Dan Adams, because he was getting the creeps.

Reverend Pollard, pastor of the First Presbyterian, was out on a parishoner call. He did not return until the medico Gibble had phoned for, a Doctor McGreer, had completed an examination with somewhat unsatisfactory results. The two had a private conference.

"Reverend, I don't know what to think about this," the Doctor said. "Prior to the examination, from what had been told me, I thought I would find a more or less clear-cut case of neurasthenia."

"Nervous breakdown, you mean?"

"Well, the term nervous breakdown is so general that we don't use it. But a nervous disorder is what I expected."

"And you found?"

The doctor frowned. "A perfectly healthy body, normal nervous responses, and apparently an extreme case of terror."

"But from what Mr. Gibble and Mr. Spencer tell me, I imagined—"

"Reverend, the man isn't insane. The man is scared stiff."

"Frightened?" the pastor said wonderingly. "Well, fright is the product of a stimulus. Where there is fear, there is a reason for it. This shouldn't be so difficult."

"I hope it's as easy as you think it is," the doctor said, shrugging. "I can't do anything for the boy, except give him a sedative, which I did, and which won't do him much good."

"Has he told you of what he is terrified?"

"Not a word. He clams up on it."

"Perhaps he will tell me, then, and be better for the telling. The fact that he came to the House of God indicates he wished solace and counsel."

"He's your baby, Reverend," said the doctor dubiously.

Dan Adams was sitting silently in the secluded dimness of the church, and Reverend Pollard went to him alone—went, he soon discovered, to a baffling experience. Because Dan gave blank stares, silence, head-shakes, to all questions and words of comfort.

Fifteen minutes later, the Reverend retired to consult with Gibble and Spencer. "You say this man suffered his attack while at work?"

"That's right," Spencer explained. "He was at the scope today doing short-tracking and—"

"Excuse me, but what is a scope, and what is short-tracking?" the minister asked.

Spencer gave a light dose of radar technology, finishing, "It's the same radar that was used in the war, only improved. Very high-frequency emissions are sent out, bounce back when they encounter an object, and are received on a scope where they can be seen. Short-tracking is a project of Associated Aircraft Experimental, which is a research agency financed by the government and the airlines. We're trying to develop a better method of following aircraft at very close range, perfecting the landing system for blind flying landings on airports."

"I believe I understand that," said the minister. "But what could have frightened this man? Could he have caused, or nearly caused, an airplane crash, for instance?"

"Not a chance," Spencer said flatly. "He was tracking seagulls."

"What?"

"Oh, it's not as silly as it sounds. The idea of the research was to see whether individual birds, or flocks of birds, could cause errors in tracking data."

"But what did this boy see that induced such terror?"

"There you've got me," Spencer said.

The baffled minister returned to the dim chapel where Dan Adams crouched. He noted how Dan's hands gripped the armrests with such force that the sinews were crow-footed in grey. He listened to the long, careful, difficult breathing of the man.

"My friend," said the pastor, "perhaps you should go home."

A series of nearly inarticulate gaspings came in answer. The minister made it out as: "Reverend—would like—to stay here."

"But why?"

"I know of no place as safe." This was the way the added gaspings seemed to translate.

"Very well, my friend." Then the pastor went back to Spencer and Gibble, who were waiting in the anteroom, and gave them his candid opinion. "That man would be better at home, among relatives and friends. He has a family, hasn't he?"

"He has a sister," Gibble said promptly. "Very lovely girl. Competent. Looks out for him."

They persuaded Dan to let them take him home. Spencer did most of it; Dan wasn't inclined to listen to Gibble. Dan didn't like Gibble.

"You'll be better off at home, Dan," Spencer said as they were riding to the small brick bungalow in Meno Park which was occupied by Dan and his sister.

Dan stared fixedly at distance for a while. "I won't be safe."

"Nonsense. You'll be as safe as you would be sitting there alone in church."

Dan closed his eyes. "A man isn't alone in church, is he?"

Spencer shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know what to say to that, Dan."

"I could tell you something to say. It's this: you didn't know what I was trying to defend myself from."

"Dan, what was it?"

"I'm not going to tell you."

"Why not?"

"Spence, believe it or not, I think too much of you to tell you. I wouldn't want you feeling the way I do. I wouldn't want any man feeling that way." He glanced at Gibble. "Not even Gibble, here."

"Huh?" Gibble said. "Now that's a hell of a remark to make."

Spencer scowled a warning at Gibble and said, "Take it easy, Gibble. Dan's not feeling well."

"He feels well enough to insult me," Gibble said.

"I wish I felt a little better, and I'd walk on your face," Dan muttered.

Spencer took this to mean the patient was becoming more rational. He gouged Gibble in the ribs, silencing the man, and they arrived at Dan's home.

Gail was not in the small but rather pleasant cottage of stuccoed white construction, with four palm trees growing precisely at the four corners of the little lot.

Dan stopped and scowled at the palm trees as if he had discovered something about them that he had never noticed before.

"The precise order of human endeavors!" he remarked bitterly. "By God, it's certainly going to be upset. Goodbye order! Goodbye peace of mind!"

"Dan," Spencer said.

"Yeah?"

"Was it something you saw in the scope?"

Dan's eyes became haunted, his mouth grooved grimly at the corners, and he said, "What do you think, Spence?" And he walked into the cottage, crossed to a bedroom, entered and slammed the door behind him. When Spencer, hurrying after him, tried the door, he found it was locked.

It was still locked when Gail came home an hour and a half later.

Gail called to her brother several times. There was no answer. They went outside and looked at the windows to the room. These were closed and, they discovered by pushing against the sash with a long stick, locked. Gail said she wished to look into the room.

"I'll lift you up so you can see what he's doing," Gibble said rather too promptly.

Gail ignored him, said to Spencer, "Spence, will you give me a hand up? Perhaps if I sat on your shoulder, I could see into the window."

She perched there on Spencer's shoulder for a while. He said finally, "Well?" Then he gasped. "Hey! Watch yourself! I can't hold you up there if you—" He let the rest go unsaid, being busy trying to keep the young woman from toppling off his shoulder. He didn't succeed, but did break her fall.

"She fainted," Gibble said.

Chapter II

THE question that gave the police some trouble was this:

How had he hanged himself when he wasn't hanging from anything?

The silken cord—it was easily established that it came from the bathrobe his sister had given him at Christmas—was about six feet long, three eights of an inch in diameter, and the knot in the end was a regulation hangman's knot. Dan Adams had been a Boy Scout, and the police tried to establish that that took care of his knowing how to tie a hangman's knot, but someone remembered the Scout Handbook didn't have the hangman's knot among its collection. Gail insisted her brother didn't know how to tie a hang-

man's knot. The police felt she would hardly know whether he did or not.

He had taken a bath. Without toweling himself quite dry, he had slipped on underwear shorts—it was a humid day, and the drops of water had not evaporated from his skin. Spencer and Gibble hadn't heard him taking a bath, but the evidence was obvious—the wet shower cabinet, the damp footprints on the bathroom floor, the soap cake with some lather still on it.

The bathroom connected with that bedroom and another one and with the living-room. That meant the bathroom had three doors. Two were locked, the only unlocked one being into the bedroom where the body was found. There was one window. Locked.

Therefore all windows and doors admitting to the room where the body lay were found locked. There were no other openings.

The police, then, had to account for the fact that the body was in the middle of the bedroom, on the floor, dead of strangulation, and not hanging from anything. The police were practical. They didn't believe in such foolishness as locked-room mysteries.

The decision was delivered by Sergeant Doyle: "He hung himself from the door, tying the end of the cord to the knob on the other side. See that upset chair there? . . . That's what he stood on. Okay, he hung himself. Then the cord slipped off the knob, and he floundered out into the middle of the bedroom, but couldn't get the cord loose, and finished strangling there on the floor."

Gail, white-faced, said, "But there's no knot in the other end of the cord."

"It slipped loose, Miss. It did that when it let him down. If it hadn't, he would be hanging to the door."

White-faced, Gail whispered, "But Dan took a bath this morning."

"Well, he took another one. Suicides often prepare themselves that way."

"Dan wouldn't kill himself."

"Lady, the doors were all locked, and the windows. You all three say so. It has to be suicide."

Gail burst into tears, and let Gibble lead her into the other room. Spencer remained behind, frowning at the body, looking thoughtful.

"The way the body is lying, you might think it had been suspended from the cord there until dead, and then let drop," suggested Spencer.

Sergeant Doyle did not favor this remark. "Look, pal, the guy hung himself from the door and the cord came loose too late."

"Well, I guess so."

"I know so," said Doyle sharply. "I know a suicide when I see one. I've seen a few."

"There's no note."

"Is there a law says they got to leave a note?"

"I thought they did."

"This one didn't. This one blew his top today and came home and hung himself. It's that simple."

Spencer didn't contain his resentment too well, and said doggedly, "He didn't come straight home. He went to a church first."

"And why not? Wouldn't you figure maybe it would be a good idea to visit a church before you knocked yourself off?"

"Not the way Dan visited church."

"And how was that?" Doyle asked curtly. And when Spencer started telling him, Doyle snapped. "Hell, I heard that story once. The guy didn't see anything in that radar contraption that made him bust it up. Maybe he thought he did. Who knows what a crazy man thinks he sees?"

"Sergeant, the sister doesn't think it was suicide."

Completely disgusted, Doyle shoved his jaw out and said, "What're you tryin' to do, give me the idea one of you guys hanged him?"

Spencer said bitterly, "The hell with you, Sergeant," and walked out. He telephoned a Miss Cook, a girl friend of Gail's, and when the young lady arrived with her mother, he collected Gibble and went back to the station. Gibble was not particularly downcast during the ride. The ghoul, Spencer thought. Thinks he has a better chance at Gail now that Dan is out of the way.

Spencer was off duty at four. A little before that hour, Gail appeared at the station. She was chalk-faced, thin-lipped, and tense with determination.

"Spence, I want you to show me where Dan first began acting strangely," she said.

"You'd be better not to look at it," Spencer said, after hesitating. "It was the downstairs scope room. I don't know—they may have cleaned up the wreckage. There

probably isn't much for you to see. Why don't you forget it, Gail?"

"I don't think Dan took his own life."

Spencer pocketed his hands self-consciously, and finally explained, "Neither did I at first, Gail, but I've thought it over and changed my mind. The evidence that he did was pretty conclusive."

"Evidence!" Gail shook her head tensely. "There was no note. Dan had a bath this morning. He would never bathe twice a day. Why, he didn't like but one bath a week."

"I know, Gail, and I'm sorry. But that's what the police seem to think."

"Will you take me to the scope room?"

"If you insist, but it won't do any good."

The scope room where Dan had been working had, as Spencer had indicated, been partly restored to order. It was a slow process. Technicians from the laboratory which prepared the experimental radar equipment were going over the wreckage carefully to salvage what they could. It wasn't much.

Gail frowned thoughtfully. "Aren't the images from a specific antenna often piped to more than one scope, or to recording cameras?"

"Why, yes," Spencer admitted. "But how did you know that?"

"Oh, Dan told me quite a lot about the operations that weren't restricted. . . . Do you suppose there could have been a recording camera on the scope Dan was watching?"

"Say, I never thought of that."

"Could we find out?"

"Sure. By checking with the switchboard," Spencer said. "I'll do that right now."

"I'd like to come along."

The man they found on duty was named Cal Smith. He greeted them pleasantly, smiling at Spencer's obvious surprise to see him on duty.

"Where's Cooper, the day man?" Spencer demanded.

Shrugging, Cal Smith said, "Home, I guess. He said something about feeling under the weather, and telephoned for me to come down and relieve him about noon. So I did."

Gail's hands had tightened at the information. "You mean that Mr. Cooper, the man who was on duty when my brother—when Dan smashed the scope—became ill and had to go home?"

"I don't know whether he was ill. Or just upset," Cal Smith explained.

"Upset? What do you mean by that?"

"Well, Cooper was pale and shaky. Not the type for it, either."

"Was Mr. Cooper frightened?"

"Could have been. I didn't place it as that, but now you mention it, he did seem scared."

"And Cooper isn't the scary type?"

"No. No, he isn't. . . ." The wire-chief was frowning at Gail now. "Say, what's going on around here, anyway?"

Gail compressed her lips grimly. "I don't know. I intend to find out."

Spencer now asked the wire-chief if they could ascertain whether there had been a monitoring camera on the scope circuit that Doc Adams had been computing that morning. Wasn't there a record kept? Cal Smith said sure, there would be a record. He did some hunting, then reported in surprise, "The sheet's gone!"

"You mean," Gail demanded, "that someone has removed the circuit record of that scope at the time my brother was on it?"

"It's missing, anyway," the wire-chief said cautiously.

"What about the film from the scope monitoring camera?"

Cal Smith did some searching, made a telephone call to the cine-processing room, then made a personal visit to the room, and came back shaking his head.

"If there was a camera on that scope circuit, and we don't know there was—then the film isn't in the file-can where it should be." He hesitated, rubbed his jaw, and confessed, "There could have been a film, because there's a label on the file-can that has been rather ineffectually scraped off."

Gail said, "There is enough label left on the can to show that there was a label originally? Is that it?"

"That could be it."

"Thank you," Gail said. "This is most interesting. Thank you very much."

Spencer showed signs of being upset, as well as excited. "Gail, if you're going to talk to Cooper, I'll take you out to his place in my car. I had a date with the girl-friend, but I'll telephone her and postpone it."

"You'd better not, Spence," Gail told him. "I know Louise, and she's not going to like you running around with me."

Spencer nodded uncomfortably. "You're probably right. She's jealous. Tell you what, I'll phone Louise and tell her we'll pick her up and take her along."

"She won't like that, either, Spence," Gail surmised. "Go ahead and phone her. But if she's reluctant, don't insist. Louise is a fine girl, and you don't want to make her mad on my account."

While Spencer telephoned, Gail waited in the reception room. She sank in a chair, gripped her hands together, and thought: *I'm acting strangely, aren't I? My brother is dead. The police say he killed himself. He possibly did. But here I'm running around asking questions. Is this a form of hysteria?* She thought about that seriously, staring fixedly at her hands.

"Beg pardon," a man's voice addressed her. "Aren't you Miss Adams?"

Gail lifted her eyes. "Yes. I—" She fell silent. She had the foolish feeling her mouth was remaining open, and she was without the will to close it.

He was a little old man of uncertain age—at least any uncertainty beyond fifty was logical. Surely he was over fifty. Between that and ninety, somewhere. He had white hair, an enormous abundance of it, that grew from the sides of his head and was combed upward so that it peaked startingly on top, the effect that of a somewhat abbreviated white duncecap. He had leathery skin of the color shoe manufacturers call factory brown. His features were delicate, completely Nordic. His eyes were two large dreams, blue ones. An odd feeling for her to have about an old man's eyes, Gail thought, and shook her tongue loose.

I—yes—I'm Gail Adams," she said.

"Sister of—ah—the unfortunate young Dan Adams?"

"Yes."

She noticed that he had his hands in his pockets, the coat pockets, and that he kept them there.

He gave a little bow. "Mr. Villem Morand."

"Mr. Morand? I see. But I don't believe—"

"Probably not. Probably you don't know me." He gave his small bow again, dropped it as a curtsy. "Insurance. Central Imperial Life. I represent."

Gail waited, studying the little man, wondering why he vaguely disturbed her with his presence. She had never seen him before, had never heard of his company, Imperial Life. No, Central Imperial Life, he had said. She still didn't know the concern. He definitely made her feel uneasy.

"I represent," he repeated. "Your brother. Most unfortunate. Very sad. My sympathies."

"Thank you, Mr. Morand," Gail said nervously.

"Your brother. A customer. My customer."

"Oh!" Gail looked at him in confusion. "I didn't know my brother had a policy with such a company." She frowned, then named two first-line companies in which Dan had carried small policies, and added, "I only knew about those."

"I'm investigating."

"Oh!" Gail drew up tensely, on the edge of her chair. "Then you think there was something odd about my brother's death also?"

"No. Satisfied. Investigated. Quite satisfied."

The oddness of the little man's appearance, with his apparent inability to use more than two words in a sentence, had Gail ill at ease. To this queasiness about him, his next words added a considerable shock.

"Brother suicide. Policy covers. Wouldn't upset. Wiser."

Gail frowned in bewilderment. "I don't know a thing about this insurance," she said. "I take it you mean that some insurance policies are void in case of suicide within certain periods, but this one is valid."

"Right. Valid. Perfectly valid."

"That seems odd."

"No. Logical. Excellent insurance."

"What did you mean," Gail demanded, "about not upsetting? Not upsetting what?"

"Present status. Suicide. Policy covers. Double."

"What? It pays double for suicide? What kind of an insurance is that?"

"Convenient kind. Suicide, ten thousand. Otherwise, half."

Gail examined the little man with growing suspicion. It certainly sounded odd.

"One might," she said coldly, "almost think it would be worth five thousand dollars

to me not to investigate my brother's death any farther."

"One might. Imaginative, however."

"Well, I don't like the idea a bit!"

"Sorry. Distresses me." The little man made a bow, and kept his one-and-two-word record clean by saying. "Pleasant meeting. Fruitful, perhaps. Good night." And he executed his small curtsy once more—it was as monotonous as his words—and wheeled, clapped a somber black hat on his peak of white hair, and left.

Spencer, returning, stepped aside to let the little man pass. Spencer's eyebrows lifted wryly. "Who was that?"

"He said his name was Morand," Gail explained shakily.

"Odd looker."

Gail winced. "Don't use two-word sentences on me, Spence. That's what he did. Odd is no word for it."

Spencer shrugged, and dismissed the matter of Mr. Morand for information that concerned him more. "Louise was a little cranky on the telephone," he explained sheepishly. "She's not too hot about this. It seems we had a dance date tonight."

Gail nodded. "The thing for you to do is keep on the good side of your girl-friend, Spence. I can go talk to the wire chief, Cooper, alone. It should be simple. I merely want to find out if there was a camera monitoring Dan's scope circuit when—when whatever it was happened."

"Well, I hate to let you down, Gail, but I don't want Louise mad at me."

"By all means run along to Louise, Spence."

Chapter III

MORAND of the brief words stalked in Gail's mind during the drive to Cooper's rooming-house. She hadn't liked Morand. Now, knowing she could readily get wrong impressions because she was upset, Gail weighed the little man carefully. The results weren't soothing. She came to the conclusion that he had offered her a backhanded bribe not to pry further into the oddness surrounding her brother's death. Insurance policies didn't pay double in case of suicide. They just didn't.

She checked on that by stopping at a drugstore and telephoning a Mr. Andrew Chapman, an insurance man whom she knew.

"Gail, I never heard of such a thing," the insurance agent told her. "Life insurance companies just don't do business that way."

"Morand said he represented the Central Imperial Life Insurance Company. What about the concern?"

"Never heard of it, Gail. Nor of this Morand, either."

"If he is legitimate insurance agent, would you have heard of him?"

"I think I would, Gail. Let me look it up in my books." The insurance man was away from the telephone for a time, then returned to report, "I can't find any record of the company or the man."

"Thank you," Gail said gravely. Now she was certain that she had been offered a bribe. The idea sickened her.

She drove on to the address which Spencer had given her as being that of Cooper. She parked in front of number three in a succession of four nearly identical stucco apartment houses of two stories and four apartments each. They even had the same hibiscus trimmed the same way before each entrance. The front door stood unlocked. They would all be unlocked, she imagined.

There were four bell-buttons, the same kind of cards above each, the tenants names printed with identical lettering. Cooper's didn't answer. Neither did the other three. . . .

If the man is ill, he's probably dodging company, Gail thought. I'll go up and rout him out. . . . Cooper's apartment was second floor, right. There were two doors, an inner paneled one and an outer slatted ventilating door. The latter was closed and locked, but the inner one seemed to be open.

Gail's knocking and lock-rattling got no response.

"Mr. Cooper!" she called. "This is Gail Adams. Could I see you a minute? It's important."

She listened to silence except for a clock ticking and an electric fan running, both in the apartment. The lights were on.

"Mr. Cooper, I've got to see you!" Gail called more sharply.

She waited, and grew coldly angry. The man was in there. His fan was running. She wrenched at the breather-door handle,

but the door was solid. The slats, however, were designed for the warm climate rather than privacy, and she wondered if a little prying at them wouldn't let her look into the room. She drew a mechanical pencil from her purse, used it as a pry, and sprung two of the slats apart a slit. Her eye went to the opening.

Her scream, a shrill, sickened thing, went through most of the neighborhood.

Chapter IV

A TELEPHONE operator wanted four dollars and forty cents. She had a thin weary voice, like the string of a violin scraping under a fingernail.

Gail asked, "You have Doc Savage on the wire?" Then she counted the money, in quarters and dimes, into the metal slot, and a bell clanged hollowly and steadily in the instrument. The sound was dull in the booth. Outside, the hotel lobby was still and almost deserted, with all but the main lights turned out. "Hello," Gail said. "Hello, Mr. Savage."

A small shrill voice, the voice of a child in a man, grated back at her over hundreds of miles of wire.

"This is Monk. Monk Mayfair," it said.

"Who?" Gail was discouraged. "But I wanted to speak to Doc Savage. The operator told me—"

"That's right, lady," the immature voice told her. "But this is closer to Doc than telephone calls from strange babes usually get. Want your money back?"

"Listen, whoever you are, I didn't call New York to be funny—"

"And I don't answer the telephone at three o'clock in the morning to put on a humor broadcast. . . . Look, lady, I'm Monk Mayfair and I'm associated with Doc Savage. I'm one of the five who work with him. It just happens this is my night to be the victim of the telephone. Incidentally, we usually have a private detective agency sift these calls, but tonight they're not functioning. So you're lucky to get this near Doc. Now if you understand all that, and if you'll be satisfied to talk to the assistant master, I'm willing to listen."

"Then could I talk to Doc Savage?" Gail asked grimly.

"That would depend. I doubt it."

"Depend on what?"

"On how much we might be fascinated by this trouble you're in."

Gail hesitated, then decided there was nothing to do but follow his suggestion. So she told the story, not using too many words, but putting enough to convey the full gist. Half-way through, the long-distance operator was asking for more money, but Monk Mayfair said something sharply—it sounded like some kind of company code—and after that the operator remained off the line. Monk Mayfair sounded interested.

"This Cooper, this wire-chief," he said. "You say he was found hanged the same way as your brother?"

Gail, having some difficulty with self-control now, explained, "The circumstances of Mr. Cooper's death were almost identical with that of my brother. There was one exception—he had not taken a recent bath. But the doors and windows were locked on the inside, and he was strangled with the cord of a bathrobe. *And he was lying in the middle of the room some distance from any support from which he could have hanged himself."*

"You didn't," Monk Mayfair suggested suspiciously, "just toss in that last to fascinate us?"

"Of course not! You can check it."

"How?"

"Telephone the police here in this city, if you wish."

"If I do," Monk told her, "I'll ask them to explain how they call both cases suicide. How do you think they'll answer that?"

"They stated that it was evidently a coincidence and that Cooper had been planning suicide also, and made it spectacular by duplicating the odd circumstances of my brother's death deliberately."

"Yeah? The police believe that?"

"They claim to. They say that people contemplating suicide often take the most spectacular means at hand."

"You must have pretty imaginative cops down there."

"I'm disgusted with them," Gail admitted.

"Why," Monk asked abruptly, "did you call us?"

"I wanted Doc Savage to take the case," Gail said. "Could I speak to Mr. Savage now?"

"Let's answer that question of mine a little more fully," Monk Mayfair suggested. "You're more than a thousand miles from New York City. . . . Do you know Doc Savage personally?"

"No. I've never even seen him."

"He know you? Or know of you?"

"I hardly imagine so."

"Then you'd better give me a long and complete explanation of how you happened to think of calling Doc," Monk advised. "Preferably something I'll believe."

Gail looking at the telephone angrily. She supposed Monk Mayfair was suspicious. She couldn't tell from his voice, but he was hedging. In the beginning, she had imagined he was some minor personage, not much more important than an office boy, but she was beginning to doubt her first judgment.

She said patiently, "I had a couple of dates with an engineer name Tremaine, who was here a few weeks ago making some installations of advanced radar equipment. He mentioned Doc Savage. In fact, Doc Savage seemed to be his hobby. He told me so much—"

"Delman Tremaine?" Monk asked.

"Oh, you know him?"

"Uh-huh. You say you dated him? He's usually pretty choicy about his girls." Monk sounded more interested. "You're probably not a bad looker."

"My brother died this afternoon and I'm hardly in a frame of mind to discuss my looks!" Gail said quietly and bitterly.

There was a silence. Monk Mayfair was evidently uncomfortable. Presently he said, "Go ahead with how you happened to call on Doc."

"As I started to say, the engineer Tremaine talked endlessly about Doc Savage," Gail continued. "He told me that Doc Savage was a remarkable combination of scientific genius, mental marvel and physical giant, and that Doc Savage followed the unusual career of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers with whom the regular agencies of the law, for one reason or another, were unable to cope. He said in particular that Doc Savage was in the regular sense not a detective, and that he did not work for fees, but took only cases that were fantastic or interesting."

She halted to assemble more words—convincing ones, because the explanation sounded a little weak now—and Monk Mayfair asked, "You believed all this?"

"About Doc Savage? I don't think Tremaine would lie."

"Any man will lie to a pretty girl."

"But you don't understand—Tremaine was so impressed by Doc Savage. I have never seen a man regard another one so highly. No, I felt Tremaine was sincere, and I became convinced that Doc Savage must be an unusual sort."

"Unusual," Monk said, "is a weasel word for Doc. In fact, I don't know that words would do justice to Doc. And that comes from a broken-down old chemist that has been associated with Doc for quite a while."

"You're a chemist?"

"That's right. But let's not let the conversation stray. You called Doc Savage because a fellow named Tremaine, who knew Doc slightly, had sold you on Doc's omnipotence."

"Yes."

"And you have for sale a nice story about men hung from thin air and something in a radar scope driving your brother mad with fear?"

Gail said stiffly, "I don't like the way you refer to the truth as—"

"Sister, I don't want to be blunt, but the feathers on this package you're selling are a little too colorful."

"But I don't understand!"

"I'll put it more simply. I don't believe this stuff you've told me."

"If you'll put Doc Savage on the wire—"

"Sorry. No dice."

"But—"

"Lady, if I bothered Doc with something as wild as this, I wouldn't be thought of very well."

Gail lost her temper. Her nerves all seemed to come loose at once, and the loose-flying ends flailed out angrily at Monk Mayfair. She gave her opinion of Monk, not flattering, of his intelligence, less flattering, and included a couple of his ancestors in the disapproval. "You dim-witted, discourteous lunk-head!" she finished. "If you think you're going to keep me from seeing Doc Savage about this thing, you've got another guess coming."

Less impressed than he should have been, Monk asked, "What do you intend to do about it?"

"Why, you thin-brain, I'll see Savage myself."

"Not while I'm on the telephone, you won't."

"I'll see him personally. I'll talk to him. I'll come to New York."

"That's ridiculous," Monk said. "Anybody smart enough to think up the wild story you just told me wouldn't be that dumb."

Gail gave her personal opinion of Monk's intelligence in six short words, and hung up. She looked at her hands. They were shaking, and she had a grisly feeling that she would be certain to have hysterics if she moved out of the telephone booth. So she remained there a while, until her feelings were under better command.

She went directly to the airlines ticket booth which connected with the hotel lobby, tapped her way grimly to the counter, and told the sleepy-looking clerk, "I have to get to New York immediately. When can I leave?"

After glancing at the clock, the clerk said, "Twenty minutes."

"I want a round-trip ticket." Gail bit her lips, remembering that she had very little cash with her. Not enough, certainly, to pay for an airlines passage to New York. "Would you take my personal check?" she asked, and listened to the clerk murmur apologetically that it was against company rules.

"You hold a seat for me," Gail said with determination. "I'll be leaving on that plane." She was back with a very few minutes to spare with enough to pay for a round-trip ticket, and about thirty dollars for expenses. Not much, but the best she could manage, and she'd borrowed it from a person she didn't like—Morry Gibble.

Driven by impatience, Gail was the first aboard the plane after it had wheeled up to the ramp and emptied its local passengers. As a result of boarding early, she had quite a wait, and sat frowning, thinking that she'd better compose herself.

Gibble had thought she was doing an idiotic thing. She'd had to tell Gibble what she was doing before he would loan her the money. Not that she minded telling Gibble—it was simply that she didn't care for the rather piggish manner Gibble had toward women in general. Not, she supposed, that Gibble was a chaser. He just wanted to be.

Now the last passengers came aboard, the pilot and co-pilot passed forward into the control compartment, and the stewardess made the door fast. The usual white-clad lineman wheeled his fire extinguisher cart to a position near the port engine and waited until that engine was running, then went to the other engine.

Gail, who had flown very little, watched nervously as the engine outside her window spat considerable sheets of red flame from its exhaust stack. She wondered if she could call the stewardess' attention to the flame, but decided no one else was alarmed, so it must be normal. Anyway, they were rolling fast now and the ship was preparing to leave the ground. It *had* left the ground. They were airborne. *Give me five or six hours,* Gail thought grimly, *and we'll see who keeps me from talking to Doc Savage.*

Presently the edgy feeling of a new flier wore off, and she tried to emulate the other passengers, who were all asleep or pretending to be. Sleep, she soon discovered, was out of the question.

She began to have doubts about her wisdom. *Good Lord, what am I doing here?* she wondered suddenly. And, quite seriously, she examined herself for signs of hysteria. She concluded with what she hoped was logic that she was quite sane, level-minded, and knew what she was doing.

But Gail was surprised, thinking about it now, that she should go to such extreme lengths to seek the aid of a man of whom she had only heard. But Tremaine, the engineer who had told her of Doc Savage, had been so utterly impressed by Doc—the Man of Bronze, Tremaine had called him—that she supposed his enthusiasm had rubbed off on her permanently. Anyway, she'd thought of Doc Savage with full confidence. As naturally, she thought now, as a kid who has been hit by a playmate yells for his mother. Since she had come by this reliance on Doc Savage secondhand, the man must be quite a strong character.

Her thoughts turned to the oddness of her brother's death, and Cooper's subsequent demise, set at her mind. She didn't want that. It wouldn't be best to go to Doc Savage bearing a head full of confusing guesswork that she had concocted during the night. She wondered if the stewardess would furnish anything to make a passenger sleep. Probably not. It wouldn't hurt to ask, though.

Gail arose and moved back to the galley in the rear, where the stewardess was bending over a sheaf of reports. She was sorry, said the stewardess smilingly, but she wasn't allowed to supply sleeping tablets. But perhaps a glass of warm milk would help? Gail thanked her, drank her milk, and moved back toward the seat.

Tip-toeing past the sleeping passengers, Gail gave each a glance as she passed, envying them their ability to sleep. . . . Which accounted, she realized later, for her noticing a seamed hand that was the color of a factory brown shoe. Shocked, without instantly knowing why, she lifted her gaze. The hand belonged to a man asleep with a newspaper peaked over his head and face.

Gail moved on. Tiny cold-footed creatures were on her spine now. Terror. And she knew why—or thought she did. Imagination? *Had she imagined it was short-sentenced Mr. Morand with his face under the teepee of newspaper?*

Gail no more than hit her seat than she realized she couldn't stay there. She had to know. So she walked back, trying to be casual, and told the stewardess, "I'd like an aspirin, too."

The stewardess looked at her oddly, asked, "Are you ill, Miss?" And Gail knew she must look as glassy as she felt. Because she'd seen, reflected in the plane window as she passed, a swatch of white hair which the newspaper didn't quite cover on the side of the man's head opposite the aisle. Mr. Morand had had white hair.

Once more back in her seat, Gail sat there with cold chills. Did Morand know she was aboard? Preposterous. Of course he did.

Gail shuddered repeatedly. Instead of being an odd character who had offered a veiled bribe, Morand became a figure as sinister as a rattlesnake. She felt danger solidly around her. Her brother and Cooper had been murdered, it was easy to imagine, and she was being following. *If I can only leave the plane unobserved at the next stop,* she thought wildly.

She hadn't checked the stops the plane made. She wished she had. She had no idea where it would sit down next, and when—three hours later—the lights of a city, pale in a thin veil of groundfog and approaching dawn, swelled up at the plane, she had no idea what city it was. The stewardess didn't announce it.

The plane settled in its final approach, the tires kissed with sharp barks of agony, and presently they were at a standstill and two men in topcoats were wheeling a landing stage into position. The plane door opened. Cold air came in, reminding Gail that, warm as it had been at home, it was winter and cold here in the north. She shivered, but might have shivered anyway—because Morand had risen from his seat, was making for the door.

Morand. It was Morand, with his dunce-cap of white hair. He'd turned up his coat collar, yanked a black hat down over his ears, and his face wasn't toward her at any time, but she knew him to be Morand.

She couldn't leave the plane now. He'd thwarted her. He didn't have his bag, so he was coming back, she reasoned. Nonetheless, she clung to a frantic hope that he was leaving the plane for good.

Not all of the other passengers filed out to stretch their muscles. Some did. Mostly these were men, and only one was a woman. Gail watched the men as they passed, rather hoping she might pick out one Galahadian fellow and ask him for help. But none of the men rode white chargers; they were, as a whole, rather surprisingly oblivious of Gail. They hardly noticed her, although she was a very pretty girl.

Gail left her seat cautiously and moved back to the door, where she jerked to a stop. Morand was outside, near the wheeled steps.

"Nice flight. Smooth air. Pleasant," Gail heard him remark to the stewardess. "New York. How long?"

So he was going on to New York! Gail returned to her seat, and sat there watching her fingers open and close, as if they were gripping at fear.

And that was that. She didn't leave the plane. Morand was the last to enter the ship, and he stood near the door watching the stewardess until she politely requested him to go to his seat and fasten his safety belt for the take-off.

Four additional passengers, two women and two men, none of them acting as if they belonged to the others, had gotten aboard. They, and the one who had gotten out to stretch, settled themselves. The plane went through its engine ritual, taxied down to

the turning apron, paused for cockpit check, then headed down the blacktop runway with acceleration that dragged Gail back against the cushions. Presently they were airborne again.

The stewardess came past, and Gail asked shakily, “Miss, what is our next stop?” She hardly knew her own voice.

“New York,” said the stewardess.

“Could I—are the police—” Gail swallowed the rest. . . . What could she tell the police? What could she prove? . . . Because the stewardess was looking at her oddly, she said, “Never mind. I—I wanted to ask a question about the police. It wasn’t important.”

The stewardess left wearing a too-careful look of unconcern, and Gail knew she was suspicious. That was all right. If she has someone, a policeman even, watch me, so much the better; the more honest people watch me, the safer I’ll feel, Gail thought.

Now there seemed nothing to do but wait, and Gail knew she was going to do it poorly. She leaned back. Her body felt heavy against the cushions. The motion of the plane was not as tranquil now, for there was a little uneasiness from rough air, and she wondered if she was going to be airsick. Ill from fright, would be more like it, she reflected.

There was a stirring opposite her. She turned her head, not thinking much about it—her anxieties were all centered on Morand, whose seat was back of her own—and saw that a man was rising from the other seat. He had occupied a double seat alone; there was a row of singles down one side of the plane cabin and doubles down the other; and she had not noticed him specially before.

The man, astonishing her completely, was in the seat with her in a split second. He was a small man, adept, and he didn’t fool around with what he was going to do.

His hand came against her face, covered her mouth and nostrils. She felt moistness; a pad in his hand was wet with something.

Mustn’t breathe, she thought wildly. And, somehow, she had the thought in her mind in time, before the stuff was against her face. She held her breath. The liquid, whatever it was, from the pad began stinging her face.

Foolishly, it seemed to her, she remained frozen. She couldn’t move, couldn’t struggle. The inaction seemed childish, hypnotic. Actually, she may not have remained passive for long. No longer than terror would have kept anyone suspended.

And now she didn’t dare move. Because the man’s free hand, the one not holding the stuff to her nostrils, had flashed an enormous knife before her eyes. A cheap knife, a camper’s knife, its blade an inch and a quarter across and several inches long.

The assailant didn’t say anything. He hadn’t said anything. She had, waiting in horror, the weird feeling that she hadn’t really seen him at all. There was about him, it seemed to her, an intangible sepulchral air of a shroud. He even smelled of undertaking rooms and death, but that of course had to be imagination, because she was still keeping air out of her lungs.

If she breathed, she would die. The notion filled her brain. There was no room for any other thought. She was going to die here in the plane seat. If she breathed the stuff, she would die. If she struggled, there was the knife, and she would die anyway.

Then, as unexpectedly as he had come, the man was away from her, and making the only sound he had really made, a hissing like an annoyed snake.

Chapter V

HE had come with his death like a black ghost, and that was the way he left. No sound whatever, after the one brief hissing.

Gail came up clawing the thing from her face. A pad of damp cheesecloth, it seemed to be.

And she saw why the man had abandoned her. Why, probably, she was going to live for a while longer. Two men, one enormous, a giant, were coming from forward in the plane cabin. The big man was ahead, the shorter one, who was almost as wide, followed.

A kind of rushing stillness overlaid everything, due probably to the plane interior which was soundproofed to the fullest extent, yet not silent at all. The engines, the rush through the air, made a gentle moaning in which everything was happening.

Mr. Morand was up. Morand came at the weird dark man, who was fleeing aft, to-

ward the rear of the cabin. . . . Then Morand brought up oddly. He stopped. He seemed to poise, holding a queer suspended attitude, bent forward, hands open and suspended for clutching, but not clutching. And Mr. Morand held that grotesque stance of pause until the dark one had passed him and gone on into the rear of the plane.

The dark one disappeared now, turning the corner into the cubicle where the stewardess would be working. Back there was the galley, the lockers, the ladies' lounge.

Mr. Morand came loose from suspension. He stumbled toward Gail. And she had the queerest feeling that Morand had not, or was acting as if he had not, known that the dark man had passed him. A thing that, under the circumstances, did not seem as preposterous as it did hair-raising.

Now the big man who had come from forward reached Gail. He snapped the saturated pad of cheesecloth from her lips.

His companion—short, homely, apish—endeavored to pass in pursuit of the dark one.

"Hold it, Monk," the giant said sharply.

"But that guy—"

"He'll be prepared for you back there, Monk. You saw that knife?"

"I'll make him eat that knife, Doc!"

"No. Give him time to soften himself up with his own thinking. He's trapped on the plane. He'll see that."

Now Mr. Morand spoke. He said, "You won't be able to touch him anyway. He doesn't exist."

The big man's hand fished in the seat-pocket that contained airline literature, and brought out the paper sack that was there for the use of passengers suddenly and uncontrollably airsick. He popped the cheesecloth pad into the tough vapor-tight paper sack, and immediately closed the mouth of the sack.

He said, "Monk, you get a whiff of that stuff?"

"Uh-huh. . . . Why isn't she dead?"

The giant scrubbed at Gail's lips with a handkerchief. "Watch your breathing. That chemical is a paralysant, and deadly." He watched her intently.

Gail, terrorized, saw the wide homely man, Monk, watching her also. . . . *Why, I know his voice! He's the Doc Savage aide I talked to on the telephone!*

Mr. Morand stood behind them. He stood oddly, both hands clamped to his chest, one hand resting on the other.

"You evidently didn't take any of the vapor into your lungs," the big man said finally.

"No. I—I think I held my breath," Gail gasped.

"You were lucky." He had metallic bronze features and strange flake-gold eyes that seemed lustrous in the half-darkness of the dimmed-out airliner cabin. He shook his head, adding, "We were caught off base on that. We didn't expect anything that drastic and quick to happen. I'm afraid we were guilty of a lack of foresight, which is synonymous with stupidity."

Gail, staring at him wonderingly, exclaimed, "You got aboard at the last stop."

"That's right."

"And you're Doc Savage."

"That's right also." The bronzed man sounded wry-voice and self-disgusted. "I'm very sorry that we nearly let you be killed."

"Oh, but you didn't!" Gail said quickly. "He fled only when he saw you. If he hadn't seen you, I'm sure I couldn't have held my breath much longer."

"Well, I can assure you we're not going to brag about our showing. Another few seconds and—whew!"

"Anyway," said Gail, "you had no way of knowing anything would happen."

He shook his head at that. "We had enough expectations to meet your plane. That should have been sufficient."

Monk Mayfair was scowling toward the rear of the plane. "That guy has had enough time to do his thinking, hasn't he? I believe I'll go back and take possession of him."

"Wait. Let's make sure Miss Adams isn't going to suffer any effects from that stuff," Doc advised. "Then we'll collaborate on that fellow."

Mr. Morand stared at them.

"Fellow? Man? Whom?" Morand was back to short words again.

Monk examined Mr. Morand wonderingly and said, "That's a hell of a question, if you'll pardon my parlor language. You stood there, looking like the kid on the end of the diving board just as he decided not to jump, and let the guy stroll past you. What was the matter? His knife look big to you?"

"Knife?"

"It wasn't a butter-paddle, bub."

"Knife? Saw none."

"Huh?"

"No. Didn't pass. Positive."

Monk gestured impatiently, said, "You got a funny way of leaving out words, pal. Maybe you didn't see the knife pass you—"

"You misunderstand. The man. Never passed me. Certainly didn't."

Monk's head jutted forward. "You'd better snow again on that one. *The guy didn't pass you, you say?"*

"Exactly. Definitely didn't." Mr. Morand jerked his own head up and down. His eyes, Gail thought wonderingly, were the most terror-filled eyes she had ever seen.

"Well, what do you know about that." Monk glanced at Doc Savage. "You hear that, Doc? We can't trust our eyes any more. We just imagined a would-be murderer trotted up the aisle past little short-words here."

Listening to his own voice seemed to enrage Monk, and he growled suddenly, "Why, I'll unscrew this little liar's head and put it back on straight!" He reached for Mr. Morand, who shuffled back in alarm.

"Cut it out, Monk," Doc Savage said thoughtfully.

Gail let a short silence pass, then said in confusion, "I'm afraid I don't understand this at all. . . . You are Doc Savage? You really are?"

Monk, scowling at Mr. Morand, said, "Sure we are. I mean, he is."

"But I don't understand your presence on the plane!"

Monk said it was simple enough. He added, "We grabbed a fast ship out of New York and beat your plane to that intermediate stop back there by nearly half an hour. There was nothing to it."

Gail examined Monk dubiously. "If you're actually the fellow who upset me so over the telephone, and I think you are, you specifically said you were having nothing to do with it."

"Smoke screen." Monk was practicing glaring at Mr. Morand.

"What?"

"Look, Miss Adams, a telephone can be the next thing to a broadcasting station if the wire happened to be tapped or you were overheard. Do you think it would be smart to announce we were rushing to take the job, that it is the screwiest thing we've had come along in some time, and we wouldn't miss it for anything? Sure, that would be great. Our necks way out. Start shooting, anybody who doesn't like our company. . . . Oh, no! That kind of advertising begets trouble."

"But you didn't know I would be on a plane bound for New York. I didn't know it myself when I was talking to you."

"I wish they were all as easy as that one," Monk told her without taking his glower off little Mr. Morand. "You told me on the phone you'd come to New York and see Doc. You were angry. You sounded as if you were going to do it immediately. You thought your brother had been murdered, so it was an important matter, one you would act on, and quickly. A plane was quickest transportation. We got the airline checking, found you were getting a ticket, and we struck out to intercept the plane."

Gail did some mental computing, and wasn't satisfied. "But the stop was over halfway, and this is the airline's fastest type of plane. You couldn't have taken an airliner and intercepted me."

"Who said airliner?" Monk asked. "We used Doc's private job. Ham Brooks, one of the lower-grade members of our outfit, is flying it back."

"I guess—I should believe you," Gail said uncertainly.

"Suit yourself," Monk advised. "Of course, we did save your life."

Gail straightened uncomfortably, embarrassed by Monk's directness.

Doc Savage told her quietly, "You'll get to understand Monk, possibly. To him, the shortest distance is a straight line, even through a brick wall."

Monk told Mr. Morand ominously, "They make me count to a hundred before I get drastic. I'm on ninety-nine now."

Gail moved her attention to Mr. Morand. She thought there was a terror in his eyes beyond any apprehension Monk Mayfair might be causing. Not that Monk wasn't formidable.

"You'll see," Mr. Morand blurted. "Nonexistent. Not here. The man. You'll see."

"You still talking about the dark little guy with the knife?" Monk demanded.

"Exactly."

"He wasn't here, huh? I didn't see him. He didn't clap a pad of poison over her mouth? None of that happened, I take it?"

Mr. Morand rolled his eyes up. They were all whites. “You’ll see,” he said.

Monk glanced at Doc Savage. “The bats will start flying out of him in a minute.” He threw a gesture at the rear of the plane with his formidable jaw. “Do we go back and see if dark-suit has become thoughtful enough?”

Doc Savage said, “Yes. But just a moment.” He touched Mr. Morand’s arm, added, “You wouldn’t mind sitting here and waiting?” And without waiting for an answer, he pressed Mr. Morand down into a seat—the man’s own seat—and for a few seconds Mr. Morand seemed frantically anxious not to sit there.

Then Mr. Morand closed his eyes. When Doc Savage took his hands away, the small man remained passive. He seemed asleep.

Gail was white-faced with surprise. She felt Monk’s touch. He whispered, “Don’t let that upset you. Doc used a hypo needle on him before he knew what was going to happen. To keep him on ice until we have time to get around to him.”

Doc Savage moved toward the rear of the plane. Monk followed hastily. Those of the passengers who were awake looked at them curiously, but no one seemed to have any special feeling that anything was wrong. Almost everyone had been asleep, and there had been little noise.

The stewardess was arranging paper coffee cups in a rack. She made a clean bright figure under the only brilliant light in the plane. She lifted a shining blonde head and said, “Good morning.”

“The man who was in a hurry?” Doc Savage asked her quietly. “Where did he go? Which lounge?”

She gave him a puzzled smile. “I beg pardon?”

Doc gave it to her a little more fully. “A thin man in a dark suit. He had a knife, but had perhaps put it away when you saw him.”

“But I didn’t see him,” the stewardess said. “That is, if it was in the last ten minutes.”

“It was less than ten minutes ago.”

She shook her head. She had a pageboy haircut and the blonde hair waggled vaguely. “It wouldn’t make any difference. No one has entered either washroom since the last take-off.”

She said this calmly, confidently. It was an impossibility. No one could have passed, gone into either lounge, or gone anywhere in the rear of the plane, the part that lay beyond the partition that shut off this section, without passing her. Without, in fact, squeezing past her. If she had been standing or sitting here all the time.

“You must have been in the ladies’ lounge when he passed,” Doc Savage said.

“But I wasn’t. I’ve been right here—certainly more than ten minutes. Nearer thirty. And no one passed me.”

Monk brought his head around and looked up at Doc. He had a foolish expression. “I seem to be getting snowed in,” he said.

Doc Savage told the stewardess who he was.

“Yes, Mr. Savage, I recognized you,” the stewardess said. “I’ve seen you before. You were pointed out to me.”

“This man tried to kill a young lady passenger.”

“Oh!” Her hands flew to her cheeks.

“He came back here.”

Uncertainty, confusion, mixed with a distressed certainty in the stewardess’ features. “But he didn’t—I’m sure he didn’t—pass me. No one did.”

“Do you mind if we take a look?”

“Oh, of course not. You must look. Maybe he—but really, no one could have gone through here without my noticing.”

“It doesn’t seem possible,” Doc agreed without much expression. “But we’ll look anyway.”

They did a quick job on both lounges, the men’s and women’s. Both service rooms were extravagantly done in chrome and pastel colors, but their man wasn’t in either.

“Would you unlock the storage lazarets?” Doc asked the stewardess.

She paled. “Certainly,” she said angrily.

There were two clothing lockers, and three others containing blankets, pillows, food supplies, and they rifled each thoroughly. No small man in a dark suit.

“This gets better as we go along,” Monk said in the tone of a man who is beginning to wonder if he didn’t see something white and transluscent in a midnight cemetery.

"There's the tail section of the plane," Doc said. "The unused part of the fuselage fartherest aft."

But that, they found, was closed off by a bulkhead fastened with at least twenty sheet-metal screws that had a special head machining. "You have a screwdriver to fit these?" Doc asked the stewardess.

"Why, certainly not!" She was coldly angry with them now.

"Sister, this isn't a rib," Monk told her.

Doc used the blade of a knife on a few of the screwheads. Presently the tip of the blade broke. He stepped back, frowning now, and said, "The screws would have to be re-inserted from this side after the fellow went in. That would have taken a busy three or four minutes—twice as long to remove them also. There wasn't that much time."

Monk ran a hand through his short pig-bristle hair, and ended the gesture by scratching the back of his head violently.

"He wasn't an invisible man," he said. "He was just intangible."

"Anyone who passed me was invisible!" the stewardess snapped.

They walked back into the plane cabin where Gail Adams waited tight-lipped in her seat. Monk glanced down at Mr. Morand in passing, remarked, "If it wouldn't get me measured for a straight jacket, I'd almost say our friend of the abbreviated words begins to look like an authority on the little man who wasn't there."

Doc Savage passed on to the pilot's compartment. He introduced himself. He told the pilot, briefly, that a murder attempt had been made on one of the passengers and the assailant had fled aft in the plane—but couldn't be found.

"Could he have parachuted—he may have had a chute along—without your being aware?" Doc finished.

Pilot and co-pilot shook their heads instantly. It was impossible. The trim of the ship would have been upset. They'd have noticed instantly. Further than that, there was a warning light which showed on the instrument panel, showed a bright red, when any door was open. The light hadn't shone red.

"I want the functioning of that light tested when we land," Doc said. "If there's any doubt about my authority to request such a test, consult your operational vice-president."

"Yes, sir," said the puzzled captain. "I don't question your authority, sir. I happen to know you own a considerable interest in the airline."

"Another thing," Doc said. "I want you personally to examine the tail section. I suggest you do it because I've told you what happened, but if you'd prefer to do so, select a trustworthy mechanic to remove the bulkhead screws and search the rear end."

"Yes, sir."

"How about your elevator trim tab the last half hour? Had to change it much? A man, even a small one, going into the tail-section would shift the center of gravity and you would have to re-trim."

The mate said uncertainly, "The air is rough. We've had to change the tab a few times after trimming out of the climb to level flight."

But the first officer was more positive. "We haven't needed to change the tab that much."

"You think, then, that a man couldn't be hiding in the rearmost section of the fuselage?" Doc asked.

"Sir, I'm positive he couldn't be," the first officer declared.

"Make a search at the end of the trip anyway."

"Yes, sir."

Monk had guessed the purpose of Doc's trip to the control compartment, and he asked, "They have to trim out for him? I hadn't thought of that."

"The pilot says not."

"I don't get it."

"It's interesting, all right."

Monk said he didn't think interesting was the word. He tried to think of a word. He ended by producing a shudder that seemed to surprise himself.

"But there *was* a man!" Gail gasped.

"There seems to be some evidence to the contrary," Doc told her dryly. "However, we saw him as clearly as you did."

Gail pointed at Mr. Morand, "Then he—his mind wasn't bereft—when he said we'd discover the fellow wasn't here."

"His prediction was accurate, anyway," Doc admitted. "Now Miss Adams, this mustn't throw you. The more utterly impossible a thing seems, the more blatant the trickery, usually." He consulted his watch. "We have nearly an hour longer before we reach New

York. Suppose you give me a very complete picture of the situation back home."

Gail nodded, for she was eager to talk. She discovered that Doc Savage was interested in her own background, and in Dan's. So she told him that they had been born on a Kansas farm, that there was two years difference in their age, and that her brother had always been interested in electricity, or electronics as it had come to be called. She told him a great deal about Dan—that Dan liked fishing and hunting, and wasn't much of a hand for girls, although he liked to give the impression he was quite a wolf, by whistling at them on the street.

"My brother hadn't grown up, really, Mr. Savage," Gail explained. "He was quite skilled in radar work, but rather underdeveloped in other ways."

"What do you mean by underdeveloped?" Doc Savage asked.

"Oh, Dan didn't have too good judgment, and I had to sort of look after him to keep him out of trouble. Nothing serious, you understand. Dan never came near doing anything really bad." She hesitated, nipping at her lips with her teeth. Then she said reluctantly, "Except once, that is. Dan was almost involved with some other young fellows in a plot to take a car. But I found out about it, and put a stop to it."

"You mean steal a car."

"I—yes. But he didn't, of course. And probably he wouldn't have, anyway, even if I hadn't interfered."

"When was this incident?"

"Oh, several years ago."

The rest of Gail's story included the fact that her parents had passed away, her mother five years ago and her father three years before, and she and Dan had been living in the southern coast city two years, or since the inception of the radar experimental work. To Doc's questions, she replied that Dan had no known enemies, and hadn't seemed any different lately than usual. However, she amended this to: "But it was hard to tell about Dan. He had an effervescent nature, always pranking, and you couldn't tell much about him."

"Even you, as Dan's sister, couldn't tell much about him?"

"That's right." Suddenly tears came to her eyes, and she lowered her head. "Don't get the idea that I didn't love my brother. I did. He meant a great deal to me. I've always taken care of him, and losing him is a terrible shock." She began shaking with sobs.

The sun finally lifted above a strata of ground fog that overlay the mountain area of eastern Pennsylvania, and laid its light redly against the long glittering blades of the airliner wings. There was, far ahead, a vague mushroom of industrial haze, and New York City would lie under this.

Presently Gail's sobbing ended in grim self-control, and Doc Savage put several questions. His casual tone belied the importance of the queries: Had Dan mentioned any recent fear? Had he seen anything odd in the radar scope before? Was Dan inclined to be imaginative? Had he ever been the patient of a psychiatrist? Had Gail ever seen Mr. Morand before yesterday? Did she think Dan had met him before? Was she positive Dan had no insurance with Mr. Morand's company, if he had a company?

To all of these questions, Gail shook her head numbly. This seemed a sufficient answer to satisfy Doc.

The plane made the sweep south now over Staten Island. Bedloe with the Statue of Liberty moved under Gail's intent staring eyes, and at first she did not realize what it was. The Statue of Liberty—New York—she thought. She had never been in New York, and she recognized the skyline of Manhattan Island readily from the many pictures she'd seen, although from the air it hardly resembled a skyline. The city seemed distant, compact and smaller than she had imagined. She supposed that one shouldn't arrive in New York City for the first time by air, for the most impressive effect.

La Guardia Field seemed smaller than she had expected. But, when the plane had taxied to the disembarking sheds, and she was outside, moving down the steps preceded by Monk Mayfair and followed closely by Doc Savage—Doc carrying Mr. Morand easily—she began to get her perspective back. New York was going to be a large city, after all.

An official of the airline met them. An anxious man, almost wringing his hands. He was concerned about what had happened—evidently the pilot had radioed ahead—and anxious to be of service. Doc Savage gave him pleasantly vague answers and assurances that the airline was nowhere at fault.

Gail noticed Doc watching the plane. The pilot was now taxiing it toward the hangars, some distance away, where the airline maintenance was done.

Doc then said, "Will you excuse me?" and gave the limp Mr. Morand to Monk to hold. Doc turned and left quickly. . . . He was not gone long, however—four or five minutes, perhaps—and then was back.

He told the airline official, "We'd like a place to wait in privacy, until our friend here regains consciousness."

They were shown to a small office that had been hastily cleared of its occupants. It was warm there. Gail's cheeks felt numb under her fingers, and she was sure there were tiny shot-like snowflakes in the air outdoors. No sunlight fell into the room, and the skies were leaden.

Now Doc Savage and Monk Mayfair had a conversation, using a language Gail had never heard before—a guttural tongue, not particularly musical, but not unpleasant either. She listened wonderingly. She had studied French, Spanish and a little Esperanto, but this bore no relation to any of these tongues, nor to anything she had heard before.

Monk was grinning wryly at the end, and she asked him, "What language were you speaking?"

"Mayan," he told her.

"Mayan?" Gail was puzzled. "That's South American, isn't it? Or Central American?"

"Central America," Monk agreed. "This is the original primitive lingo." Monk went over and scowled at Mr. Morand. They had put him in a swivel chair. "He should be making his debut by now. That stuff never knocks them over an hour and a half," Monk said, pushing Mr. Morand's head back.

Mr. Morand's eyes remained closed. His color was good, though. His hands, which hung limp, looked brown enough to be wearing leather gloves.

"What do you think became of the man who tried to kill me?" Gail asked.

"According to slumber-boy, here, he wasn't there," Monk said.

"Do you believe that?"

"When I do, you can send for the fellows with the white coats," Monk said.

"Where did you learn to speak primitive Mayan?" Gail asked.

"Oh, we've been down there a time or two." Monk went over and looked from the window. "That pilot should be showing up. It isn't an all-morning job to search the tail of the plane."

About five minutes later, the pilot arrived. "There wasn't anyone," he said. "There wasn't a soul hidden in the tail-section."

"So the little man who wasn't there," Monk said blankly, "really wasn't there!"

Chapter VI

GAIL couldn't believe it. A man had tried to kill her; she was sure of that. Seemingly he had disappeared into thin air aboard the plane. It was impossible. She sank into a chair, hands clenched, thinking in wild terror of the way her brother and Cooper had died, hanged from a support that wasn't there, either. And in locked rooms.

Before she could pry any words from her fright, another man arrived.

"Hello, Doc," he said. "I been looking all over for you. They told me at the airline desk that you were here."

Doc introduced the newcomer. "This is Ham Brooks, one of our associates. He flew the plane that took us to intercept you, Gail. Then he brought the plane back."

Ham Brooks was, Gail's first thought ran, ridiculously dapper. He was decked out, of all things, in a morning outfit—striped trousers, dark swag coat and fawn lap-over vest. Like a diplomat for a formal day affair.

"This," said Ham Brooks, seizing Gail's hand, "Is a pleasant surprise. You're not forty-five years old, you don't weigh two hundred pounds, and you haven't got a moustache."

"Where on earth did you get that description?" Gail gasped.

Ham Brooks indicated Monk Mayfair. "From my short and hairy-eared co-worker here, the one with the longsuffering wife and thirteen not overly bright children."

"That's a damned lie!" Monk said indignantly. "I'm not married."

"It's no bigger lie than the description you told me she gave of herself over the telephone," Ham advised.

The pair glowered at each other, and Doc Savage, looking somewhat irritated, told

Ham, "You'd better hangar the plane, and we'll meet you later downtown."

Ham told Monk something. He used the Mayan dialect that Doc and Monk had employed earlier. Monk jumped, made his hands into fists, and yelled, "That's an insult only a shyster lawyer would think up!"

Ham went out chuckling. And presently the pilot of the plane also departed, after receiving Doc's thanks for his search of the plane.

Monk, still scowling, eased over beside Mr. Morand's chair. He suddenly sent out a hand, and tipped the chair over backward. Mr. Morand, as the feeling of falling got at him unexpectedly, instinctively threw out his hands.

"Why, you deceitful little ghost-raiser!" Monk said grimly. "You've been conscious for some time!"

Mr. Morand, peering at Monk with alarm, hastily scrambled to his feet. "Don't you touch me!" he gasped. "Don't you dare!" Then he demanded wildly, "What happened to me? Where am I? I slept? Why?"

"Don't you know a fainting spell when you have one?" Monk asked him.

"Faint? No! No, never!" Mr. Morand seemed deeply frightened. "No! Not susceptible. Never faint. . . . Beset! Was beset! Inhabited!"

"So you're inhabited," Monk said. "And you're not accustomed to fainting. I supposed you're more fully accustomed to seeing little men who aren't there."

Mr. Morand jerked visibly. His cone of white hair seemed to get an inch taller. He staggered to a chair, collapsed in it, wailing. "My God! I remember! Oh! I remember!" He clamped his fingers to his cheeks, and the brown leather fingers drew the brown leather cheeks out of shape. "You searched? Find him? Did you?" The words were as distorted as his face.

"What do you think?" Monk asked.

"Seek!" Morand gasped. "Seek everywhere! Miss nothing. Hunt thoroughly. Please!"

Monk glanced at Doc Savage, who remained expressionlessly attentive. So Monk told Morand, "Pal, we went over that plane like monkeys after a peanut. . . . And you seem to have a good idea what we found. Now we're waiting for you to tell us why."

"Tell what? I know nothing?"

"Watch out, you used three words in a row. . . . Friend, you said we wouldn't find that guy. I know you said it just as clearly as I know I saw the fellow. Now, where'd he go?"

Morand bent forward, fingers working hard at his face again. "Back," he wailed. "Back. Evil. Evil returneth."

Monk glanced at Doc again, and suggested, "I don't think he's wound up enough. I think a good arm-twisting might wind him up so that more words would come out at a time. And maybe some truth."

Morand straightened. "Truth? You wish it? Really?"

"We hanker. Strongly," Monk said.

"You'll be terrified."

"Not any more than you're going to be if you don't pop," Monk advised him.

Mr. Morand registered distraught excitement. He showed it with attitudes of face, body, with poundings of his fists on the chair armrests. "Terrible ordeal. You'll see. Won't like it. Disbelieve, probably. But don't. Proveable, every word. . . . Perhaps shouldn't explain. Your minds unattuned. Skeptics. Ignorance a disaster." He stared at them, weighing, or looking as if he was weighing, their intelligence. Then he started violently, pointing at Doc. "Doc Savage! You! Why, certainly! Oh my God! How wonderful! How excellent! Perfect!"

And now the words poured out of Mr. Morand. Gail, her eyes on Doc Savage, listened to the leathery white-haired Morand begin building a story that started out innocently and gradually developed into a bloodcurdling and fantastic a thing as she had heard.

Mr. Morand's narrative was generally this: He had, from childhood, been interested in demonology. He was using the word demonology, Mr. Morand explained, in its obvious sense—the study of demons, spirits, ghosts and spiritualistc phenomena. His early quest led him to study in a religious seminary, a university noted for its psychology courses, and another known for its historical curricula—he gave in each case names of the schools, and dates, saying these could be checked.

It was Morand's theory, formed early, that there must be something behind the idea of ghosts and evil spirits. The thing that had convinced him of this, more than anything else, was the fact that all tribes and races

had such tales and beliefs. The feeling about ghosts was as prevalent as the feeling about religion, if not more so. Mr. Morand was not a believer in God as a spiritual force taught in the Biblical sense. He said frankly that he could never remember having believed in the regular God. But he did believe there was a scientific explanation for both God and ghosts, and since the subject had a fascination for him, he had spent his life so far in pursuit of the theme.

The things he had learned in years of work, he said, had led him to become a graduate chemical engineer, then an electrical engineer. He gave the names of the schools where they could check him on this.

Here Monk Mayfair got on the telephone and placed long-distance calls to some of the universities which were being mentioned.

Science could explain and duplicate anything and everything, said Mr. Morand, and if they didn't believe this themselves now, they would find out he was right, although they might have to live a few hundred years to learn it. Science was an infant. It hadn't even solved a simple thing like gravity to anybody's satisfaction, and as for the psychiatrists and their understanding of the human mind, they were blind kids stumbling in a dark forest.

A little knowledge could be a dangerous thing. This was the theme Morand now began developing. . . . He wasn't going to tell them how he had discovered what evil spirits were. That was what he had discovered. The existence, substance, composition and plasma of evil spirits. And he wasn't going to disclose his lines of research nor methods, because as a man of science, he was entitled to the fruit of his effort. He wasn't a philanthropist. He was a practical scientist, and going to reap the reward of labor, even if the reward was only prestige.

Evil spirits. He wanted to emphasize that. Because there were no good spirits. There were legends of good fairies and good spirits, but they were just that, legends and pap, mental oatmeal which silly writers of fairy tales had concocted for the multitude. There were only evil spirits.

The fact that there was nothing but evil spirits had an explanation too.

The explanation waited while Monk Mayfair asked some questions into the telephone. He was speaking to one of the schools which Mr. Morand had attended. Monk looked somewhat surprised with the answer he got over the telephone.

"He really went to those schools—or the one I just talked to, anyway," Monk said. "Set a scholastic record, too."

"Truth. Every word. Truth," said Mr. Morand sharply.

"Yeah," Monk said skeptically. "I want to be around when you start proving it."

"Indeed? You were."

"Huh?"

"Man in plane. Non-existent. You saw."

Monk slammed the telephone down. "By golly, I'm getting filled up on this!" he yelled.

Doc Savage, who had hardly spoken—Gail had gathered by now that Doc preferred to learn by watching the effect the impulsive and blunt-mannered Monk had on others—Doc now suggested that Mr. Morand's story was interesting, and should be heard through.

So Morand continued. All spirits are evil. This was entirely logical, because of the factors that accounted for their existence. These factors, he wanted them to understand, had nothing to do with heaven, hell, nor religion. None of this was connected with any religion in any way.

It was, however, connected with the construction of human beings, and in the following way: People when they were born were equipped with a body, or the immature makings that would develop into a body. They were also equipped with less tangible things which can be lumped under the general heading of character—in other words, they had things in them that would cause them to be good people or bad people, regardless of environment. Environment was a factor, all right, because a kid who had crooks for a father and mother was rather apt to develop into a crook himself or herself, and nobody would be fool enough to deny that. But this was artificial. It was some carpentering that was done on character by environment, and just a misleading factor when one approached the whole matter of why some persons were evil and some weren't.

The answer to evil was one of the intangibles. Evil was something that the growing mind absorbed the way plants absorb the effects of sunlight. Where was it absorbed

from? Well, that was what Mr. Morand had discovered after about thirty years of study and applied concentration—evil was abroad in the world just as much as sunlight is abroad. Or darkness, rather. Because it would simplify things to regard evil as the night, and the other nicer abstract mental qualities as the sunshine.

Now, if this was beginning to sound like spiritualism or religion, don't be misled. It was a fact, a scientific one, that Mr. Morand had learned. He even believed that evil and good had different times for assailing the growing human being, the way there is daylight and night-time. He had unearthed some proof of this, but it was not too definite.

Better give this whole character-essence a name, said Mr. Morand. Call it *penetralia mentis,* which was a Latin term for the soul, and would do as good as any for a name. They ranged from good to indifferent to evil. There were varieties of *penetralia mentis* just as there were varieties of germs, some harmless, some beneficial, and some pretty bad. These existed. If they didn't seem real—or if this whole story sounded cock-and-bull—it was because people didn't know they were there, just as for numerous centuries no one knew atoms were there. Anyway, there were *penetralia mentis* that were good, or at least nothing to worry about. But there were *penetralia mentis awfuls,* also. These last were giving the trouble.

It was most unfortunate—and it had happened by accident, really—that Mr. Morand's research had centered on the *penetralia mentis awfuls.* Because he had discovered how to bring one of them out of his disembodied environment for clinical research.

Didn't they see how wonderful it would be to convert one of these things from a tangible to an intangible for laboratory examination? Well, that was what Mr. Morand had thought. So that was what, after years of work, he had managed to do. He had fixed it up so the *penetralia mentis awful,* the one he had chosen for research, could manifest itself without needing a body to do so.

Mr. Morand was afraid, horribly afraid, that the *penetralia mentis awful* had escaped and was rampant.

They mustn't underrate the frightfulness of this! The thing wasn't just evil afoot. It was evil without any restraining goodness whatever, and therefore it was pure evil, evil such as the world had never known. Because *penetralia mentis awfuls* in human beings had always been restrained and tempered by the fact that the human being had some other *penetralia mentis* who were good, and they fought the bad one.

To put it in a nutshell, a *thing* of pure evil was loose in the world. In the world of concrete things as we understand it, that is.

Now did they comprehend?

Monk Mayfair finally said, "Personally, I think I've just listened to fifteen minutes of the damndest lying I ever heard."

Mr. Morand had woven a spell with his story, and Monk's blunt skepticism didn't entirely disperse it. Gail was quite affected. She felt completely creepy. She had been thinking of her brother's weird death, of Cooper's apparently equally strange demise, and the disappearance—the impossible vanishing—of the man who had tried to kill her. This, and Mr. Morand's odd short-worded eloquence, had her wondering what to believe.

Gail glanced appealing to Doc Savage. He hadn't changed expression. And somehow she was shocked when he spoke to Monk Mayfair.

"We'll take him down to headquarters," Doc said. "And let him put that yarn up against a lie detector and truth serum."

Gail started, a little stunned by the practicality of this.

Mr. Morand surprised them all. "Good. Willing. Perfectly agreeable."

"Well I'll be daggoned," Monk said.

Mr. Morand sniffed. "Mr. Savage eminent. Scientist. This matter terrible. Humanity threatened. Needs competence. Savage can cope."

Shaking his head, Monk said, "There's bound to be a catch in this. Got to be. But we'll give you plenty of chance to coöperate, boy."

Mr. Morand glanced around nervously. "Careful. Must be watchful. Utter evil. You understand? Utter. Unpredictable."

"Oh, you think this runaway spook will try something?"

"Not spook. Has nothing to do with spiritualism. Nothing! Absolutely!"

Gail shuddered. "Mr. Morand, you think my brother saw this creature on the radar scope screen?"

The cone of white hair bobbed affirmation. Radio microwave-lengths were one of the methods he'd been using to observe *penetralia mentis.*

"Oh, holy cow!" Monk complained. "I don't believe a single word of—"

Gail was pointing. She was trying to scream also, but was getting out very little breath, so that the only noise she was making was similar to a hard yawn.

There were two desks in the room, and what was happening around the smaller one not far from the door was a full and effective climax for Mr. Morand's lengthy story. The air around and above the desk was turning an iceberg shade of blue, and this was darkening to purple of a progressively deepening shade that approached black, and for all practical purposes of visibility, was black.

Doc Savage moved toward the desk. Then changed his mind, and stopped.

"Gas, probably," he said.

Then he went to the window, picking up a chair as he did so, and threw open the ventilating portion of the metal sash. He glanced out and down, seemed satisfied they could depart by that route, and noted that the hinged part of the window did not give room for quick exit, and used the chair to knock a larger opening into the window.

Doc was being completely practical, Gail realized later. And, under the circumstances, he thought very quietly and directly.

But at the moment Gail fell victim of the most complete sort of supernatural terror. The earlier death of her brother and Cooper, the attempt on her life, and the whole affair followed by Mr. Morand's story, had set her up for blind fear of the unknown. She didn't scream. She couldn't. She was still trying.

Monk Mayfair began throwing articles at the desk. He threw a chair, a typewriter, a paperweight, three books. Which seemed pointless, because there was no evidence the purplish mass—vapor, if it was that; a new kind of evil spirit manifestation, if it was that—was coming from the desk. It wasn't, apparently, emanating from anywhere. It was just materializing in the air. And it was going to fill the room. Fill it blindingly, completely.

Gail felt herself seized. Doc Savage had laid hold of her, lifting her, and carrying her toward the window and safety. But hysteria took her now; she couldn't accept any fact other than terror, not the fact that Savage had her and he was her friend, not anything. The screams came now, great ones like strips being torn from canvas, one following the other, and she could not stop them.

Half the office was full of purple now. It was spreading with fabulous speed, a great unbelievable outpouring that was without sense nor explanation, and as purple-black in its core as ink.

It enveloped Mr. Morand. He had just stood. His mouth was wide, teeth showing; his hands were up at shoulder level, palms-out, the fingers bent back as if weights pressed against them.

Monk Mayfair started for Mr. Morand just as the purple enveloped him. Then Monk changed his mind. Monk looked scared. Possibly the only time, Gail learned later, that Monk had ever looked scared. And, as he confessed afterward, he was twice as frightened as he could possibly have looked.

Now Doc Savage had Gail outside. This was a second-floor office, the brickwork was sheer, the concrete sidewalk below suggested broken legs, and Gail felt herself swung into space. She still screamed. She was helpless to aid herself. They were dropping. It was an incredible jump downward, not less than twenty feet, but Doc Savage landed without too much jar, and kept Gail in his arms, an accomplishment that a professional acrobat no doubt would have considered adequate. Gail, looking back on it, rated it impossible.

Monk landed beside them. Loudly, not as gracefully. And he staggered about weirdly, trying to walk without the formality of letting his stinging feet touch the sidewalk.

"Morand?" Doc demanded.

"The thing ate him," Monk said.

"Watch this window."

Monk promptly sat down to get his weight off his feet, and put his eyes on the window.

Doc Savage told Gail, "Get hold of yourself. If you can walk, you had better do that." He planted her on her feet, then dragged her with him, running to the right, then through the door, and up a long flight of stairs. They were stared at, shouted at, and people ran with them. The screaming and window-breaking had stirred up excitement.

It was farther to the corridor door of the office they had vacated so hastily than Gail had thought, but they got there. She had

stopped screaming now; she had no breath for it anyway; from being hauled along by Doc.

She heard him tell someone, “Keep away from that door. There may be poison gas in there!”

She saw him produce from his clothing somewhere a small notebook which seemed to have variously colored pages and assorted-colored sections on these pages. She watched him tear out different colors and shove them into the crack at the bottom of the door, then pick them out again and inspect them.

It dawned on her finally that he was making chemical tests for poisonous vapor, and that the slips he was using must be some variation of the old-time litmus-paper used for testing for acids and alkalis.

She did notice that he kept each slip carefully, and that he seemed not unduly upset, with not, certainly, the air of a man who was dealing with a manifestation of rampant evil.

Doc tried the door. It seemed to be locked. He drew back, lifted a foot, and brought the foot and his weight behind it against the door slightly above the lock. The door popped open, the lock torn from the wood, and the interior of the office was clearly visible.

Clearly visible. The purplish substance was gone. There was no visible trace of it. Gone. And Mr. Morand was gone also.

Chapter VII

THE office had only one door and that had been locked, Gail thought blankly. *Locked inside.*

Doc Savage went to the window, thrust his head out and called down, “Monk, anyone come out this way?”

Gail heard Monk yell, “Not a soul, and I mean soul. Also spirit, spook, *penetralia mentis,* or what have you.”

“The door was locked.”

“So what?” Monk wasn’t impressed. “The key was on the inside. I noticed it.”

“It was locked on the inside.”

“And Mr. Morand was no longer present.”

That got complete silence from Monk.

Doc asked, “Where did the purplish stuff go? Did it drift out of the window and away?”

“Not much of it,” Monk said foolishly. “There was a little, some tendrils kind of, that swirled around the broken place in the window. I wouldn’t say any actually drifted out.”

“There was none in the room when I came back in,” Doc said dryly.

Monk didn’t have any word for a while. When he did, he sounded as if a few stitches were beginning to pull.

“Right now, I’d buy almost anything anybody had to sell,” he complained. “Including dematerialization.”

The confusion around the place died down, largely because Doc Savage and Monk Mayfair offered no true explanations. Doc gave none at all. Monk said it was nothing, they had just seen a mouse and they didn’t like a mouse, was all.

When he had cleared the office, Doc Savage made a few additional chemical tests, using a lot of devices from a small portable case that seemed to be practically a chemical laboratory in a handbag. Gail watched his face curiously. But no one could have told whether he found anything of further interest.

“You should have something to eat, and get some sleep, Miss Adams,” Doc told her.

Gail shuddered. “I couldn’t sleep! Never! Not after all these weird things have happened.”

Doc didn’t insist. He told Monk, “I’ll be gone a few minutes. You keep an eye on Miss Adams in the meantime.”

“Sure will!” Monk clearly had a great deal of enthusiasm for keeping an eye on Miss Adams. “You’ve got good nerves,” he said. “You’re holding up fine.”

“Yes, specially when you remember the performance I gave while being handed out the window a while ago,” Gail said bitterly. “I didn’t even do a good job of screaming. I sounded like a cricket that a chicken had just swallowed.”

“I didn’t exactly sing myself,” Monk confessed. “Whew! It must’ve been fifty feet from that window to the ground. I think I flattened my feet permanently.”

“What do you think the purple stuff was?”

"Nothing that I cared particularly about seeing. Have you any suggestions?"

"How," Gail asked, shivering, "did it make Mr. Morand disappear?"

"Considering that story he had told us, I bet he wasn't surprised," Monk guessed.

"You don't really know what to think, do you?"

"That's it exactly," Monk told her. "I've got some ideas, but they seem to go with strait jackets and the water treatment. I'm avoiding them."

Monk's information wasn't enlightening, but he had a sort of belligerent grin on his homely face that was reassuring. Gail felt better, without knowing why she should.

"Somehow, I have confidence in Doc Savage," she said. "Although he hasn't done anything too spectacular so far. Except jump from the window with me. That was an amazing physical feat."

"The competition in the spectacular has been pretty lively, but give Doc time," Monk told her confidently. "He's a slow starter. In the last act, just before the curtain goes down, is where you get your money's worth from Doc."

"He's really as phenomenal as Mr. Tremaine said he was?"

"Tremaine? . . . Oh, the ex-boy-friend who told you about Doc some time ago. . . . Well, Tremaine probably didn't exaggerate."

Gail swung over to the window, to stand and try to grasp more of this new relief. She needed it badly. Being a self-sufficient sort, she wasn't accustomed to tying to someone else for mental security. But suddenly she felt quite glad that she did have someone as competent as Savage for an anchor in this storm of the gory and the unbelievable.

The sun had floated high by now. There were hard solid steel-like clouds in the sky, and the sun rimed them with chill light. Out of the clouds, or out of somewhere, came the hard shotting pellets of snow, and Gail listened to them, wind-driven, making a myriad of knitting sounds against the glass.

The unloading ramp was below here, and she watched a plane come in from the runway in use. She noticed that it belonged to the same airline she had ridden, and remembered that it wasn't too large a line and operated only that one southern route. So she surmised that it would be the plane that followed on schedule after the one she had taken.

She had a twinge of feeling about the plane. It symbolized, for a moment, the Southland that she'd left a few hours ago. She thought of her brother, and had to take very tight hold of her composure. She looked down at the plane, thinking how infrequently tragedy really touched human beings, and wondering if by chance it carried anyone who had come all the way from her home town to New York. . . .

Monk Mayfair was nibbling a fingernail and wondering just what variety of snide trick he could pull on Ham Brooks, the dapper attorney. He had carried on a not too bloodthirsty—at times—feud with Ham Brooks for a long while, and frequently suspected himself of getting the worst end of it. This spooky stuff, this abracadabra about the essence of evil getting out of the box where the devil kept it—to embellish Mr. Morand's story a little—should offer something in the way of an evener-upper with Ham.

Monk had progressed to thinking about his ignominious leap from the window, and wishing Ham had leaped instead of himself, and he had been there to see it, when Gail filled the room with a pure shrill shriek. Monk jumped. He felt that he rose up in the air and remained there a time.

Gail pointed frantically.

"There! Getting out of the plane!" she cried. "I know that man!"

Monk regained a posture on the floor, and jumped to her side. "What's that?"

"There," said Gail. "The average-sized man who is wearing the blue business suit. You see him? Just passing that cart piled with baggage!"

"I see him," Monk said. "Now what about him?"

"I know him."

Monk ran a hand through his hair, as if tempted to yank some out. "I don't see his horns yet. Or do you whoop like that about all the men you know?"

"But it's Mr. Gibble!"

"Oh. . . . Mr. Gibble?" Monk hadn't hooked it up yet.

"Mr. Gibble," Gail told him sharply, "is employed at the station where my brother worked. He's working on radar also. He has been there several weeks, I understand. . . .

But I don't understand why he has rushed to New York?"

"I don't either," Monk said with an enlightened air. "But it's something we can use to open a conversation. Let's go down and accost Mr. Gibble."

They arrived breathless at the main floor and sprinted into the large waiting-room of the terminal. Mr. Gibble gave them a bad moment by doing a too obvious thing—he was standing gaping at the big replica of the globe that formed part of the decorative motif of the terminal lobby—and presently they discovered him.

"Is this guy the solid sort?" Monk asked as they made for Gibble. "Or do you think we can stampede him with a little brisk footwork at the beginning?"

"I don't know him well," Gail said. "That's not his fault, though."

"He's tried, has he?"

Gail nodded. "Every time. I'm afraid it did him no good. Somehow he always reminded me of one of those big gold-colored caterpillars crawling on my hand."

"I can understand his trying." Monk was examining Gibble as they drew near. "He does have kind of a fuzzy golden look at that. That's English cloth and first-line tailoring in that suit he's wearing. Three hundred bucks worth of suit. On him, it looks tired."

Monk's suit looked tired also, and they always did, but his acquaintance with fine garb and what it cost was acquired from Ham Brooks, and hence first-rate. It, possibly didn't occur to Gail to be surprised, because she was staring at Gibble.

"Hello, there, Mr. Gibble!" Gail called.

Gibble jumped. He seemed to feel as Monk had felt a few moments ago, as if he had risen in the air and wasn't coming down.

He did come down, and hit running. The take-off was preposterous in its abruptness. His feet on the tile floor briskly imitated a barber doing a hard job of whetting a razor, then he was going. He was off.

Monk, already applying steam, had the same trouble with the smooth floor and his feet. Monk's greater bulk gave him an increased inertia, so he had even more trouble than Gibble. And, once under way, Monk's running style, of the loose-legged floppity-hop school, computed poorly with Gibble's long skating glide.

When he saw Gibble was gaining, Monk began yelling. His howling, the whacking of his feet on the floor, stirred a commotion. It also opened a wide path for Gibble, who flew out through the door. Not the door to the street and taxicabs and sidewalk, but the other door through which Gibble had lately come. The one to the loading ramp. There he vanished.

Monk reached the door a moment later, dived through, and squared off to resume the chase. His smallish eyes hunted vainly for Gibble, and presently he said, "Oh my God, not another *penetralia mentis* visit!" He spoke from the heart.

Gail arrived. "Which way did he go?"

Monk yelled the same question at an airport employee who was going past rolling a plane tire along the ground with one hand. "Which way'd the guy in the blue suit go?"

"Yonder," said the man, pointing casually.

Yonder implied a succession of baggage trucks, mail dollies, gangplanks and other equipment into which Gibble could have dodged. And clearly had, Monk hoped.

"Gibble!" he yelled. "You're just making it worse!"

Gibble did not appear. Monk began searching, but with no immediate success. He called to Gail. "He's around here somewhere. You go back in the terminal and yell for a cop—and oh, oh!" He had spied Gibble.

The footrace that followed chastened Monk somewhat. Because Gibble outran him. There was no question about it; Gibble was faster on his feet.

"He got away!" Gail gasped, catching up with Monk.

"I'm not unhappy anyway," Monk told her. "I was beginning to think he'd done one of those dematerializations on us."

They did not give up the hunt for Gibble. They spent almost fifteen minutes at it. Monk was telling Gail that Gibble had probably gotten a cab without their noticing, when Doc Savage joined them with different information.

"Your quarry," Doc said, "took a plane."

"Huh?"

"He went south," Doc added. "The plane that just took off a few moments ago."

"Huh?" Monk repeated.

Gail said, "Mr. Gibble is always saying 'huh?' I could get a distaste for that word."

Doc added further, “It’s all right. Ham Brooks went along.”

“How,” Gail demanded, “did you know about Mr. Gibble?”

“You created quite a commotion, chasing him out of the waiting room,” Doc explained. “It was noticed. I asked questions, and got several descriptions of Gibble which, put together, fitted the earlier one you had furnished. About that time, Gibble came to the ticket-counter in a hurry and bought a ticket back home. Ham bought one also, and took the same plane. Gibble didn’t seem to know Ham by sight, fortunately.”

Gail didn’t think much of the move. “But why did you let him escape?”

“The answer to this,” Doc said, “seems to lie back at the place where it started. And Gibble has hardly escaped. Ham Brooks will shadow him.”

“Another thing I dislike is an indirect way of doing things,” Gail announced grimly. “Gibble obviously is involved. It seems to me the thing to do would have been grab him and extract the truth.”

Doc let this pass. He asked, “Monk, will you need anything in the way of baggage for a trip south? If not, we can get going immediately?”

Monk said he couldn’t think of anything.

“Then we’ll leave now. We’ll shake together something in the way of breakfast on the plane then Miss Adams can sleep.”

Gail seemed stunned. “What about Mr. Morand?”

“Morand isn’t with us,” Doc reminded her. “He left in a cloud of blue smoke, for parts unknown.”

Gail shuddered. “I don’t think that’s a bit funny.”

Doc said it wasn’t intended to be. Monk, who knew Doc quite well, gathered that the bronze man was pleased about developments. He saw no cause for satisfaction himself. He couldn’t imagine a more thoroughly inexplicable mess.

The plane was in a hangar at the other end of the field, and enroute there in a taxi, Doc gave another piece of information.

He said, “Ham checked with the airline on Morand’s plane reservation up here from the south. The airlines keep a fairly good record of those things, you know. There was an odd point about the reservation.”

“Nothing could look odd to me now,” Monk said. “What was it?”

“Morand made the plane reservation nearly two weeks ago.”

A gasp of surprise came from Gail. “Then Morand wasn’t on the plane deliberately to follow me!”

“Apparently not,” Doc said. “No, I think it was a coincidence that you took the same plane. Probably a plan was working, a plan that had been laid some time back. And your taking the plane looked like an upset. Possibly that was why the attempt was made to kill you.”

“You mean someone thought I knew more than I did?”

“Perhaps.”

“I’m confused,” Gail said.

“You’re not without company,” Monk assured her.

Chapter VIII

THEY passed—Gail was perfectly willing to take Monk’s word for this—the airliner bearing Gibble some four or five hundred miles out of New York City. Gail did not see the airliner. She had not seen anything except brilliant eye-hurting sunlight since New York had dropped behind them with a kind of banshee moan. Monk was tinkering with the radio, eavesdropping on the airline frequency, and he collected the information about the location of Gibble’s plane.

After that, Gail found the flight dreadfully monotonous. Dreadful, because she couldn’t sleep, and couldn’t think, either, with any degree of sanity about the mystery.

This plane frightened her somewhat also. She’d read of jet ships, seen pictures of them, seen them in the newsreels. She’d never had a desire to ride in one of them, particularly at the neighborhood of five hundred miles an hour. They were also, she’d learned, above thirty thousand feet. She was having ghastly thoughts about what could happen if something went wrong. If the pressurized cabin popped open, they’d probably explode like popcorn. Certainly they’d freeze, or perish from lack of oxygen, before reaching a lower level. She’d read an article somewhere about the perils of high-altitude

jet flights at near the speed of sound. She was plain scared.

In an astonishingly short time, less than a third the interval required for the New York trip, they were dropping down toward a cluster of tiny mottled colors by the sea. Her town. New York had looked small. This was tiny. Doc brought the ship into the traffic pattern, contacted the control tower, and presently they were on the runway. To avoid too much interest in the unusual ship, Doc avoided the administration building, taxied to a hangar on the opposite side of the field, and arranged immediately for hangarage.

To get the ship out of sight seemed to be his immediate idea. And Gail understood why when mechanics and pilots at the hangar clustered about, peering into the cockpit, discussing the powerplant, numerous other unique features the ship seemed to have.

Doc tried using an assumed name, discovered he was known by sight, and devoted some time to getting promises that it wouldn't be advertised that he was in town. The newspapers particularly, weren't to know.

"Now I see what it's like to be a celebrity," Gail said thoughtfully.

Doc said, "Monk, you're less conspicuous. So you stay at the field, and lend Ham a hand if he needs one. We don't want to lose Gibble."

Monk seemed not particularly enthusiastic about the job. "If that shyster lawyer insults me again," he said, "I'm not gonna stand still for it. I've finally decided to take him apart."

When she was in a cab with Doc Savage, riding into town, Gail suggested, "Mr. Mayfair and Mr. Brooks don't seem to get along well, do they?"

"They've been threatening each other for years," Doc said. "But it's a big fake. I don't recall their having used a civil word to or about each other, but each one has risked his neck to help the other on numerous occasions."

"Then they actually are friends?"

"Marvelously so. There is no snide trick so low that one wouldn't pull it on the other. They spend all their spare time thinking up terrible things for one another."

Arriving home, Gail discovered Doc Savage was going to be a source of considerable comfort. She had been appalled, for instance, at making arrangements for her brother's funeral and burial while in her present state of mind. Doc took charge of that gloomy task and, she supposed, examined her brother's body in the process. But he was subdued about it, and could have been an old family friend taking over at a time of need.

Spencer arrived to offer sympathy and assistance. He'd been trying to telephone Gail, and was quite worried.

"Gail, I knew you were going to see the wire chief, Cooper," Spencer said. "When I heard Cooper was dead, and had died the same odd way as your brother, I was plenty upset."

Gail introduced Doc Savage. Spencer's jaw dropped.

"Good Lord, not really!" he blurted. "There was an engineer here, Tremaine, who talked an arm off us about you."

"Tremaine seems to have oversold me," Doc said. "Nice chap, though. He worked with an associate of mine, Long Tom Roberts, in some advanced radar experiments during the war."

"Yeah, he was a swell guy," Spencer agreed. "He's in South America now, isn't he? Been down there several weeks laying out blind landing systems for an airline."

"That's right. About this Cooper fellow, whom Gail found strangled when she went to see if he'd taken the films that had monitored the scope her brother was watching—what about him? Honest?"

Spencer hesitated, glancing at Gail. Then he said, "Honest as far as I know."

Neighbors were dropping in, offering their sympathies. Doc instructed Gail to remain with someone, preferably three or four people, for self-protection, and she promised. Then he told Spencer, "If you have time, let's run over to Cooper's place and take a look around."

When they were enroute, Doc remarked, "You seemed a little dubious of Cooper's honesty a minute ago. Or was I wrong?"

Spencer hesitated. "As a matter of fact, I think Cooper was entirely honest. Perhaps too honest."

"Then why did you seem uncertain."

"Dammit, I wish you hadn't brought this up."

"It might be important, and I'd like to know."

Spencer grimaced. "Well, the reason I hesitated, it occurred to me that Cooper was probably a lot stronger character than Dan Adams."

"You distrusted Gail's brother?"

"Don't get me wrong. I think Gail's a great kid."

"We're discussing her brother."

"That's right. . . . I would call the brother weak. Not nearly the sort of person Gail is. Gail always took care of Dan. I imagine she steered him away from a lot of scrapes."

Seeing that Spencer was uncomfortable, Doc told him, "Gail said the same thing about her brother. You think his weakness could have some bearing on what happened to him?"

"My God, I don't know. I don't even know what happened to him?"

"You don't seem to think he committed suicide."

"Well, he wasn't the neurotic type you expect to do a thing like that. *And there wasn't anything there he could have hung himself from.* That I don't get."

And Cooper was straight."

"Absolutely. A fanatic on honesty."

"And," said Doc, "you're imagining he might have been killed because of that?"

"That's good mind-reading," Spencer admitted. "But I haven't a thing to base it on."

They reached Cooper's home, found no policeman there, were admitted by a janitor, and Spencer watched Doc Savage go over the place painstakingly. The police, Spencer thought, would have done well to examine the place this thoroughly. But he couldn't see that Doc found anything.

Doc learned the apartments were equipped with an incinerator—a chimney affair with iron doors accessible from each hallway. He inspected the interior, felt of the bricks inside for heat, remarked, "This doesn't seem to have been used lately. Maybe we'd better take a look."

He went downstairs, discovered the incinerator proper was a large furnace affair in the basement, and that it hadn't been fired up recently from the bottom, and contained a considerable amount of refuse. The top, however, bore evidence of a small fire which hadn't ignited the whole contents. Doc dug around in this.

He showed Spencer some long strings of crinkled ashes.

"Motion picture film," he said.

Spencer started. "Gail was coming here to ask Cooper what happened to the film recording of the scope her brother was watching when he was seized with terror."

"The film was ignited, tossed down the incinerator chute, and started a small fire which burned out." Doc gave some more attention to the litter. "People have steaks for evening dinner, usually. There are steak bones dumped just under the ashes. Here are two breakfast-food cartons that were on top. That sets the time as after the dinner-hour last night. Let's see if we can narrow it down. Here's a paper wrapping from a piece of undertaker's equipment, probably tossed there by the mortician who came for Cooper's body. That sets the time of the film burning as between the dinner hour and the discovery of the body."

Doc visited each of the three apartments in the building, asking the same question: "Had they noticed an odor of burning celluloid, picture film, last evening. If so, approximately what time?"

One tenant had been at a movie, but the other two had noticed. The time was given as nine o'clock by one, and eight-forty by the other.

The time of Cooper's death had been set by the medical examiner as eight-thirty.

"Let's say the film was burned about the time of Cooper's death," Doc said dryly.

Gail was upset when they returned. She said, "Mr. Mayfair called. He and Mr. Brooks are very anxious to have you join them."

Spencer excused himself, explaining that he had another date with the girl-friend. When he had gone, Doc asked Gail, "Where are they?"

Gail gave him an address. "It's in the better part of the city, where the fine homes are."

"They have Gibble cornered?"

"Yes, I gathered so," Gail said. "But what is Mr. Gibble doing in that part of town? Only the wealthier people live there."

"Want to come along and find out?"

"Yes, I'd like to."

"And you had better," Doc advised. "I'm not sure whether your life is still in danger, but it could be."

They drove for twenty minutes and came into a section of magnificent homes set far back from the boulevard and surrounded by expanses of landscaping that obviously required the services of many gardeners.

Gail remarked wonderingly, "You seem to know the city. You haven't asked a question about the route, nor taken a wrong turn."

"Had a look at a map of the city before I came down here," Doc explained. "That will be the address yonder." He slowed the car—they were driving the one that had belonged to Gail's brother—and a squarish figure came ambling from the shadows.

It was Monk. He pointed. "That's the jernt. Right good-sized place, too."

"Know who lives there?" Doc asked Gail.

She shook her head. "It's the Dan Camper mansion. He's the oil magnate who died a couple of years ago. But I don't know who has it now."

"I inquired into that," Monk said. "He owns it."

"Who?"

"Gibble."

"Oh, no!" Gail exclaimed. "That can't be! Gibble is only a minor employee at the Station. His salary wasn't as large as Dan's, and Dan barely made enough to make ends meet. . . . Why, Gibble wouldn't have enough left of his salary to hire even one gardener for that great palace of a place!"

"Nevertheless," said Monk, "Gibble lives there."

"I can't believe it."

Monk shrugged, explaining, "I thought it a little odd, too. So I ask some questions around. And whatcha know! This Gibble has been masquerading as a poor working man. He's been working at the radar research job on a salary that must've seemed like peanuts to him. Know who Gibble is? He's Anthony Wandrei Gibble, who invented and developed a cracking process that revolutionized the oil industry. The guy has more dollars than I have wishes."

They were silent for a while.

"It should be an interesting visit," Doc said, and moved toward the mansion.

Chapter IX

HE was probably the only butler in the state. The only one in a livery, anyway. That was Gail's thought and, startled, she whispered it to Doc Savage.

"The master isn't in to callers," said the butler in the best comic opera tradition.

"That isn't exactly unexpected news," Monk told him. "The master is indisposed, is he?"

"Mr. Gibble," said the lackey stiffly, "is occupied."

"We'll divert him, then," Monk suddenly had a fistful of the butler's livery, jerked the man's face close to his own, scowled fiercely, and added, "We could start the diversion right here, if you're a mind."

Gail wasn't exactly sure what happened then. There were several sounds—swishes, grunts, impacts—put rather closely together. All at once, in fact. She saw Monk's feet in the air. He seemed to be standing on his head beside the servant. But then the blur cleared, and Monk was partly kneeling and partly sitting on the butler, but looking a little uncertain as to just how this had happened. "Where'd he go?" Monk asked blankly.

"You have him," Doc said. "Or vice-versa."

"Oh!" Monk arose hastily. He'd had enough of the butler, at close range anyway. He told the latter, "Buddy, the last guy that done that to me was four Japs."

The servant arose and dusted himself. He was red-faced, looked considerably less butlerish. "You did all right," he said.

"Did I?" Monk eyed him dubiously. "Well, we still want to talk to Gibble. So do we have another workout, or do we see Gibble?"

The butler was feeling of various of his joints. "Mr. Gibble can throw you out himself," he said. "Personally, I would as soon tie into a tiger."

"Same here," Monk assured him, and they walked into the mansion. "Where'll we find the master?"

The servant pointed, and they walked in that direction. Gibble had company. Two men. They, like Gibble, wore three-hundred dollar suits, and unlike Gibble they would have been as distinguished in coveralls. Par-

ticularly if one read the financial news frequently.

They found out now what made Gibble want to run. Miss Adams. He saw her, made a kind of strangled sound, and left the room with remarkable speed. . . . To be brought back in a few seconds later by Ham Brooks, who'd been watching the back door.

"He's impulsive," Ham said. "And not slow on his feet, either."

Gibble stared at Ham in astonishment. "You! You were a passenger on the plane coming back!"

Ham admitted it, and added, "I was right on your heels all the way out here, too." He nodded at the other two gentlemen. "These fellows came in the back door some time later, evidently after you had telephoned them. Aren't they a bit out of character, sneaking in back doors."

Gibble looked a little ill. "You know them?"

"I know this one." Ham pointed out the taller of the two. "I could use one of his railroads, or a few of his oil refineries, as who couldn't."

The man under discussion, a J. C. Ziff by name, said wryly to Ham, "And if I ever hired you for a lawyer, you'd probably have one before you got through."

"Oh, you know me, too?"

"That's right, Mr. Brooks. . . . This is Sam Munroe. He has a few more oil refineries than I have."

Sam Munroe, who looked cranky and was perspiring, didn't acknowledge the introduction.

Doc Savage moved to the center of the room. "I take it we interrupted a conference?"

The man named Sam Munroe grunted. He looked at Gibble. "Is this Doc Savage?" he demanded.

"Yes, I think so," Gibble said. "At least he resembles the description. A man named Tremaine, who was at the Station some weeks ago, talked incessantly of Doc Savage, and he had some snapshots of Savage which he would insist on showing to anyone willing to look. The fellow in the pictures seemed to be this man."

"I want it more sure than that," Munroe growled.

J. C. Ziff said, "Rest your horse, Sam. This is Doc Savage. One of the most extraordinary people you'll ever meet, I've no doubt." Ziff paused, chuckled without much humor, and added, "More interesting, it's sure, than all the ghosts."

"The ghosts have been damned interesting," Ziff said.

"I'll stack Savage up against them."

"Even against Morand's spook?"

"Yes. Morand's spook included."

Doc Savage had listened patiently, but now he lifted a hand, arresting attention with the gesture. "Gentleman, we came here to get a few facts," he said. "Let's come to the point at once. Are we going to get them?"

No one spoke for a while. Gibble mopped perspiration from his forehead. Then J. C. Ziff, who seemed to be the spokesman, got to his feet, pocketed his hands and looked levelly at Savage.

"I think you're the man we want," he announced. "In fact, if I had known what was going to develop, I would have suggested we hire you—you don't work for money, do you? So I'll re-phrase that—get you interested in our unusual avocation some time ago."

"An avocation," Doc said, not taking his eyes from the man's face, "is not a man's principal business, but a sideline, a hobby."

"That's right."

"And you think your avocation would interest me?"

"It already has," J. C. Ziff said unhappily. "At least, you're now poking into the mess it has become."

Doc moved a hand impatiently, said, "Let's find a beginning and start there. What is this avocation?"

J. C. Ziff hesitated, glanced at Gibble and Munroe, and said, "I'd better vote my partners on this. We sort of work one for all and all for one." He waited for Doc's nod, then the three of them got in a corner and nodded and shook their heads and mumbled words. They all nodded at the end, and took chairs again, and J. C. Ziff said, "We appointed Gibble spokesman. Go to it, Gibble."

Gibble cleared his throat, "Mr. Savage, we'd like your assurances—"

Doc was already shaking his head. "No promises. Let's not start that. You tell a straight story, and we'll go from there, and the chips won't fall on any innocent parties."

Gibble sighed. "First, we three men"—he indicated Munroe, Ziff, himself—"developed a friendship years ago. It sprang out of our mutual associations with the petro-

leum industry. We also developed a common interest—research into the supernatural. I won't bore you with the details of our research activities. I'll just say that we've concluded there is nothing to the so-called mediums, spiritualists, ghost-raisers and their ilk. It's a lot of bunk. They're fakers and phonies who either prey on the public for money, or do a great deal of harm to the mental tranquility of their friends and the people with whom they come in contact. So we've opposed them."

Ziff said, curtly, "Gibble's trying to say we formed a society to debunk mediums and spiritualists."

"Let Gibble tell it," Doc commanded. "He started the story."

Gibble explained, "It's like Ziff says. For several years, we've debunked commercial spiritualism. We've put up large rewards for anybody who can produce a genuine spirit, and hired experts to expose the trickery involved."

Munroe said, "We've had a lot of fun out of it."

"Let Gibble talk," Doc said sharply.

"Well, that's the story," Gibble explained. "Our hobby is exposing phony mediums and spirit-workers. We've spent a lot of money on it. And got value in return."

"And that's all?" Doc demanded.

"Yes."

"Oh, no, it isn't. There's quite a bit more," Doc told them coolly. "There's Gibble pretending to be a worker at the radar Station, two impossible hangings, and an attempt on Miss Adams' life, plus Morand, some wild stories, and wilder incidents."

Gibble seemed surprised. "I was going to come to that."

"Do it, then. You said you'd finished. Let's not finish until we come to the end."

J. C. Ziff grinned uncomfortably. "You're a direct fellow, Savage."

"Gibble is doing the talking, Ziff."

Gibble renewed his recital. "More than a year ago, a man named Morand applied to our association for funds for research into the spiritual world."

Doc said, "Let's be specific with dates. When did Morand apply?"

"Last January 18, about noon," Gibble said.

"All right. How did he apply?"

"In person. Morand talked to Mr. Munroe. Munroe thought he was a crackpot, but was nonetheless impressed enough to call a meeting at which a séance was arranged. Only Morand insisted it wasn't a séance, but a scientific demonstration. Well, we brought some scientists ourselves—and our professional ghost-debunkers. We have two magicians on our staff who are experts."

"Morand was going to produce a spook for you?"

"Yes. That is, he was going to prove scientifically that there was a kind of reservoir of evil in existence and that it was from this reservoir that the evil spirits entered the mentality of men and women—if that makes sense to you. It didn't to us. Not then. Since, we've wondered."

Doc examined the three men in turn. "I take it you all attended this debunking party you held for Morand."

"That's exactly what it started out to be. And we did," Gibble said. He fell silent. He shuddered. He added, "But this time, the outcome was different."

"You mean that you've always debunked spirit-raisers in these séances?"

"Before that time, always."

"This time you didn't?"

"Well—not exactly."

"Morand got the best of you and your experts?"

J. C. Ziff jumped up from his chair and yelled, "By damn, I wish we knew the answer to that ourselves. Morand sure as hell made it look as if he had something."

"Sit down," Doc said sharply.

Gibble was nodding his head. "As Mr. Ziff says, we were left guessing. Here's what happened: I had a dog, a pet, a large Great Dane, a very gentle and faithful animal which I prized highly. This dog was killed in our very midst, murdered, strangled, mutilated horribly. *And there was no way anyone could have entered the room and committed the awful deed."*

"What killed the dog?"

"Well—one of Morand's evils—if you believe Morand."

"And you believed Morand?"

"He was very convincing. Also very apologetic. He said the thing had gotten free for a few moments. He seemed frightened about it."

"An act?"

"If so, a good one."

"What did your experts say, your ghost-lawyers. The magicians, for example?"

"They were flabbergasted," Gibble said. "Of course, later, they formed various acceptable theories to account for it. And they did duplicate it afterward, without of course, murdering another dog."

"Then what happened?"

"We let well-enough alone for a few months. Washed our hands of it."

"You didn't finance Morand's work?"

"No. We felt we had been foxed. . . . Frankly, we were afraid to have anything to do with it."

"And then?"

Gibble looked uncomfortable. "Morand came to us again," he explained. "He seemed terrified. He said that he feared that, in his experiments, he'd opened up a way the evils could escape by themselves and wreak their will on humanity. He wanted us to finance him while he stopped the leak."

"You didn't?"

"Naturally not."

"What did you do?"

"Well, we started a careful investigation. I, for instance, took an anonymous job at the Station in order to make observations."

"What observations, and why the Station?"

"Morand had said that the evils could, and would, become visible in radar scopes. He said that was the way he'd been observing them. And his experiments were being conducted here in this city, and he said he feared the evils would assault the radar scope operators."

Gail gasped, and clamped her hands to her cheeks. Monk moved to her side hurriedly, and laid a comforting and reassuring hand on her arm. Ham scowled at Monk for this.

Doc said to Gibble, "All right, you've been observing. What has it got you?"

Gibble flushed. "Nothing."

"Nothing at all."

"No."

"Why," Doc asked, "did you go to New York?"

"To meet Morand. You see, he has demanded money. Not a request this time—a demand. Morand claims that it was his demonstration before us that gave the evils a chance to escape their environment. So it's our fault, and Morand demands we finance his efforts to stop the evils."

Doc asked, "Finance him to what extent?"

"A hundred thousand dollars."

"That's quite a bit of financing," Doc said dryly.

"So we thought."

"But you went to New York. Why didn't you just talk it over with Morand here?"

Gibble flapped his hands hastily. "Oh, you don't understand, Mr. Savage. . . . Morand doesn't know we are here watching. We've been secretive. He thinks we are in New York, where we have our headquarters. Morand wired us to meet him for an appointment in New York today, and I flew to keep the appointment."

Doc nodded. "You didn't stay long in New York."

Gibble, becoming somewhat pale, said, "I had better explain why I fled so hastily when I saw Miss Adams, Mr. Savage."

"Yes, you had better explain that, Gibble," Doc said coldly.

"Well, I was terrified. There had been two murders. I'm merely a man whose hobby is ghost-laying, and so are Mr. Munroe and Mr. Ziff. I was horrified by the murders, and greatly upset at the idea of being connected with them. I knew, the instant I saw Miss Adams there in New York, that there would be explaining to do. And this fellow"—he pointed at Monk—"didn't establish my confidence a bit when he rushed at me. So I fled."

"And came back here at once by plane?" Doc suggested.

"Yes. To confer with my friends here. I wished their advice on what to do."

"And their advice is?"

Gibble looked at his two associates. He muttered, "I don't know. We hadn't had our conference."

J. C. Ziff scowled at Doc Savage. "Can I say a word now?"

"Go ahead," Doc said, nodding.

"This is conference enough for me," Ziff announced. "I say toss it into Doc Savage's lap. Make it his baby." He eyed Munroe. "What about it, Sam? Hand the baby to Doc Savage? How does that strike you?"

"Sure, hand it to him," Munroe said hastily. "God knows, I don't want the ugly thing in my lap."

Doc Savage's hand went up arrestingly. "Now wait a minute. I'm not in the habit of letting anyone hand me anything. They are perfectly welcome to hold it out for inspection, and then I decide whether I'm interested."

"You're interested in this," Munroe pointed out. "You're already mixed up in it."

"Not," Doc said curtly, "with the idea of helping you fellows."

"Oh now, wait a minute—"

"Don't," Doc said, "start pushing. You fellows are wealthy men, and accustomed to shoving folks around with your money. But don't shove on me."

J. C. Ziff grimaced, and said, "Well, suppose the three of us just pack up bag and baggage and clear out?"

"Suppose that gets you in jail?" Doc inquired. "I can predict it will. As material witnesses attempting to flee. Perhaps as collaborators with Morand in this thing. Maybe the collaboration was unwitting, but you'll have to prove it was."

Munroe, the short-tempered one, swore violently. Gibble lost more color, and hurriedly poured himself a drink from a bottle he removed from a cabinet. But J. C. Ziff looked at Doc Savage thoughtfully, and asked in a more reasonable manner, "Let's put it this way: We've held this thing out for your inspection. We've told you all we know, and can and will fill in details—but they'll add nothing. Now, are you interested? We'd like your help and we need it. We want this thing solved, the murderers caught, and the straight of this *penetralia mentis,* as Morand called his evils, learned." Munroe ended with the air of a man who had delivered a convincing argument.

"Very persuasive," Doc said. "I'll meet you half-way. I'll take this thing off your hands. But it will cost you."

"How much?" said Munroe cautiously.

J. C. Ziff complained, "But you don't work for fees! That's what I've heard, anyway."

"Twenty thousand dollars," Doc told Munroe. "And you give the sum to a cancer research foundation. Any foundation you name, providing I approve it."

Munroe conferred with his two associates. Then wanted to know the answer to a question. "But what is the idea of soaking us such a big fee?"

"You three have been spending your money on a completely worthless cause—ghost-laying," Doc told them. "You haven't done much, probably, except get this mess stirred up. So it's not out of order for you to donate to a needy cause for a change."

They put their heads together again, and came up with, "All right, Savage. It's a deal."

J. C. Ziff complained loudly a moment later, "Dammit! It strikes me we just made a deal to donate twenty thousand to get Savage to do something he was already doing."

"That," Doc said, "is about it. Good evening, gentlemen."

Chapter X

HE was a big man with a lonely face, and both these features were extreme. Actually, he was near seven feet and actually he could have been attending a perpetual funeral. He dressed well, but had used his clothes hard. He had dark sad eyes and good teeth—you couldn't tell which were the ones that had been knocked out in the past. His sadness had a permanent quality, ingrained, malingering, if one was to believe his appearance. The latter was a little deceitful. He looked saddest when best pleased with what the world was doing to him, or the other way around.

He had stood behind the hotel room door when Doc came in. Now he closed the door, and looked down at the table-lamp in his hand. Just the heavy iron stem and base of the lamp. It turned a handspring in his palm, and looked small there, not because it was a small lamp, but because his hand was big out of all proportion even to a man nearly seven feet from the floor and made of gristle and ox bones.

"Holy cow!" he complained. "Wondered if you'd ever show up."

Things in the room seemed to shake a little when his voice went rumbling past.

Besides having size, unnatural fists, that voice, and a sadness you couldn't believe, he was: One of the men rated highest in the world as a civil engineer. A Doc Savage aide. Named Colonel John Renwick. And called Renny.

"You could have used pocket radio," Doc. said.

"Afraid to," Renny said.

Doc looked as if he believed this, although feeling that Renny was afraid of nothing.

"Why?"

"Those guys do a little with U.H.F. wavelengths themselves," Renny explained. "They got a pretty good lab. I had a peek at it. I know a couple of magicians who would like to have it."

Doc looked at Renny sharply. "That's what it is?"

"Uh-huh."

"You're sure? Nothing there for genuine research into the supernatural, so-called?"

Renny laughed. Out of his sourly sad countenance, the mirth was preposterous. "You haven't been believing any of that stuff?"

Doc shook his head. "They've put on some life-like demonstrations, is all."

"Sure. They got the tools to make the equipment to do it with, and the know-how."

Doc said, "Suppose you rough in the whole story of your part?"

Renny nodded. "I'll make it short and sweet. I saw the deal that made Morand vanish in the air terminal in New York—and slick doings that, too. . . . Well, after that, they didn't stick around. They were afraid of you, I guess. Anyway, they hauled their freight out of there and to the other airport, where they got a plane to Washington, and changed to another airliner bound here."

"With you trailing them?"

"Just like a spirit." Renny grinned. "No trouble. They didn't even come close to noticing me."

"And when you got here?"

"They holed up pronto. Lit out for the laboratory or workshop or whatever you call it where they have been making this stuff they've used."

"What was the purpose of that?"

"A conference."

"At which they discussed?"

"You, mostly," Renny explained. "They know what they're up against now, those babies. They're not dumb, and they haven't any scruples. . . . It was to keep the girl from reaching you that they tried to murder her on the plane. But that didn't work, and you're in it, and they're sweating ice-water."

"You picked up a lot."

"I planted a microphone in their joint, and listened."

"Oh. That's great going, Renny. . . . Any idea why they killed the girl's brother?"

"I got that."

"What."

"The kid was a weak character. They didn't trust him to keep his lip buttoned."

Doc shook his head regretfully. "So he was working for them. . . . I won't enjoy telling his sister that. She's all right, the sister is."

"Well, the brother was probably just weak," Renny said. "They'd hired him to put on the act at the radar scope. Act scared. Act as if he'd seen a devil in the scope. Go to a church for safety."

"And the idea of that?"

"To sell Gibble the notion that there was really a *penetralia mentis,* as Morand called it, loose and raising cain."

"Young Dan Adams put the act across rather well, I gathered."

Renny nodded. "And then they knocked him off. Did it so as to enhance their scheme's effectiveness. . . . That was a vicious thing. But they didn't dare trust young Adams. He'd already spilled something of the plan to a friend."

"Dan had talked to the wire-chief, Cooper?" Doc demanded.

"That's the one. Cooper. And Cooper had tried to argue Dan out of staging his act. Cooper was going to throw a monkey-wrench in the works."

"They should have bought Cooper."

"I think they tried it," Renny said. "And Cooper wouldn't buy. Cooper was upset. He thought a lot of the radar station and the work they were doing there, and he didn't want it dirtied up with crooked horseplay. Anyway, Cooper cut the moving-picture camera monitor in on the scope Dan was going to pull his trick with, and he got the dope on Dan—proof Dan hadn't seen anything in the scope. Cooper took the film home with him for safekeeping. But I think they got it and burned it, when they killed Cooper."

"Yes, they burned it."

"They're rough, those guys. They're meaner than these *penetralia mentis* they've cooked up with imagination and some clever gadgeteering."

"And you have them spotted?" Doc asked grimly.

"Nailed down."

Doc strode to an assortment of metal equipment cases—he'd brought these along from New York in the plane, and had them delivered from the airport to this room which he'd reserved in advance, last night, by phone—and got out what stuff he thought he'd need. His metallic features were set in flat planes of anger and determination. He said, "We'd better take those fellows at once. They're too vicious to take chances with. And we have the general picture now."

"That's what I think," Renny agreed. "Of course, we haven't anything but circumstantial evidence against them, which isn't good."

Doc said coldly, "The lie detector and truth serum will loosen them up. We'll work on them ourselves, and be sure we have the goods on them before we turn them over to the police."

"Monk and Ham might come in handy."

Doc said, "I sent them out to keep an eye on Miss Adams. We'll pick them up."

They left the room, and there was a man with a dufflebag in the hall. The dufflebag was canvas and to be fastened with a zipper, but the zipper wasn't closed, so that both his hands went in easily. He showed them what the bag contained, said, "You know what this is?"

The man said, "Benny!"

From down the hall, the fire-escape door, two more men came into view. They were similarly armed with submachine guns and one of them was the man who had tried to kill Gail Adams on the New York bound plane. He seemed to be Benny.

Benny said, "We thought of all kinds of trick methods of grabbing you guys." He waggled his weapon nervously. "We finally decided to be direct about it."

The other man who was with Benny did not come close. He remained well back.

Benny told Doc, "We hear somewhere you got a trick gas with no color and smell that knocks 'em out quick." He swung his jaw at the fellow farther away. "You try to use it on us, he'll cut you down."

"What do you want?" Doc asked.

"Your company," Benny said. "You're going to walk down the stairs and out the side door. And be nice, will you."

Chapter XI

THEY could see the sea from where they sat. Through a window, with waves endless to the horizon in a calm pattern like pale blue corduroy cloth, and with the evening sun upon it so that here and there reflection cast a lance of enfeebled sunlight.

Renny was doing most of his looking at the ceiling. "What gets me is that I must have been cocky. Careless."

There were sand dunes nearer at hand, here and there a tuft of salt grass standing like tough whiskers on an old man's sand-yellow face. The house—it was three bedrooms, living-room, kitchen—stood among the dunes. To reach it, they had traveled the last half mile of a lonely road on which the two automobiles had had some trouble with soft going.

Renny groaned. "Holy cow! I guess I wasn't careless, and they outfoxed me. That hurts me worse."

Doc listened to the man outside the window strike a match. Cigarette smoke drifted past the window a moment later. He knew another guard was outside the door. He glanced at Renny.

"We must be funny-looking, sitting here in our underwear," he said gloomily.

"They don't seem amused."

"I'm not either."

"Neither am I. . . . I wonder what the hell they're waiting for? . . . Well, we'll find out, I guess. While we're waiting for it, why don't you brief me on a couple of points I haven't picked up yet?"

Doc leaned back, seemingly well composed, and inquired, "For instance?"

Renny said: "The general picture was this: Three rich men playing at ghost-smashing for a hobby. Morand decided to sucker them out of a reward they'd offered for a genuine 'spirit.' Morand put on his show for them, and they wouldn't pay off. That it?"

Doc nodded. "That seems to be the way it started."

"Then what developed?"

"Morand," Doc explained, "didn't give up. He concluded to try again, more elaborately. He hired Dan Adams to put on a show of having seen a *penetralia mentis* in the radar scope. That got a hitch in it when Cooper found out, so both Dan Adams and Cooper

were killed. But Dan Adams' sister took it up from there, and she came to New York to see me. They tried to kill her enroute."

"How'd they work it on the plane?" Renny asked.

"It was a good act," Doc said grimly. "I had the pilot search the plane. That was after the stewardess had said that she hadn't seen Miss Adams' assailant pass her to get to the rear of the plane—the only place he could have gone."

Renny frowned. "Had the stewardess bought, did they?"

Doc nodded. "She lied, all right. So did the pilot—when he searched the plane. The stewardess had removed some sheet-metal screws and let the fellow into the back of the plane, then replaced the panel. The pilot released the fellow later—it was that man Benny—and then came to the terminal and lied to me, saying he hadn't found the man."

"How'd you catch all that?"

"Ham. . . . Ham watched the pilot free the man."

"The dickens he did! But wait! How'd you know you should have Ham watch the pilot?"

"That one," Doc explained, "goes back a bit further to when we intercepted the plane on which Miss Adams was a passenger. We saw Morand talk to the pilot and stewardess and hand them money. Quite a bit of money. Too much to be involved in any honest deal."

"And Ham reported he'd seen the pilot free the guy who hid in the plane?"

"Yes. In the terminal office. He used Mayan. And I told him, also in Mayan, to have you watch Morand in case he tried to get away from us—which he did."

Renny glanced uneasily at the door, rubbed his jaw, wondered bitterly what the delay was about, and shrugged violently. He said to Doc, "I heard the business of Morand vanishing from the room at the airport was pretty good."

"Not bad," Doc admitted. "They used colored smoke—the pilot had planted a time-bomb of it when he came into the office to spin us his lie. The same kind of colored smoke that was developed during the war for marking purposes. . . . But Monk and I thought it might contain poison gas also. So we got Miss Adams out of the window, and jumped ourselves. Not a very graceful performance."

"But smart."

"We thought so then. But I took litmus-paper tests of the vapor when I came around through the building to the door, and learned it was just colored smoke—the kind, incidentally, that dissolves in a hurry. You remember the type? They used it for putting a quick mark on terrain, for brief observation purposes."

"Yeah, I've seen the stuff used," Renny agreed. "But it must have been pretty weird, hooked up with a locked room and Morand vanished."

"It was, if you didn't know it was trickery."

Renny glowered at the door. "Holy cow! I can't sit around any longer." He jumped to his feet, a lean hardwood giant of a man with corded muscles. "I'm going to start an argument, anyway. They're figuring up some kind of dirty work and—"

The door swung open then, and Morand came in flanked by an armed man. The latter stepped sidewise to keep Doc and Renny covered.

"Hello, Morand," Doc said coldly. "Didn't the spooks get you?"

"Listened." Morand whipped a brief gesture at the door. "Interesting. You've surmised. Good job, too. You're enlightened."

"You think so?"

"Also nearly dead."

Doc Savage took, deliberate, a deep breath, and blew it out with manifest gusto. "I haven't," he pointed out, "felt more healthy in some time."

"Temporary. Very temporary."

"I doubt it," Doc said levelly. He caught Morand's eye and held it with a hypnotic steadiness, then demanded, "Would you like to bet that I won't be alive and healthy when you're doing a very brief little dance on air? Or do they use the gas chamber in this state?"

The attempt to unnerve Morand didn't get far. He did scowl, but advised, "Wasting time. Can't frighten me more."

"You don't," Doc said, "look like a man composed and full of confidence."

"Not. Didn't say so. Already frightened. Couldn't be more. Complete impossibility."

Renny Renwick snorted at this and asked, "What would scare you, pal?"

"Mr. Savage. Great shock to me. Throughout."

"That's a logical answer," Renny told him. "I thought maybe it was your *penetralia mentis."*

"Very facetious."

"I don't feel facetious," Renny said.

"Good. Can you make you less so, imagine. Rise. Look out window. Not toward sea. Other."

Renny did so, and Doc was beside him. This window was small, faced away from the sea upon the rutted lane through the sand dunes and—they got a sickening shock—a car that was being unloaded in back of the bungalow. The cargo of the car—Monk, Ham and Gail Adams.

"Successful catch," Morand said coldly behind them.

Doc Savage wheeled. "You can't get away with wholesale murder, my friend. That's what you're planning, isn't it?"

"Exactly."

"Holy cow!" Renny rumbled, and looked more than a little sick.

Doc looked at Morand woodenly, "All five of us?"

"Correct." Morand didn't nod, hardly moved his lips when he spoke. Doc read a kind of glazed fright in the man, but got no assurance from it, because the fear was what was driving Morand. He listened to the man, using the short-worded statements that were so exasperatingly monotonous, added, "Gibble, Munroe, Ziff. They disbelieve. Not fully, though. Can be persuaded yet. Five murders. Same mysterious circumstances. Should be convincing. Don't you think?"

Doc thought of Ziff, Munroe and Gibble, wealthy men who had stirred this thing up with their tinkering with ghost-raisers. He decided, and kept it off his face, that Morand was right and further mystery, if it was inexplicable enough—and Morand could see that it was, Doc didn't doubt—might sell the trio on the reality of the *penetralia mentis,* so-called. Doc wished, with some bitter hindsight, that he'd given Gibble, Munroe and Ziff a full explanation of how the trickery had been worked. But be hadn't. He'd been, he supposed, guilty of some mumbo-jumbo himself.

Presently Gail Adams was pushed into the room, and Monk and Ham were shoved in after her. None of them wore the clothing they'd worn when Doc last saw them. Gail wore a house dress, and Monk and Ham were in their shorts and two of unfortunate Dan Adams' bathrobes. Not only had they been disarmed, but their clothing had been taken for fear they contained some of the gadgets for which Doc Savage was noted.

"Doc," Monk said gloomily, "I was never so thoroughly suckered in my life." He grimaced and explained, "One of them walked in on us pretending to deliver a telegram. One of the oldest gags there is. And I fell for it."

"Oh, shut up!" Ham Brooks told him curtly. "I'm the guy who let the telegraph messenger in the house. I'm the one to be kicked."

"I'll make a note of that," Monk said.

Morand seemed bothered by their apparent unconcern. One of the men who had brought them—there were four of these guards—scowled and said, "That's the way they been acting. You'd think nobody was playing for keeps."

"Disturbing," Morand muttered. "Unnatural. Completely." Then he wheeled, left the room, and was back shortly with a collection of apparatus in a handbag. "Listen carefully," he told his men. "But watch the prisoners, also."

Now Morand began giving instructions. Doc Savage, listening, had some trouble keeping fright off his own features. Morand was outlining a simple, direct plan for wholesale murder.

They were to be killed in a group. Morand had the spot picked. Gibble's big home. He had the room selected also, a large chamber on the second floor with one door and windows that could be locked securely on the inside. He'd had the room in mind for some time, evidently, and was familiar with each detail.

The affair was to be another locked room and hanging-from-nothing matter.

The door locked was all right. It locked with a key, and since it was not a spring lock, there would be no question of the police reaching an easy conclusion that the door had simply been slammed behind someone.

He produced the contraption they were to use to lock the door. Doc saw that it was ingenious—a lever arrangement of very thin metal which clipped to the doorknob and operated by tugging on piano-wire leads. Yanking one lead caused the levers to turn the key and lock the door. Yanking another wire

freed the thing from the doorknob and it would drop to the floor, where it could be pulled through the crack—a crack as narrow as an eighth of an inch—at the bottom of the door.

Gail Adams made a whimpering sound now. "My brother—this is the way—" She closed her eyes tightly. Monk started to go to her, stopped when one of the men cocked a gun noisily.

Doc told Morand coldly, "You've used that trinket for a long time, probably. . . . Spooks could lock themselves in rooms very conveniently with it."

"True," Morand said. "Convenient. Convincing also. Yes, used it before. Put on few little shows. . . . Nothing like this will be, though."

"I can imagine."

Morand ended on a little pep-talk for his assistants. There was a great deal of money to be milked from Gibble, Munroe and Ziff—more than the initial fifty thousand he was after. Once they made one payment, they would make others. Once sold, they could be kept sold. Finding five bodies mysteriously dead in Gibble's house would sell them if anything would.

The slaughter, Morand pointed out, was necessary anyway. Dan Adams and Cooper had upset the plan, and Doc Savage had learned too much, and Doc's friends knew as much as Doc, so self-protection demanded their deaths. The matter could be arranged so as to bring Gibble, Munroe and Ziff to terms. That was convenient, and necessary. Morand examined his men hopefully. They saw how simple it was, didn't they? They understood it was necessary.

Renny Renwick stared at Doc. Renny was now a shade of pastel green. "The guy's off his trolley!" Renny blurted.

Doc nodded, reflecting that it was obvious. Morand was probably sane enough. But his preoccupation with the supernatural over the years indicated a trend of mind that had led him to this sort of thing. Sane? Well, maybe not exactly. But it was more a combination of neuroticism and criminality.

Doc moved. He went to Morand, went very fast, so that the man had hardly lifted his hand before Doc had him, was behind him. Doc swung behind Morand, arms around the man, wrenching Morand close. Then Doc's back was against the wall, and he gripped Morand as a shield.

There was no chance whatever of reaching the door. There were two guards there anyway; their guns already on Doc, or on the part of him that was not covered by Morand, which was considerable.

There had been some stirring when Doc moved. It settled now. And silence held a moment, until someone's breathing broke loose with a sawing sound. Then Benny, who had earlier tried to kill Gail Adams, swung his gun up and sighted deliberately at Doc Savage's exposed shoulder.

"Hold still, boss," Benny said coldly. "I can smash his shoulder."

Morand yelled—with difficulty because of the tightness with which Doc held him—at his men, at all of them as much as Benny, "No! Wait! Not yet! Not instantly!"

Doc said grimly, "They're excited, Morand. One or more of them is sure to miss me and get you."

"No!" Morand's voice had a wild sound. "This is preposterous. You haven't a chance. Why are you doing this?"

Doc said, "Give me a better idea, and I'll try that." His hands moved a little, changing their position on Morand, and then he seemed to discover that he could hold Morand against his chest with one hand, and he did that.

"You have no chance. Utterly none."

"Wouldn't appear so," Doc agreed.

"Then why—"

"If you think," Doc said, "we're going to meekly follow instructions to be slaughtered, you have another guess coming."

Morand made a whining sound of distress. He seemed surprised that they should feel inclined to alter his plans. He said, as if it was a good argument, "But there'll be such a bloody mess here!"

"Perhaps."

"And it will gain you nothing," Morand insisted. "I'll think of a way. Use you. Even with bullets in you. I'll contrive somehow."

"It won't be as easy."

Doc glanced over Morand's shoulder and noted the generally foolish expressions on the watching faces. The situation seemed senseless to them. It looked, no doubt, like nothing but a choice of suicide.

Now Doc spoke in Mayan. Very briefly. Two or three guttural and half-musical

sounds, and it was probably mistaken by Morand's men for some sound of fright that Doc could not help making. Benny thought so, and laughed.

Silence fell. A short one. Twenty seconds or so, and then Benny went down on the floor. He gave the appearance of loosening at all joints, and collapsing straight down instead of falling in any particular direction.

Gail Adams went down in almost the same fashion an instant later, and she was followed by another of Morand's men.

Morand shrieked out, "Gas! My God! New York—he searched me there! He planted something in my clothing!"

Which, Doc Savage reflected unpleasantly, was as wonderful a piece of accurate conjecture under difficulties as he had ever seen. Disturbed by Morand's accuracy, he came around hard with his free fist—the one he'd use to smash the anaesthetic gas capsules in Morand's clothing—and drove Morand's jaw somewhat out of shape with the blow.

Monk, Ham, Renny, all were moving now. The short warning in Mayan had prepared them, both to hold their breathing back so the stuff wouldn't get them, and for fast action now.

There were, in all, seven men in the room in addition to Morand. With Morand, two others were on the floor. Four on their feet. The two at the door. And two others.

Doc, using as near an imitation of Morand's frightened squawl as he could manage, shouted at the pair at the door, "Gas! Run, you fools! Run!"

Monk and Ham hit the other two almost simultaneously. Renny, a little behind, struck down Monk's opponent. Monk, disappointed, always violent in a fight, yelled, "Dammit! Pick your own!"

Of the men in the door, one promptly wheeled in flight. The other stood ground, swung his gun at different targets indecisively. When he did decide to shoot it, it was Doc he chose, but too late. Doc was near enough to strike the gun aside, and he and the man went hard against the door edge. The gun turned loose an ear-splitting uproar, and continued until the mechanism jammed. After that, those who were not deafened could hear plaster falling, the hard breathing of desperation, blows, but not many cries.

Doc left his victim standing rigidly against the door casing. The man's eyes were widely open, his mouth a little loose, and the gun slid to the floor presently. But the man did not stir, did not change expression, until Renny Renwick came to him, looked at him speculatively, asked, "Holy cow, what's holding you up?" and cuffed him on the jaw. After that, he went down.

Renny went on into the living-room, was well across it when he saw Doc going down. He imagined Doc had stumbled, was falling. Then the hacking of an auto-firing gun told him differently, and he dived for the floor himself. The gun silenced.

Doc turned his head. "One is getting away. Let him go, rather than get shot."

"One left for seed?" Renny said. "That won't do." He rolled over and crawled on hands and knees back into the room where they'd made their break. He returned with a gun he'd located on the floor. Outside, there was a car engine starting, and Renny drifted, quietly for such a big man, to the door. He shot once.

Doc said, disapprovingly, "We didn't want to kill anyone."

"Didn't we?" Renny said briefly. He went outdoors, and Doc listened and heard the car engine die.

He turned and went back into the large bedroom, into the stillness there. Monk and Ham stared at him. No one else seemed to be conscious.

"It over?" Monk asked.

"Yes," Doc said. "Except for probably a long argument with the police. . . . Possibly also with Gibble, Munroe and Ziff, who probably won't want to donate that fifty thousand to a cancer fund." Doc compressed his lips suddenly. "But they will."

Monk looked around the room vaguely. "I'm confused."

"What by?"

"Where was the anaesthetic gas?"

"In Morand's pocket." Doc went over, leaned above Morand, fished in the unconscious man's suit coat pocket and brought out a rather mangled cigarette package. "In here," he explained. "Trick cigarette package. False bottom. The gas globules were in there."

"You made the plant when?"

"In New York. When we searched Morand, after the trouble on the plane. You remember that, don't you?"

"Sure. But that far ahead! Whew! That's a little foresighted, even for you, isn't it?"

"Oh, it was pretty clear that Morand was wrong, even then. I just took a chance. It was one of about a hundred little preparations we always make in advance, on the chance of making one of them pay off when we need it badly."

Monk came over and took the twisted cigarette package from Doc and stared at it.

Doc went to Gail Adams. Ham was already there, trying to test her pulse. Ham let her wrist drop, looked up, and confessed, "I'm shaking so I couldn't tell a pulse if it was a sledgehammer."

"Let's see," Doc said, and knelt beside the girl. He held her wrist for a time. "She's all right."

They both jumped then, wheeling. They stared at Monk, who lay flat on his back where he'd toppled. Dust, stirred by his collision with the floor, lifted uneasily. The smashed cigarette package, now considerably crushed, lay in Monk's right hand.

"Monk fainted!" Ham exclaimed.

"No. . . . There were five gas globules in the bottom of the cigarette packet," Doc said. "I must have crushed only four. And Monk, wadding up the package, broke the other."

Ham was grinning.

"Let's tell him he fainted," he urged. "Let the big ape talk himself out of that one."

THE END