



THE TOO-WISE OWL

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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- ? [Chapter I. THE OWL](#)
- ? [Chapter II. JASPER](#)
- ? [Chapter III. THE GALLANT MAN](#)
- ? [Chapter IV. GIRL GETS OWL](#)
- ? [Chapter V. DEATH FOR OWASSO](#)
- ? [Chapter VI. DEATH FOLLOWS THE OWL](#)
- ? [Chapter VII. DEATH IS A QUESTION](#)
- ? [Chapter VIII. BLOOD ON HIS HANDS](#)
- ? [Chapter IX. TROUBLE IS LIKE BANANAS](#)
- ? [Chapter X. BROTHER'S SECRET](#)
- ? [Chapter XI. GUILLOTINE](#)
- ? [Chapter XII. HOT TRAIL](#)
- ? [Chapter XIII. SNOW BIRD](#)
- ? [Chapter XIV. WHY THE OWL WAS WISE](#)
- ? [Chapter XV. OF THE MIND](#)
- ? [Chapter XVI. LONE WOLF](#)
- ? [Chapter XVII. NO WISE MEN](#)

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Chapter I. THE OWL

TROUBLE comes to men in strange shapes. It came to Doc Savage in the form of an owl.

It was a Tuesday afternoon. There came a knock at the door. The cold winter wind was making such a whoop and whine around the midtown skyscraper that no one heard the knock the first time. The next knock was louder. Monk Mayfair opened the door.

Monk blinked. "Well, well," he said. "A man with an owl, as I see the situation."

The man was a boy in uniform; otherwise, the statement was correct. The boy wore the uniform used by the attendants in the candy shop in the lobby downstairs. The owl wore feathers and a sleepy look. He was not a large owl. He was a rather fat one. He was brown, inclined to red. The owl's ears were rather long.

Monk winked solemnly at the owl. "Hoot mon, what's the idea?" he asked.

Monk had a small squeaky voice that might have belonged to an individual just above diaper age.

"It ain't funny," said the boy in uniform. "It ain't funny, at all."

Monk winked at the owl again. "He looks funny to me. He looks like Ham Brooks."

"He got handed to me," the boy said.

Monk thought there was something very funny about the owl. He lifted his voice. "Ham, come here quick!" he shouted. "Here's an owl that looks just like you."

Someone in the next room said something that was to the point about one of Monk's ancestors. Something about tails and trees.

The owl blinked his eyes slowly. He was a boy owl—or an old man owl—there was no doubt. He had the reversible outer toes of an owl, and he flexed these slowly. After that, he was motionless, apparently asleep with his eyes wide open.

The boy said, "Here." He took hold of one of the owl's legs. "Here's why I brought him." The boy exhibited a tag. The tag said:

For Doc Savage. URGENT!

Monk eyed the tag. "A present for Doc, eh?" He burst into laughter. "Ham, hurry out here!" he bellowed. "This owl looks exactly like you."

The boy in the uniform got impatient.

"Listen, brother," he said. "A guy handed me this bird in an awful dither. There was something wrong about the guy."

"Wrong?" Monk said.

"He ran away from there in a hurry."

"The guy who gave you the owl, you mean?"

"Yeah. The guy had a ski pole."

"Maybe he was in a hurry."

"Sure he was," said the boy. "So was the other guy who was after him—the guy who wore the diamonds and came in a Rolls-Royce."

"One guy chased the other?"

"That's it," the boy said. "And if you ask me, there will be one dead guy if they get together."

WHILE Monk's jaw was down in astonishment, a dapper man with a large mouth, good shoulders, a thin waist, seven hundred dollars' worth of clothes and an innocent-looking cane came out of the adjoining room. He asked, "Where is this owl that looks like me?"

As a matter of fact there was no resemblance between Ham Brooks and the owl that anyone except Monk Mayfair could see, then or afterward. Except that the owl did not look wise, and Ham did, which was not a resemblance.

Ham was displeased. "Day by day, you show more earmarks of a goon," he said.

Monk swallowed. "You don't get it. There's some trouble."

Ham flourished the cane. "There will be a decapitation if you don't stop saying I look like animals."

"This is a bird."

"All right! A bird is equally as offensive."

The boy who had brought the owl was becoming desperate.

"A guy rushes up," he said, "and jams this chicken in a candy jar. The guy has a ski pole. He turns and runs. Another guy races after him. This other guy is a million bucks on legs."

Ham frowned and indicated the boy. "Friend of yours?" he asked Monk.

The boy said, "I ain't friends of either of you guys, if you ask me. All I do up here is deliver the owl, like it says on the tag."

Ham examined the tag. "This says the owl is for Doc."

The boy nodded violently. "Now, you're getting places. Doc Savage. Where is he? This his place?"

"Is this his place?" Ham looked startled. "You must be a stranger in these parts."

"I work downstairs," the boy snapped. "I haven't been there long. Say, do I stand here and argue, or do I see Mr. Savage?"

Monk and Ham gave the matter thought. Doc Savage was a democratic fellow, but he was also at work on an important manuscript of scientific data. A matter of two men quarreling over an owl might not be of enough importance.

While they were thinking, the owl scratched his hooked beak in a tired fashion, wriggled the tufts that made him look as if he had long ears and settled back into silent contemplation.

Monk said, "I guess we better call Doc."

"Suppose so," Ham grumbled. Ham hated to agree with Monk.

"Hurry up, you two humorists," said the boy angrily. "My boss gives me five minutes to deliver this night chicken. You wanna get me fired?"

"It's an idea," Monk said.

DOC SAVAGE had one quality not always owned by famous men. Doc looked the part. His giant size, his-bronze hair, his regular features, bronzed a hue almost as dark as his hair, made him impressive. But the things that were startling about him were the small things. The nature of his eyes, like pools of flake gold, perpetually stirred by small currents. The amazing timbre of his voice—like thunder under control, as someone had once put it. The sinews in the backs of his hands and in his neck which hinted at the physical power he possessed.

The Man of Bronze, as the newspapers called him occasionally, was a remarkable combination of mental

ability and physical brawn, trained and directed since childhood toward the unusual occupation which he followed, the career of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers.

Doc Savage did not follow his unorthodox profession for any impractically idealistic reasons. If there were an idealist, it had been his father, who had placed him in the hands of the world's leading scientists in specialized lines for training. The idea had been to create a superb human machine for fighting the battles of the weak. The project had been a success.

Actually, no normal man is likely to be a professional Sir Galahad, unless he has good reasons. Doc Savage was normal in that respect. He had his reasons.

His reason was excitement. He liked it. The fire and crackle of danger in far places, the impact of the unexpected. He was one of those men—and they are few—who thrive on things that keep other men awake nights and give them gray hair.

He had gathered together a group of five associates—Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks were two—who shared his liking for excitement.

They had, the bronze man and his associates, made a reputation that had filtered to the far corners of the earth. They could get recognition from the authorities of any nation. Bandits in outer Mongolia, thieves in Paris, had been known suddenly to shut up shop and lie very low upon getting the mere information that Doc Savage was in the vicinity.

All of which seemed to mean nothing to the boy in uniform. He extended the owl. "Here," he said. "This chicken is for you, I guess."

Doc Savage took the owl. The bird accepted the transfer placidly, looking the bronze man over with one eye.

"The boss says," said the boy, "for you to ask your friend not to stick his owls in our candy jars no more."

"Did your boss see the man who brought the owl?" Doc asked.

"Uh-huh."

"We might talk to him, then," Doc said.

The bronze man placed the owl on a chair. The bird had become interested in Monk. He fell to watching the homely chemist with gimlet intensity.

Doc Savage went downstairs with the boy.

THE candy-shop proprietor was an advertisement for his business—rotund, pink, cherubic. He looked like a piece of his own candy. His temper, however, was a green persimmon.

"You owe me, mister," he said fiercely, "for the jar of candy in which that owl was thrust."

Doc Savage asked quietly, "What did the man look like?"

"What do I care?" the man snapped. "He looked like Abraham Lincoln. He carried a ski pole. What about the candy?"

"The man fled, I understand," Doc said.

The proprietor turned purple. "He was a crook." He reached under the counter. "I will thank you to tell your friends not to bring these around!"

He slapped a large revolver down on the showcase.

Doc indicated the gun. "Which man dropped that? Or was it dropped?"

"The man with the ski pole dropped it," snapped the proprietor. "He tried to get it out when he saw the other man. It fell from his fingers and skidded under the counter. He did not seem to think he had time to recover it. He fled."

"Thank you." Doc took the gun.

"What about the candy?" yelled the other.

An assistant manager of the building dashed up, full of apologies to Doc Savage and with a bile-filled look for the candy man. Doc Savage, as the assistant manager well knew, was probably the most important tenant in the building. He also owned the structure.

DOC SAVAGE went back to his headquarters and, in the recreation room, found Monk walking around and around the owl.

Monk pointed at the owl. "This thing's neck is on a swivel. I walk around and around him, and he keeps turning his head."

Doc Savage placed the revolver on the table.

"That owl's neck must be wound up like a rubber band in a model airplane," Monk said.

Doc examined the gun. It was good, but there was nothing to identify the man who had carried it.

Ham said, "Doc, did the man have a ski pole?"

"Apparently."

"Just one?"

"Yes."

"I wonder," Ham said, "why he had just one ski pole?"

Monk said, "Maybe he carried it for the same reason you carry that silly cane."

Ham ignored the suggestion. "The fellow was in trouble, Doc. He was coming to us. The other man, the one with the diamonds and the Rolls-Royce, intercepted him. The man with the ski pole had to flee for his life."

Doc Savage nodded slightly. "That must be what happened."

"Why the owl?" Ham asked.

The owl himself proceeded to ask that question in a way that stood their hair on end.

The revolver lay on the table. The owl flew to it, landed beside the gun. In a leisurely way, but as if he knew what he was doing, the owl turned the gun around.

"Dumb cluck," Monk said. "He thinks that gun is something to play— Hey! Look out!"

The owl clenched a claw over the hammer, squeezed and cocked the gun. Generations of forebears who had picked up their living with their claws had given the owl strength to spare in his claws. He cocked the gun without difficulty. Then he pulled the trigger.

The gun exploded with the tremendous report that guns always make in a room.

The bullet broke the glass out of the window.

The owl calmly flew out of the hole he had made, and away.

Monk made fighting-off-the-impossible movements with his hands.

He said, "That night chicken shot off that gun as if he had a *human mind!*"

Chapter II. JASPER

DOC SAVAGE jerked open a drawer and got a pair of binoculars and went to the window. He said, "Grab two portable radio outfits and get downstairs. We are going to catch that owl if we can."

Monk and Ham hastily dashed into the laboratory—the laboratory comprised most of the headquarters—and snatched up radios. The outfits were about the size of the so-called "personal" radio sets, but these were complete transmitter-receiver outfits which would function on short wave for a great distance.

The fact that chasing an owl was a silly thing to do did not occur to Monk and Ham until they were downstairs.

"If it wasn't Doc's orders," Monk said, "I would think somebody had lost his mind around here."

Ham said, "Doc sounded serious."

Monk rubbed his jaw. "That owl did act funny, at that."

The radio outfits which they were carrying said, "Go south from the main entrance of the building. When you reach the corner, advise me."

Monk and Ham hurried outside. The cold grabbed them instantly. The wind had a biting vigor and a hurried force. It seized their coat skirts and popped them against their bodies. It tried to pull the breath out of their lungs with icy fingers.

They had dashed out without their overcoats.

Monk said into his radio, "We're at the corner, Doc."

"Look up about ten stories," Doc Savage said. "There is a ledge. The owl alighted there."

Monk and Ham squinted upward. Ham leveled an arm. "That's your night chicken there, isn't it?"

Monk nodded, said, "He isn't mine," and into the radio, advised Doc, "We see him. What now?"

"Keep an eye on the bird," Doc Savage said. "After he gets cold, he may be easy to catch."

Monk asked, "Doc, why so anxious to catch the owl?"

The bronze man did not answer immediately. Instead, there was a small trilling sound from the radio, a noise that caused Monk to stare at the instrument with interest. The trilling, low and exotic, was a thing Doc Savage did without thinking, when he was mentally excited.

Finally Doc said, "There is a possibility that the owl is a key to something very important."

Monk wanted to go further into the subject, but he was prevented from doing so by a sudden gasp from his side.

Ham did not do the gasping. Their pointing upward, and the intensity with which they were watching the owl on the ledge, had stopped a crowd of curious pedestrians. The weather never seems to be too cold for a New Yorker to stop and ogle something that someone else is ogling. Already, there were at least fifty people around them, and a woman was sobbing and moaning that it was a baby up there on the ledge and that it was going to fall any minute.

The gasping was caused when the owl flew off the ledge. On spread wings, the bird came downward. Now and then, he flapped his wings. He seemed comfortable, unmindful of the cold, at home in the wind that seemed about to turn to ice.

Also, the owl had a destination. A car. The bird flew to the machine. A window was down, and a hand reached out and took the owl inside.

Monk reached the car and thrust his head inside.

Monk took a good look, said, "Blazes!"

The kid said, "What do *you* want, knob nose?"

HE was a round apple of a youth who looked as if his name should be Fritzie Katzenjammer or something like that. He was fat enough to be uncouth in a pair of skin-tight Fauntleroy pants, out of which his stockinged legs stuck like black sausages. Twelve would catch his age. More or less. But not much more or less.

"What did you call me?" Monk asked.

"Knob nose," the boy said. He examined Monk's face. "I can think of other names."

"Kid," Monk said, "you better not—"

"Kid," said the youth, "is a varied word. The word kid means a small wooden tub, an indentured white servant, a hoax, the young of such animals as the antelope, the goat, and the roe deer, if under one year old. Originated from the Scandinavian—Germanic word *kizzi*."

Monk swallowed. "Yeah?" he said.

"If you don't believe it, look it up in the dictionary, frightful face," said the shaver.

"What are you doing with that owl?" Monk asked.

The tike scowled at Monk. "None of your business, octopus countenance," he said.

Monk was an extremely homely fellow. One did not have to meet him in a very dark alley to have the eerie feeling that an ape had gotten loose. Monk was not ordinarily sensitive about his extreme, but rather pleasant, homeliness. But the fat boy was beginning to get Monk's goat.

"Gimme that owl, you little punk!" Monk growled.

He reached for the owl. The boy jerked the owl back. This disturbed the owl, who decided Monk's hand was the most suitable object for his displeasure.

There was a brief interval of howling, commotion, after which all combatants separated to take stock of themselves. Monk's hand looked as if a cat had tried to dine. Two owl feathers were floating around in the car. Ham was holding his sides with mirth. He thought it was very funny.

The boy was indignant. "What do you mean, treating Owasso that way?" he demanded.

Monk indicated the owl. "Is that Owasso?"

The boy nodded. "Owasso is a type *Bubo virginianus*, a cousin of *Bubo ignavus* which is common over Europe and Asia north of the Himalayas. The species is sometimes called the eagle owl."

"He'll be a hairless owl if he takes hold of me again," Monk said.

Something occurred to Ham and he inspected the boy thoughtfully.

"You see anything of a man with a ski pole?" Ham asked.

"Pole," said the boy, "comes from the Latin word, *polus*. Various kinds of poles are a point of a sphere, a place where a force is concentrated, the vertex of lines in that plane that belongs to a given linear complex, morphologically or physiologically differentiated areas of an axis, a point where a function complex variable becomes infinite so that the reciprocal of the function is holomorphic in the immediate neighborhood of the point— Are you listening, dog face?"

Monk indicated the boy. "Ham, how old would you take it to be?"

Ham scrutinized the boy. "Twelve," he said. "Which would be eleven years, eleven months, twenty-nine days too old."

"What do you two beans want?" asked the boy.

Monk indicated the boy again. "Ham, is it human?"

"You two make me die laughing," the boy said. "Will you get your No. 12s off the running board of this car, and let me drive on?"

"You're not old enough to drive this car," Monk advised.

Ham stepped back, stared at the car. "Hey, this is a police machine."

"Sure," said the kid.

"Where did you get it?" Ham asked. "I suppose your dad is a cop?"

"I snitched the car," said the boy. "If my old man was a cop, my old woman would have drowned him

when he was a pup."

Ham and Monk exchanged looks. "Nice spriggins," Monk said. "He steals police cars."

"I'd be able to stand him," Ham said, "if he told us something about that owl. Where did you get the owl, boy?"

"You see that man yonder?" The boy pointed. "He gave me the owl. Go ask him. Tell him little Jasper sent you."

The man indicated was an average-looking fellow, staring into a show window.

Monk and Ham walked toward him.

The car started behind them. They turned. The unusual boy was driving away. He drove recklessly, in a way to make hair stand on end.

"I got a hunch," Ham said, "that little Jasper pulled one on us."

The man the boy had pointed out told them, "Owl? I know nothing about any owl. I am a bookkeeper employed by a hat company on the sixth floor of this building. I just came down to lunch, and I have been working since early this morning without leaving my desk. I can prove it, too."

"Just let it go, brother," Monk told him. "Just forget all about it."

MONK and Ham contemplated each other unhappily. "Doc will not have any paroxysm of joy about this," Monk said. "That kid pulled us in, what I mean."

"He poured us right down a hole, all right," Ham admitted.

"Did you ever see such a kid before?" Monk asked in amazement.

"Seeing him was not half as much as hearing him," Ham said. "Did you hear that guff he rattled off about owls?"

"If the owl was his, maybe he's read up on owls."

"He had read up on the word, pole, and the word, kid, too," Ham reminded. "Some brat, little Jasper."

"He beats me," Monk admitted. "He couldn't be more than twelve years old. And he was rattling off stuff there that I never heard of. Sounded to me as if he had committed the stuff to memory out of the dictionary and the encyclopedia."

Ham was silent. He was also thoughtful. He ran his fingers over the cane he carried—it was a sword cane—abstractedly.

"Remember the owl, Monk?"

Monk eyed his clawed hand. "Heck, I'm not likely to forget that chicken."

"The owl was smart."

"He had sharp claws, too."

"I mean the way he fired that gun up in headquarters."

"Aw, shucks, that was just a trick someone had taught him. I bet it was that sassy brat's work."

Ham chuckled, and the chuckle turned into a hearty laugh.

"What's so uproariously funny?" Monk asked him.

Ham straightened out his face. "Just the idea of us standing here and discussing an owl and a kid as if it were a life-and-death matter. It's sort of wacky, don't you think?"

Monk said, "For some reason, Doc seemed excited. Do you remember Doc ever getting excited over something that was not important?"

Their radio outfits—they were carrying the gadgets under their arms—said, "Monk, Ham, go a block west and a block south." It was Doc Savage's voice. "There is some kind of commotion there."

The commotion consisted of a wrecked car—the machine the sassy boy had been driving—piled against a pole. Its caved-in radiator was steaming; its windshield lay in pieces in the snow. There were two policemen and a couple of hundred curious onlookers on the sidewalk and hanging out of windows in the neighborhood.

A man was telling one of the cops what had happened.

"A small boy was driving this car," said the man who had seen it, "when a man tried to kill him. The boy seemed to know he was in danger. He drove the car toward the subway, skidded it into that pole, jumped out and ran into the subway."

"Describe them," directed the officer.

"The man had a wooden ski pole," said the observer, and the boy had an owl."

Monk nudged Ham. "Doc was right," Monk muttered. "There is something going on. And it's not as funny as it looked to us a minute ago."

Chapter III. THE GALLANT MAN

JEFFERSON SHAIR left his apartment at four o'clock that afternoon. He was carrying his steel ski pole, his favorite pole, the mate to which he had lost in an unexpected avalanche, while he was cutting across a mountain slope on his skis in a steep schuss the week before.

Because it was only four o'clock, Jefferson Shair believed that he might be able to obtain a mate for the pole in a ski shop in the neighborhood. Previously, he had not known there was a large ski supply shop in the immediate vicinity. He had obtained the information from the telephone classified directory, something he had not thought of doing before.

He left his brownstone house in the Seventies but stopped on the steps to look around. He whistled twice and made enticing clucking noises.

"Here, Owasso," he called hopefully. "Come, Owasso! Nice owl."

There was no sign of Owasso, the owl.

On second thought, Jefferson Shair turned back to his door, rang and spoke to the dignified butler who opened the door. "Clarence, if little Jasper should return, try to confine him to the premises, will you?"

Clarence, the butler, looked as if someone was trying to feed him an apple containing a worm. "Begging pardon, sir, but that may be difficult," he said.

"No doubt it will," Jefferson Shair agreed. "But if little Jasper returns, endeavor to confine him to the premises. Keep him here."

"Could you suggest a method of doing so, sir?" asked the butler.

Jefferson Shair grimaced. "I would suggest a thorough application of an old-fashioned razor strap, if you have one."

"I have tried that, sir. It was not effective."

"Then try a stove poker on him," snapped Jefferson Shair. "Do your best, Clarence."

"Yes, sir," said Clarence.

Jefferson Shair then adjusted his hat against the cold wind, turned up his collar, tucked in his muffler, put his hands in his pockets and moved out on the street. He whistled as he walked along between the banks of shoveled snow, but his eyes were not carefree or happy. They kept roving with the unending caution of a hunted animal.

HE met the girl on the corner. She was a small, nice-looking girl in good clothing. She had brown eyes and amber hair and a nose that turned up at the end and a scared expression. It was a very scared expression.

She took hold of Jefferson Shair's well-pressed coat sleeve and said, "Please!"

Shair looked at her and said, "I beg your pardon. There must be some mistake."

"Please," the girl said. "Please walk down the street with me."

Jefferson Shair was a long and very gaunt man with some of the physical qualities of Abraham Lincoln. The fact that he was so very well groomed detracted somewhat from his Lincolnesque characteristics, but the resemblance was nevertheless marked. This made him look like the kind of a person to whom young ladies in distress would naturally appeal.

"I am sorry," said Shair, "but I never saw you before."

The girl gave his arm an imperative tug. "Please walk down the street with me," she said.

With some suspicion, Shair asked, "Will you explain why I should do that?"

"I'm in difficulty," the girl said.

Shair looked at her face. It was almost impossible to be suspicious of such a nice countenance, and he melted. He put a hand on the young lady's elbow, and they strolled down the street, bending forward against the wind that was so cold it felt solid.

"Will you explain your trouble?" Shair suggested. "Perhaps I can help."

The girl nodded. "Let us go into some place where it is warm, and I'll tell you the story."

Jefferson Shair glanced about, and selected a tea room across the street. He said, "Will that place do? I have been a patron several times, and they serve an excellent *minestrone* soup, a bowl of which would do each of us good."

"Oh, excellent," said the girl.

A moment before she entered the tea room, the girl turned and glanced back along the street. She gripped Shair's arm.

"See that man?" She pointed.

Shair got only a glimpse of the fellow, because the man seemed to realize they had noticed him and turned hastily into a doorway. Shair could tell little about the man. The individual wore a checkered Mackinaw coat. That was about all.

"I got a bare glimpse of the person," Shair admitted.

"That," said the girl, "is the man I am afraid of."

They sat in a tiny booth where there was privacy.

"My name," said the girl, "is Lola Huttig."

"My name is Jefferson Shair, Lola," Shair told her. "I am a big-game hunter. A professional hunter."

Lola's eyes widened. "My profession is not nearly as glamorous as that," she said. "I worked as a model for a company which manufactures raincoats, until a week ago, when I lost my job. Since then, I have not been able to find work." She hesitated, then touched Shair's sleeve. "I do not want you to get the idea that I am going to ask you for money."

"The thought never entered my head," Shair said gallantly.

"However, I do want help," Lola added.

"What can I do for you?"

A waitress brought them steaming *minestrone* soup in red bowls. They waited until she had gone.

"The man I showed you—" Lola Huttig said, and hesitated.

"Yes," prompted Shair.

"He's been molesting me," Lola explained. "He follows me everywhere. I think he got me fired from my modeling job. Since then, he has been a terrible nuisance."

"Why is he bothering you?" Shair asked.

Lola grimaced. "It's rather ugly. He seems to think he can terrify me into marrying him."

Shair smiled. "I thought that sort of thing went out of date with family mortgages and villains with long mustaches."

"Well, that's the way it is," Lola said distastefully. "It's awful."

"What is the man's name?"

"I don't know," Lola said. "I've never even had a date with him."

Shair chuckled again. The girl's concern seemed unnecessary to him, but she was such a little bird of a thing in distress that he felt an urge to assist her.

"What do you want me to do?" he inquired.

The girl produced a revolver. She calmly placed the pistol on the table and said, "I want you to take this and scare him."

Jefferson Shair looked at the pistol with slightly distended eyes.

"You don't scare people with those things," he said. "You kill them."

"Oh!" Lola's hand flew to her cheek. "You don't understand. The gun was my father's. He is dead. And it is loaded with blanks."

She broke open the cylinder of the gun. The way she did it showed that she had not handled firearms to any extent. She pushed the cartridges across the table to Shair. The shells obviously had no lead in them.

"See? Blanks," the girl said.

Shair nodded. "Yes, they are blanks. You wouldn't hurt anyone shooting them with these."

"It would make a big noise, wouldn't it?" Lola asked.

"Oh, yes. Almost as big a noise as a genuine cartridge."

"That," said the young woman with satisfaction, "is what I thought. You see—it is my idea to threaten the man with this and shoot at him a few times. But I lost my nerve. I am scared of guns. I . . . I couldn't pull the trigger."

Jefferson Shair chuckled comfortingly. She was indeed a helpless little thing.

Lola said, "I . . . I wonder—please, would you shoot the man with the blanks for me?"

Shair was startled. "Me?"

"Oh, yes," Lola said. She took his hand pleadingly. "You see, he would probably think you were a boy friend of mine, or even my husband, maybe. And shooting him with the blanks would scare the wits out of him, and he wouldn't bother me any more."

Right there, Jefferson Shair showed something that made him different from other men.

An ordinary man would not have accepted the strange young woman's invitation to be her defender in such an unusual fashion. But it was exactly the kind of a thing that appealed to Jefferson Shair. He was somewhat of an adventurer at heart.

"I'll do it," Shair told her. "It will be amusing."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" Lola looked as if she wanted to hug him. "You *are* a brave man, aren't you?"

"Not necessarily brave," Shair said modestly. "It just happens that I have done a few unusual things in my time."

Lola Huttig was wide-eyed with interest. "You said you were a professional hunter; didn't you, Mr. Shair?" Lola, wide-eyed with interest, was really something to make a male's heart stand up and shake itself.

Jefferson Shair showed he was entitled to a little hair on his chest by expanding warmly under the attractive young woman's obvious admiration.

"I was in Africa for a great many years," he explained. "I was what they call a white hunter in Africa. I took out parties of big-game hunters. But after the war began, I came back to America and went to my mountain lodge. There, I conduct big-game hunting parties in the fall—and, now and then, a party of ski experts. It is very rugged country around my lodge, and only expert skiers are able to work in the district. But for an expert, it is wonderful."

Lola indicated the ski pole. "You are an expert, I presume."

Shair nodded. "I ski a little."

"I think it would be wonderful," Lola told him, "to be an expert on skis."

Shair expanded even more. "I was international slalom champion, three years running, and downhill champion of Europe two times."

"Is that good?" Lola asked naively.

Shair laughed. "I'm the only man in the world who has been able to do it."

"Oh," Lola said.

She gave him another half-hour of the build-up, as sweet as molasses turning to sugar and as smooth as velvet.

JEFFERSON SHAIR then killed the man!

It was what they had wanted him to do, naturally.

It happened after they left the tea room and while they were walking down a deserted street.

The man—the man in the checkered Mackinaw which Lola had pointed out as her annoyer—stepped out of a doorway and said, "Wait a minute, dear."

Lola clutched Shair's arm and said, "Here he is again!"

Shair scowled at the man. He was warmed up to the point where he was very anxious to be a defender of womanhood, provided the sample of womanhood was as attractive as Lola Huttig.

Shair said, "Brother, what do you want?"

The man in the Mackinaw scowled. "What's it to you? Listen, you better drift along."

Shair said, "You've been annoying this girl. It's got to stop!"

Lola helped it out by taking hold of Shair's arm and saying, "Mr. Shair is my boy friend."

"That's right!" Shair snapped. "Listen, fellow, you've got to stop annoying Miss Huttig."

The man sneered, told Shair, "Better go roll your hoop, pal."

Shair bristled. "Don't tell me what to do, you chaser!"

"Yeah?" the man snarled. "Don't get tough!"

Shair was enjoying this. He liked protecting Lola. Also, he disliked this man. He detested the fellow intensely, for such short acquaintance.

Shair called the man several violent names.

At this point, a man stepped out of a car across the street and leveled a small hand motion-picture camera at the tableau. Simultaneously, another man farther up the street appeared with another movie camera. Shair did not happen to notice this.

Shair called the man some more names. He drew the pistol which the girl had shown him contained blank cartridges.

He proceeded to shoot the man in the Mackinaw coat. He shot the man six times. The man fell on his back. His mouth opened and a red flood came out. His chest convulsed, and red came out of it like small fountains.

"You've killed him!" Lola gasped.

She turned, ran, bending forward and fighting the bitterly cold wind.

Shair looked foolishly at the gun.

"Blanks," he muttered. "They weren't blanks!"

Across the street, the man with the movie camera yelled, "You murdered that man! He didn't even threaten you. You just shot him down in cold blood. I got a picture of you doing it!"

Shair's face turned slightly blue with rage.

He lifted the gun and aimed at the man with the camera and pulled the trigger twice. The hammer snapped on discharged cartridges. The man with the camera fell over backward into an areaway, screaming, "Police! Help!"

With presence of mind, Shair wiped fingerprints off the pistol. He tossed it into the snow.

"Don't think I don't see through this trick!" he bellowed in the direction of the man across the street.

Then he turned and ran away through the cold and the biting wind that chased him like an animal of ice. Shair took along his ski pole.

Chapter IV. GIRL GETS OWL

LOLA HUTTIG was crying. Sobbing as she ran. She traveled wildly with no particular destination and no special object except to get as far away from there as quickly as she could. Instinct was driving her. The instinct of self-preservation.

She knew what she had done, and the realization had brought horror that was like a black pit. To run away was the only thing she could think of.

Those blanks in the pistol—they hadn't been blanks at all. They had told her the shells were blanks when they hired her. But they hadn't been. The cartridges had been specially loaded slugs which—probably with an increased powder charge—would kill a man at close range. They had killed the man in the Mackinaw coat!

The man in the Mackinaw was another actor. At least, she supposed he was. That was what they had told her he would be. But now he was dead.

One part of what she had told Jefferson Shair had been the truth—the part about being out of work, and about losing her job modeling raincoats. The part that she had not told Shair was that she was an actress.

Lola had not told Shair how hungry she was; how badly she needed money. How, when a man approached her in a theatrical agent's office, she had been desperate enough to take this job. The man had made it sound innocent.

"It's a gag," the fellow told her. "I know it sounds screwy. But it's just a gag on this fellow Shair. A gag to win a bet. He bet a pal that chivalry was dead, and he would not fall for helping any lady in distress. Pull this off, inveigle him into shooting the blank cartridges at this other actor who is supposed to be molesting you, and you'll get fifty dollars."

Fifty dollars was a lot of money.

So now the actor was dead, back there on the sidewalk. And two men had taken movies of the killing.

Movies!

Lola stopped. The pictures! She just remembered them, actually. She had noticed the men with the cameras, but she had been too shocked to put two and two together and get an answer.

She had been an innocent victim in a frame-up for murder.

"How fantastic!" she said through clenched teeth.

She turned and went back.

SHE probably would never have found the men, except that she had a piece of luck. The pair—the two men who had taken pictures of the murder with small cameras—were conferring with a third man. They handed this third man their cameras, and the fellow drove away with the cameras in great haste.

The two men waited on the sidewalk. They stood there long enough to become very cold. They stamped and windmilled their arms, blew fogging gulps of breath on their stiffening fingers.

Eventually, another man appeared and joined the pair of photographers who had gotten rid of their cameras and the film the instruments contained.

The three spoke to each other. Then all three turned and walked to a bar.

Lola had come back to get the movie films. Now, they were gone. All she had was the license number of the car driven by the man who had taken the cameras away.

Lola had wanted the films because they showed that she was present when the murder occurred. Probably, they implicated her. She did not know. She did know that she wanted the films so that she could destroy them.

Grimly, she followed the men into the bar. She was careful about it. She took a side door, made sure the place was gloomy. She noted that a policeman was standing at the bar having a cup of coffee and decided she would be safe in case the men discovered her eavesdropping on them.

She slid into the adjacent booth without attracting attention, and proceeded to take in all she could hear.

The three were having hot Tom and Jerries to warm them up for a little job they seemed to have ahead.

"I don't like to go to Shair's apartment," one of the men said.

"Like it or not, orders are to go there," another man told him.

"The owl probably isn't there."

"The boss wants us to look and see, anyway."

"Suppose," said the uneasy member of the trio, "that Shair is there."

"He won't be."

"What makes you think not?"

"He's got sense enough not to come back. He'll figure we have put the police on his trail."

The third member of the trio, who had not previously spoken, said, "Orders are to go to Shair's place, so we'll go there. Say, that was a neat gag we pulled. I never thought the silly thing would work."

"It was crazy!" said the timid one.

"It was damned smart!" corrected the other.

"How you figure?"

"Shair," said the other, "had got it into his head to go to Doc Savage for help. We stopped him this afternoon. But he was sure to try again."

"How do you figure the murder he just got framed into pulling will stop him from seeing Savage?" demanded the timid man.

"Listen, he'll be afraid of the police, now. He'll go back to his lodge. Once he does that, we'll know where he is and how to handle him."

The second member of the trio said, "I think you got the boss' plan wrong."

"Yeah?"

"I think he wants a hold on Shair. I think that's why the boss had us take the pictures. Those films are evidence that Shair killed that fellow in cold blood. At least, that's the way it would look to any jury."

"What about the girl?"

The other grunted. "She was in the picture, wasn't she? Where will that leave her if she goes to the police? She's smart enough not to do that."

"All right, we'll forget about the girl," the other man declared.

Lola Huttig, in the adjacent booth, compressed her lips grimly.

THE butler named Clarence opened the door of Jefferson Shair's town house and said, "Good evening, gentlemen. What can I do for you?"

One of the men held out a paper and said, "Here, read this, and you'll understand why we are here."

The paper had very fine print which required all the butler's attention long enough for him to get hit over the head with a blackjack made out of a stout silk handkerchief filled with broken icicles which they had picked off a nearby ledge. The icicle blackjack had the advantage of being an instrument which could be disposed of readily. It was not something likely to be produced in court as evidence.

The wielder of the blackjack tossed the ice onto the stoop where it would melt.

"Drag the old geezer inside," he said.

This was done. They closed the door behind them.

"Now, look for Shair," said the man. "*And be careful!* Shair is a guy with iron in his system."

Two men went seeking with pistols. They were gone about five minutes, during which there was a commotion in the rear of the house. Then they returned.

"There's somebody in a back room," one of them reported. "He won't let us in."

"Shair?"

"Nah, I think it's that kid, little Jasper."

"Let him stay in there."

"That's O. K. by me," the man agreed cheerfully. "Little Jasper is something I don't need in my life."

"Find the owl, and quit trying to be funny."

"O. K.," the man said.

They hunted. They wandered through tall rooms, rich with the fine things that taste and money can acquire. There were rooms of old armor and old paintings and fine old furniture as rich and pleasant as the gold from an Egyptian pharaoh's tomb.

"No owl," one of the men said. "We've looked everywhere."

"Everywhere," said the man who had used the ice blackjack, "except that room where little Jasper is."

THEY knocked on the door of the room. The first knock, a polite one with a doubled fist, got no answer. For the next knock, they used a chair, which they broke against the door. They also fired a pistol into the door for punctuation.

They seemed to know what would get results with little Jasper.

"Go away," little Jasper advised from the other side of the door. "You're waking me up."

One of the men said confidentially to the door, "Jasper, if you don't want your head pulled off your shoulders, come out of there."

"You think I will?" Jasper asked.

"I think you better."

"You're crazy," said Jasper, "if you think I will. I know you fellows. You're Terrence. Sloppy Stone and Harry are with you."

"Come outta there, Jasper!" bellowed Terrence.

"Nothing doing," Jasper replied. "I would as soon associate with three fully primed skunks."

"Jasper," Terrence said ominously, "we may become angry with you."

"Nuts!" Jasper said. "The word nut means a goddess of the heavens, an indihescent polycarpellary one-seeded fruit, a man's head, a perforated block of metal, a part on a violin, the vertical axis of a potter's wheel, a rounded biscuit, and the act of currying favor. I am not referring to the last-mentioned meaning."

Terrence took a deep breath.

"Jasper," he asked, "is that owl in there?"

"What owl?"

"Owasso."

"Of course not," Jasper said. "Whatever gave you such an idea?"

The three men drew back from the door and looked at each other. They nodded solemnly. They knew Jasper.

"The owl is in there," one of them said. "We'll have to break down the door and get it."

Jasper apparently heard this, because he said, "You try smashing this door down, and you will be sorry. I know all about you fellows and what you are trying to pull on Jefferson Shair."

The three looked at each other uneasily.

Jasper added, "I'll tell the police the whole story. Then where will you be?"

"You don't know a damned thing, Jasper," said Terrence.

"In the jailhouse, that's where you'll be," Jasper assured him. "A nice rock jailhouse with an electric chair in it."

The man's face darkened. "Get a chair," he ordered. "A heavy one. We'll get this door. We've got to have that owl."

They bustled around and found a piece of furniture heavy enough for their project. One of them looked out the front door, and another one scrutinized the court in the rear, to make sure the coast was clear, with no policemen sufficiently in the neighborhood to hear the racket of breaking down a door.

The man who looked out of the rear nearly discovered Lola Huttig. Nothing but a stroke of luck saved

her from being found. She was standing almost beside the back door. She simply stepped to the left, where there was a small projection, and flattened herself there. The man did not notice her. He was not expecting anyone so close.

The man eased the door shut very carefully when he closed it; and, like many doors, this one required slamming before the spring lock would function. It did not catch. Lola opened the door and went in.

She was discovering a rather surprising thing about herself. She had much more courage than she had thought she possessed. It was a good feeling.

Lola Huttig's past life had been for the most part a poverty-stricken one. She had never held a job which paid a great deal of money. She had personally secured her education with hard work and persistence, and she had fallen into the habit of envying others their easy life and smooth manners. The next natural step was to wonder if she didn't lack something that other more successful people had. Courage, perhaps. Or confidence, or whatever it was.

But now she was going ahead in what was unquestionably a dangerous situation and was finding that she was perfectly sure of herself. She was even intrigued by the bizarre mystery of it.

It was, she took time to think, a rather curious little sidelight to her character to crop up at this point, and under such conditions as the present ones.

THERE was some doubt whether Lola actually saved little Jasper's life.

What happened was simple in one way and complicated in another. It was simple in the direct passions concerned. The men were there to steal an owl and kill little Jasper. That was the simple part. The complicated portion was the motivations. Why steal an owl? Why kill little Jasper? The killing of little Jasper was, in part, understandable. They wanted to silence him. He knew them. They wanted to shut him up.

Lola Huttig used two cans of pepper out of the kitchen. They were large cans. She took off the lids, then threw the cans at the men who were breaking down the door. She got the throwing done just as the door collapsed.

There was sneezing and profanity. In the midst of the confusion, little Jasper popped out of the room. He ran very fast, considering that he was almost as wide as tall. He had an owl. The owl for once did not look sleepy.

Lola grabbed little Jasper's arm, and ran with him down the hall. In this, she got no co-operation from Jasper. He kicked her shins, and when that had no effect, tried to trip her.

Lola had been nursemaid to enough brats in her own time to have a system of her own. She took hold of Jasper's left ear with a grip that left no doubts.

The pepper did not work as well as she had hoped, and the men behind them started shooting.

Jasper said, "Here, go this way!"

They ducked through a door. Across the room was another door. No doubt, it led outside to cold winter freedom. But it was locked. Lola struggled with the lock. Then she picked up a chair with the idea of smashing at the door.

"That's no use," advised Jasper. "These doors are made of *Tectona grandis*, better known as teak. The yellow or brown heartwood of genuine teak does not attack iron, unlike oak, and India, Burma, and Siam are the only sources of genuine teak. Other false teaks are the West African teak, and 'eng' or 'yang' teak from Indo-Malaya."

Lola had neglected this lecture on teak to try another door which let her into a bathroom. Or at first she thought it was a bath. Then she saw that it was a gymnasium. There was an exercise machine or two, an electric-cabinet bath, a shower, and the other stuff found in a fairly wealthy man's gym. There were bars over the windows.

Jasper had closed the door through which they had come. A bullet clouted a small but impressive hole in the panel.

"They've got us trapped," said Jasper.

Lola still carried her chair. She broke one of the gym windows. The cold outdoor air jumped in as if it were an animal.

Out of the window, Lola yelled, "Help, police! Burglars! Help! Help!" She put enough stark fear—it was not hard to do—in her voice to convince anybody who might hear.

To Jasper, she said, "Come here, little boy! I can push you out through these bars."

Jasper looked at the bars. "Not me, you won't. I'm fatter than you think."

A happy idea hit Jasper.

"We can put Owasso outdoors, though," he said.

"Owasso?" Lola was puzzled.

"My owl."

Lola snapped, "Oh, stop being silly about that owl. Let the thing go. Our lives are in danger."

Little Jasper looked at her grimly. "You got it wrong, lady. Those men want the owl. If we turn the owl loose, they may go chase him and let us alone."

Lola thought that if there was much more of this foolishness about an owl, she was going to get hysterical.

Something with the hard sound of a gun muzzle rapped the door and one of the men said, "Let's have that owl!"

Lola wondered if she was actually crazy.

AFTER the man pounded twice more on the door, Lola concluded that a certain amount of lying was justified, and shrieked, "Don't you come in here! I'll shoot! I have a gun!"

"Lady," said the man ominously, "you're mixed up in this plenty already, without getting us peeved at you."

Lola snapped, "Don't come in! I'll shoot!"

Jasper had been gazing about the place. Now he looked at Lola with considerable disgust.

"Alcohol," Jasper said, "is a hydroxide of organic radicals, obtained chiefly from potatoes and maize. Purified, or absolute alcohol, boils at 78.3 degrees centigrade and has a specific gravity of 0.763."

Lola made a wild sound. "That," she said, "is as crazy as the rest of this."

Jasper was disgusted. "Take that big jug of rubbing alcohol and pour it in that pail," he said. "Pour some of the alcohol on the floor. It will burn. Set a match to what you pour on the floor. When those men rush in, throw the bucketful of alcohol over them."

Lola pressed a hand to her cheek in astonishment. It would work!

"We'll have fun!" Jasper said gleefully.

"How will we get them inside?" Lola asked.

"Yeah, they think you've got a gun." Jasper shrugged. "Just fix the alcohol, and I'll take care of the rest."

Lola hurriedly prepared the alcohol trap. The pungent order of the stuff rushed through the room. When she tossed a match into the alcohol she had poured on the floor, the stuff burned with such a transparent blue flame that she had to hold her hand over the blaze before she was sure it was aflame.

Jasper said. "All right, now. Threaten them."

"Stay out!" Lola cried at the door. "I've got a gun! I'll shoot you!"

Jasper said loudly, "Lady, you ain't got no gun. What are you lying to them for?"

Outside, the men swore. They hit the door together, burst it down. They came through, all three of them, in an eager hurry, and Lola tossed the bucket of rubbing alcohol!

The results were all she had hoped for. The three men forgot all about the owl named Owasso, and whatever else was in their minds.

LOLA and Jasper stepped over the form of the butler, Clarence, who was still unconscious, and ran out into the wind-filled street.

They hailed a passing taxicab and climbed inside. Jasper still had the owl.

Lola settled back breathlessly. "Jasper, you are wonderful! You are amazing!"

Jasper grinned. "Mr. Jefferson Shair always said that meeting me was like finding poison in the sugar bowl."

Lola stared at him. He actually didn't look a day over twelve years old, and she didn't believe he was.

"Something like that," she admitted. "But you really are amazing, Jasper."

Jasper contemplated the owl thoughtfully.

"I'm amazing enough to have another idea," he said. "But I don't know whether I'll tell you about it. Jefferson Shair always said you couldn't predict what a dame would do."

"It wouldn't hurt to talk about it," Lola suggested.

Jasper frowned for a while. Then he nodded. He leaned forward and tapped on the window to get their driver's attention.

"My man," he said to the driver, "kindly convey us in a midtown direction at an accelerated pace."

The driver glanced around at Jasper, scratched his head, and shrugged. He headed the cab downtown.

"What is your idea, Jasper?" Lola asked.

"Jefferson Shair was going to a man named Doc Savage," said Jasper. "I think it might be an excellent idea if we copied his example."

Lola was puzzled. "Who is Doc Savage?"

"He's quite a guy," Jasper said. "And I think I make an understatement in saying so."

"Why was Mr. Shair going to Mr. Savage?"

"He was taking him the owl," Jasper explained.

Chapter V. DEATH FOR OWASSO

DOC SAVAGE, with no show of expression, listened to Lola Huttig's story. Whenever the girl paused to assemble more words, there was no sound but the needling of small hard flakes of snow against the windows and the fluttering of a large sheet of oilcloth which Monk Mayfair had stuck with adhesive tape over the hole made in the window when Owasso the owl fired the revolver.

Lola took half an hour and told her story thoroughly. She put in enough of her poverty-ridden past to make it clear why she had accepted the rather strange job of inveigling Jefferson Shair into firing a supposedly blank cartridge at another actor.

"They told me it was a gag, and I believed them," she repeated. "I guess hunger makes people gullible."

She finished the story, leaving out nothing, and waited for Doc Savage to comment.

He did not say anything.

"You can turn me over to the police," she said nervously. "As I have explained, I suppose I am technically guilty of some kind of murder charge in connection with the death of that poor actor."

During the girl's recital, first Monk had arisen and left the room. Then, when the homely chemist returned, Ham departed.

Ham now returned.

Doc turned slightly toward Monk and Ham and asked, "Does her story check?"

Monk said, "A murdered man identified as an actor was found in the Sixties a while ago. He answers the description of the actor Miss Huttig says was hired to play the part of her annoyer."

Ham said, "I just checked on Jefferson Shair's home. The fire department just finished putting out a fire that had started in the gymnasium. The butler, a man giving his name as Clarence Maken, was found

unconscious in the place."

"Any trace of the three men Miss Huttig says were trying to get the owl and kill Jasper?" Doc Savage inquired.

"No trace," Ham replied. "But a neighbor reports three men dashing into the street and rolling in the snow to put out their flaming clothes. Then the three ran away. That explains what became of them."

Doc Savage told Lola Huttig quietly, "Your story seems to check. Now, would you mind explaining just why you came to us?"

Lola showed some confusion. "I guess," she said, "it was because I couldn't think of anything else to do."

"You want help?"

"Naturally. I do not like what those men did to me. I think it was pretty horrible, murdering an innocent man the way they did. It was ruthless."

Jasper and the owl had taken in everything in silence. Now, Jasper snorted.

"Not half as ruthless," he said, "as other things they will probably think up."

Doc Savage turned to the youngster. "They were really after the owl, Jasper?"

"Sure! They've been after it for days."

"Why?"

"Riddle," said Jasper, "is a sieve, a device for straightening wire, to perforate with holes, an apparatus for threshing grain, and anything puzzling, an enigma, or an ambiguous proposition."

"Meaning?" Doc suggested.

"Just what I said," answered Jasper. "A riddle."

DOC SAVAGE leaned back, his strange flake-gold eyes intent on Jasper. He contemplated Jasper for some time, and the youngster showed signs of uneasiness. Jasper finally decided to ignore the bronze man and fell to contemplating Monk, who was admiring pretty Lola Huttig. Jasper tore a corner off a newspaper, made a spitball and hit Monk on the ear.

"Hey, you!" Monk said indignantly. "I didn't like you the first time I saw you, and the feeling is increasing."

"Aw, dry up, dog face," Jasper advised.

Doc Savage said thoughtfully, "You seem to be a unique young fellow, Jasper. How old are you?"

"Fourteen," Jasper said.

"I took him for about twelve," Lola remarked.

"I'm fourteen," Jasper said, as if proud of it.

Doc Savage told him, "You seem to have a remarkable fund of unusual information for a young man of

your age, Jasper."

Jasper seemed embarrassed. "Aw, nuts!" he muttered. He squirmed uncomfortably and would say nothing more.

Doc Savage nodded slightly to Ham, and they went into the adjoining room, which was the library. There were banks of shelves laden with scientific volumes.

Doc Savage said, "What do you make of the boy, Ham?"

"He's a remarkable combination of mental giant and street devil," Ham muttered. "I never saw anything like him before."

The bronze man indicated the telephone. "See what you can learn about Jefferson Shair," he directed.

He returned to the reception room, noted that Jasper still seemed embarrassed and paid no attention to the boy. He walked over to the owl, studied the bird for a while. When he extended a finger, the owl moved over onto it. Jasper seemed surprised.

Doc said, "Outwardly, he seems an ordinary type of owl."

"He's not ordinary," Jasper said defensively. "He's smart."

"You mean that you have trained the owl?" Doc asked with interest.

"Nah, he's just smart. He understands what you say to him." Jasper frowned. "I'll demonstrate to you. This fancy Dan you call Ham, here, has been telling me you have a laboratory on this floor. In a laboratory, you keep things to experiment on. Have you got any mice in the laboratory?"

"Yes, there are mice," Doc replied. "The doors are open to the library, and the mice are in an open cage, so that the owl could get them if he wished."

The owl came to life, spread his wings, and started flying away.

"See!" said Jasper. "He understood."

Doc said hastily, "The mice are poisonous. They have been treated with a chemical in experiments."

The owl turned and flew back, alighting on the polished top of the inlaid table, where he skidded around awkwardly before settling in repose.

"See!" repeated Jasper. "Understands every word."

Monk Mayfair stared at the owl as if the bird were going to give off sparks and music or explode like a bomb.

"I don't believe it!" he muttered.

THE impressed silence created by the demonstration of owl intelligence was still thick in the room when Ham Brooks came in.

Ham said, "Jefferson Shair is what Miss Huttig said he was. White hunter in Africa for years. Didn't have to do it for a livelihood. He's a sportsman, fairly wealthy. Graduated from an American school and went

to several foreign institutions of learning. He specialized in zoo-chemistry, whatever that is. A year or two after the war started over there, he came back to America."

Ham reviewed some notes he had made on a piece of paper. "That is about all. Since he come back to America, Shair has not engaged in business, although he owns enough stock in a few small companies to take a part in their management. He never has done so. Principally, he stays at his skiing lodge and occasionally accepts parties of high-paying expert skiers. Oh, yes—Shair is one of the best skiers in the world. He won the downhill at two big Eastern meets last year, and has already won once this year."

Monk said, "That is a lot of information not to tell us anything."

"Maybe you can do better," Ham snapped.

Monk and Ham never got along quietly together. A stranger momentarily expected them to have a fight or worse, but violence never seemed to materialize between the two.

There was an interruption caused by the arrival of two more of Doc Savage's group of five associates. The newcomers were Colonel John Renny Renwick, who had a large voice, larger fists and was an eminent engineer. The second was William Harper Johnny Littlejohn, who was an eminent archaeologist and geologist and used words nobody understood.

For the benefit of the new arrivals, Monk recited what had happened.

"Holy cow!" said Renny.

"I'll be superamalgamated," said Johnny.

Monk indicated the owl. "This night chicken seems to be at the bottom of the trouble. But there sits the owl. Do you see anything about him that would start people committing murders?"

Renny ambled over to the owl. Owasso and the big-fisted civil engineer contemplated each other. The disapproval seemed to be mutual.

"Just an owl," Renny rumbled.

Doc Savage said, "The owl belongs to the species *Bubo virginianus*, which extends over most of North America. They are somber-colored birds and among the larger members of the species. The owl, incidentally, forms a very common assemblage in nature, and its suborder, Strigiformes, is not closely related to the hawks and eagles. They are unlike other birds in that they incubate from the laying of the first egg." The bronze man shrugged slightly. "All of which is fact, but not of importance at the moment."

"That owl," Monk reminded, "can fire a pistol. He can also understand what you say to him."

Renny frowned. "I don't believe it."

Johnny—the archaeologist and geologist was taller and thinner than it seemed any man could be and have health—also eyed the owl.

"A meandrous arcanum," he remarked.

Renny blinked. "A what?"

Little Jasper said, "A Hycynian annagrammatism, a logogriphic adjuration of labyrinthine rebus."

Johnny's mouth came widely open and he absent-mindedly tried to put his monocle in his eye. The

monocle habitually dangled from his coat lapel. It was not a monocle at all, but a magnifier which Johnny used in his work. It had been years since Johnny used a monocle for anything else, but now he tried to put it in his eye. He was really dumfounded.

Big-fisted Renny burst into laughter. "Did you get a dose of your own medicine!"

Monk said with infinite satisfaction, "Now you know what it's like to hear those words you use."

DOC SAVAGE arose and went to the boy. "Jasper, we have not heard your story," he said.

Jasper rolled small foxlike eyes in a round face that was like a fox's face without the pointed muzzle.

"I'm hungry," Jasper said. "It's past my dinner time."

Lola Huttig said, "The boy knew those men who wanted the owl."

"Did you know them, Jasper?" Doc Savage asked.

"Nah," Jasper said. "Look, when do we eat? Owasso is hungry, too."

Monk snorted. "One good thing, he's not an expert liar."

"Me?" Jasper bristled. "Me, a liar?"

"A regular Munchausen," Monk said.

Jasper snorted. "Other great liars in history have been Janus, Tartuffe, Pharisee, Pecksniff, Joseph Surface, Judas, Tom Pepper, Scapin, Cagliostro—"

"That's enough," Monk muttered.

"Well, why don't you be original?" Jasper suggested. "With all those great liars to choose from, why do you have to give Munchausen the credit?"

Doc Savage said, "Jasper, tell us your story."

Jasper squirmed. He seemed to have no respect at all for the others, but Doc Savage had him overawed. Jasper grimaced.

"Aw, I ain't nobody much," he muttered. "I'm an orphan. My mother and father died four or five years ago. I was put in a home."

"When did you come to live with Jefferson Shair?" Doc asked.

"Less'n a year ago," Jasper muttered. "He got me out of an orphan home last January."

"You were in the orphan home prior to that?"

"Yeah."

"Where is it located?"

"Uptown," Jasper said, "next to the gas works."

DOC SAVAGE arose went into the laboratory, and telephoned the orphanage about a former inmate named Jasper Coogle. Jasper had admitted his name was Coogle.

There was a delay while records were examined at the home. Yes, there had been such a boy. He had been taken from the home by a wealthy man named Jefferson Shair.

"It is rather important," Doc Savage said, "that I talk to someone who knew young Coogle while he was in your institution."

The other hesitated. "Perhaps I can find Nurse Tile. Nurse Tile recalls all the boys."

Nurse Tile had a very pleasant voice and a fund of information about Jasper Coogle. Jasper had been a timid boy. He had not mixed with the other boys. He had, in fact, been an extremely backward youth in almost all respects. In school work, he had not progressed past the third grade.

"In fact," said Nurse Tile, "poor little Jasper was never able to learn the multiplication table."

"Perhaps," said Doc Savage thoughtfully, "we are not talking about the same Jasper Coogle."

"This Jasper Coogle was a round fat boy with rather small eyes," said Nurse Tile. "His eyes were blue, his hair red, his nose freckled and his hands always dirty."

Doc Savage now made the small trilling sound which was his involuntary reaction to mental stress, to surprise and kindred emotions.

Finally he said, "This seems to be the same boy. You say he was backward?"

"I never saw a more knot-headed one," said Nurse Tile. "And we have our share of blockheads here."

"Thank you," Doc said. "Oh, by the way, did Jefferson Shair have any particular reason for taking Jasper out of the home?"

"I imagine he just wanted a boy."

"Did Mr. Shair express any preference for a backward boy?"

Nurse Tile was silent. "Now that you mention it," she said finally, "I believe he did. That was strange, wasn't it?"

"Not as strange," Doc Savage said, "as it may be terrifying."

THE telephone began ringing again as soon as Doc Savage put it down. He picked it up. The voice that came out of it belonged to an educated stranger. "This is Jefferson Shair," it said. "May I speak to Doc Savage."

"Savage speaking."

"I believe you have a young lady and a rather extraordinary boy at your place, now," Shair said. "They came to you concerning some rather startling events which have occurred around an owl. Am I right?"

Doc Savage said bluntly, "What do you want?"

"Your help," said the other frankly, "if you can see fit to extend it to me."

"We will have to know more about you than we know now."

"I can see that you do. I mean—I'll tell you all about it."

"How?"

"By meeting you and telling you the whole amazing story."

Doc Savage said, "We will wait here for you."

The other coughed nervously. "I'm afraid you do not expect other men to be cowards. Unfortunately, I am one. Frankly, I am afraid to come to your headquarters."

"You attempted to reach me once?" Doc asked.

"Exactly," said the voice. "That is why I am not willing to go there again. I was discovered by an enemy. I barely escaped with my life."

Doc Savage caught Ham's eye, and made gestures with the fingers of one hand. He used the manual alphabet employed by deaf-mutes and directed Ham to get little Jasper.

Ham nodded, went out, returned with Jasper.

Doc said, "Is this something you cannot tell us over the telephone?"

"It certainly is!" said Shair.

Doc held the receiver so Jasper could hear. Jasper nodded. "Sure, that's him," he said. "That's Mr. Shair."

Doc asked, "Shair, where will we meet you?"

Shair said, "Walk south on Fifth Avenue from Thirty-fourth Street. As soon as I am sure you are not followed, I will join you. Bring the owl."

"You want the owl?"

"Just fetch it. I don't want it." Shair swore. "The owl is the last thing on earth I want. But bring it. I need it to explain the situation."

Doc Savage said, "In about fifteen minutes?"

"Make it twenty," Shair said. "I have to get down there."

"Right," Doc Savage said. "By the way, shall we bring your ski pole? Your fingerprints are on it, you know."

"Yes, bring the pole," the other said. "And thanks."

Doc Savage hung up. He turned to Monk. "Monk, rush out and buy a stuffed owl that looks something like Owasso."

"A stuffed owl?" Monk said.

"Yes."

Monk went out, looking puzzled.

Doc said, "The rest of you get on bulletproof vests and helmets. This is not what it is supposed to be."

THEY walked south on Fifth Avenue. They were normal-looking men in their long overcoats and caps with the ear flaps pulled down. Doc was a little larger than Monk or Ham. Renny and Johnny were not walking with them, but were driving taxicabs slowly in the street, not getting far away.

Monk said, "Jasper insists it was Shair on the phone."

Doc Savage did not comment.

Ham said, "We haven't got any ski pole, Monk. Not one that belongs to Shair."

Monk growled, "Yeah, I know, but—"

Ham said, "The man talking on the telephone acted as if he was not surprised that we had the ski pole. Shair would have been surprised. He would have asked Doc where he got the pole. Therefore, it was not Shair on the telephone."

"Yeah. But Jasper ought to know Shair's voice," Monk snapped.

"Jasper may know a lot of things," Ham said, "but I don't believe he knew that. He— *Oops!*" Ham made a grab for the stuffed owl he was carrying. "This thing jump—"

Monk emitted a howl, dived for a fire plug. He took shelter there. "Somebody just put a bullet through the owl!" he yelled. He made a scuttling dive for a doorway, hit it sitting down and went through it in a cloud of snow.

The owl lay for a moment on the sidewalk where Ham had dropped it. Then the owl jumped. They all heard the *spat!* of the bullet. Also, feathers flew.

Ham took to the same door Monk had chosen, knocking Monk down in his hurry.

Doc Savage remained on the street.

Three more bullets hit the owl! They were well aimed, wonderfully aimed! The owl lost some of its shape, so evidently the bullets were high-velocity slugs which mushroomed. The type of bullet with shocking power to kill a grizzly, but which would not shoot through a loaf of bread.

One more slug knocked stuffing out of the owl, and there was silence.

Doc Savage said, "The bullets seem to be coming from the building directly across the street."

Monk looked at the building in disgust. It was a typical downtown New York structure. About thirty stories high, each floor covering a quarter of a block. At a conservative guess, a thousand people worked in the place.

"Finding which flea bit us," Monk said, "may not be so easy."

Chapter VI. DEATH FOLLOWS THE OWL

DOC SAVAGE took two grenades out of his clothing and tossed them toward the door of the big building. No one was entering or leaving the big main entrance at the moment. One grenade was a combination of smoke and tear gas. The other was straight explosive.

The twin blast broke a few windows, filled the lobby with smoke and fumes.

Doc said, "Monk, get back to headquarters and bring Equipment Case 176."

Monk knew better than wait to ask questions. He departed.

Doc added, "Ham, put on your gas mask. Get in the lobby and tell them there has been a gas explosion. Let them think it is dangerous. Have everyone kept on upper floors of the building."

Ham was as puzzled as Monk, but he nodded. He crossed the street hastily. The gas mask he put on was a portable affair which Doc had designed, a transparent hood with a small gadget which would purify air and add oxygen for a short time. Usually, they had found, gas masks were employed for very brief intervals.

Doc Savage moved around to the freight entrance of the building. From this point, he could watch both side and freight entrances. No one left the structure, so, evidently, Ham's blockade was effective.

Doc used the portable radio, said, "Monk."

"Yeah, Doc." The homely chemist had his set cut in.

"Bring Case 176 to the freight entrance," Doc directed.

"Sure."

A crowd had gathered, by now. The tear gas had drifted out on the street. A very small quantity of it was highly effective and rather terrifying. Curious individuals who approached the building turned and fled hastily. Word that the gas was poisonous seemed to be getting around.

A police emergency squad arrived with gas masks. They entered the building.

Monk appeared with the equipment case. The box was somewhat larger than a portable typewriter case. Doc took it.

"Go into the building, Monk," Doc directed. "Find the police. Explain that you are a chemist, and therefore a gas expert. Make some tests, and inform them that the people in the building should be gotten out. Advise that they have everyone leave by the rear stairway and this freight entrance."

Monk grinned. "I begin to get the idea."

Renny and Johnny had remained in the background. Keeping out of the action had been difficult, but that had been their orders. They were not to make themselves conspicuous unless something could be gained.

Doc summoned them.

"Both of you," said the bronze man, "stand on the sidewalk outside."

Renny nodded. "What do we do?"

"Watch the people who come out of the building. Try to spot anyone with a greenish cast on either hands

or face."

"Holy cow!" Renny stared. "Greenish face?"

"Or hands," Doc said. "Watch closely. The greenish cast will be very slight."

Renny remembered something. He snapped his fingers. "Now I know what this is," he said.

LOLA HUTTIG was an attractive young woman. Monk Mayfair was beginning to appreciate her. He was also making hay while the sun shone. Or, in this case, making as much progress as he could while they were driving out of the city.

Monk was piloting the car. Lola was at his side. Little Jasper rode in the rear, with the owl, and with Monk's pet pig and Ham's pet chimp. The pig was named Habeas Corpus; the chimp was named Chemistry. Habeas and Chemistry got along together about as well as fire and gasoline.

Monk gave Lola his homeliest grin.

"I'm sure glad Doc asked me to come in and get you and Jasper," he said.

Monk had long ago discovered that his homeliest grins worked best with femininity. There was something fascinating about his complete homeliness. Ham claimed it was a type of snake-and-bird fascination, but Monk did not agree. He claimed there was honesty in his countenance, or something else of which women approved; he didn't know what.

Lola smiled. "You say you found the man who called up and pretended to be Mr. Shair?"

"Yeah," Monk said. "We got on his trail after he took a few pot shots at the owl."

Lola said, "I understand he fired from a window in a large office building. How did you find him?"

Monk expanded proudly. "That," he said, "was the result of some experimental work Doc and I did a few months ago."

There was more snow falling, now. The flakes swirled in the headlight beams. It was now dark. The tires made a doleful whining where the flakes had drifted over the pavement. Now and then, the machine skidded slightly.

"I don't believe I understand how you identified the man who fired at the owl," Lola said.

Monk braked for a red light, got on the streetcar rail and slid broadside for some distance. He straightened out.

"Ever hear of the paraffin test?" he asked.

"The paraffin test?" Lola said blankly.

"It's something the police use," Monk explained. "Take a person who fires a gun. Powder fumes jump back out of the breech of the gun and deposit on the skin of the gunman's hand—or on his face, if the breech of the gun is close to his face. Then the police take paraffin and put it on the hand while the paraffin is warm. They peel it off. They treat it with chemicals, and the result is a discolored crystal formation, usually greenish. If the greenish discoloration is there, the person has fired a pistol."

"I never heard of that," Lola told him.

"Well, the police have been doing it for years," Monk assured her. "All Doc and I did was improve the method. We did it by eliminating the paraffin and, therefore, the necessity of even getting close to the shooter."

Lola was impressed. "How did you do that?"

"We found a chemical which, in gas form, created a pronounced green deposit when it came in contact with anything that powder fumes had recently touched," Monk told her. "We worked it out for police detectives to use. They put the gas in a room, walk their suspects through the room, and the one whose skin shows a greenish tinge has fired a gun. Of course, it's not sure-fire, or anything. But it works if conditions are right. It worked today."

Lola frowned. "You mean the occupants of the building where the shots came from were tricked into walking through the gas?"

"Sure. Doc made them think there was poison gas in the lobby, and everybody had to leave by the back way. He set up our apparatus where it was not noticed, kept the freight-entrance half full of our gas—and we got our man."

Lola widened her eyes. "Won't the police arrest him for doing a thing like that?"

Monk grinned. "They never caught on. It will be all right if they do. Doc's got a high commission. It's honorary, but plenty effective."

"Mr. Savage," Lola said thoughtfully, "seems to be a remarkable man."

"You'll learn more about him," Monk said, "as you watch him find out why some guys are so anxious to do things with, or to, this owl."

He reached out and turned on the windshield wiper. The snow was getting worse, and the headlights were like ghosts chasing the night.

IT seemed to Lola Huttig that there was no reason why they should stop at this particular place on a country road. But Monk said, "They'll be here." He got out but did not offer to help her out into the snow-filled wind. He said to Jasper, "You keep hold of that night chicken, Jasper."

"Don't worry about Owasso, grasshopper face," Jasper told him.

There was a period of silence, then gaunt and thin Johnny Littlejohn came out of the icy night and said, "Aphonics are pandectively acromatic—"

"Huh?" Monk said. "Wait a minute. What are you saying?"

Jasper said, "He is explaining that it'll be smart to make no noise, barrel neck."

"He knows some small words," Monk said indignantly. "He might use them for a change."

Johnny, patiently with small words, advised, "Don't yell and holler. You don't need to whisper, either. Did anyone follow you?"

"No," Monk said. "I kept using the radio direction finder and spotted your transmitter."

Both Lola and little Jasper looked at Monk in surprise, and Jasper said, "Oh-oh, a smartie-pants. Radio compass and everything."

Johnny frowned in Jasper's direction. "An artsmay upspay."

"Huh?" said Jasper.

"I think he means you," Monk told Jasper.

"What'd he call me, the long article of bones?" Jasper demanded. "What's artsmay upspay? Never heard the words before."

"Look it up sometime," Monk suggested. He turned back to Johnny. "What goes on?"

"Nothing, yet," Johnny said. "But it is getting ready to happen, as nearly as we can tell." He beckoned. "Come on. Doc sent me down to meet you."

They got out of the car. The snow was deeper here in the country; it was above their ankles.

They walked in silence for a while.

Jasper suddenly snorted. "I get it!" he gritted. "Artsmay upspay—that's hog Latin for smart pup." He glared at Johnny in the moonlight. "So, I'm a smart pup, am I?"

"The canine part may be giving you too much credit," Johnny told him.

DOC SAVAGE was lying in the snow on a small ridge among some dwarfed trees, with a telescope to one eye. It was a large, long telescope, the kind marksmen use for spotting their shots on targets. The telescope was aimed down into a valley where a house stood in the chill winter moonlight. The moonlight was coming brightly through a rift in the clouds and probably would not last long. It was still snowing.

Lola Huttig touched Ham Brooks' arm, indicated Doc. "What is he doing?"

"The man who tried to shoot the owl"—Ham pointed at the valley—"is down there."

Lola asked Ham eagerly, "Can you make sense of this? Why did they trick Jefferson Shair into murdering a man? Why the commotion over the owl? Who are the men who are doing all this?"

"And why?" Ham said.

"What?"

"I was just adding another question to yours. And why?" Ham explained. "The thing doesn't make sense."

Doc Savage took his eye away from the telescope and said, "The man is still lying there in the snow with a rifle. He seems to be watching the driveway to the house."

Doc got to his feet. "The rest of you wait here," he said.

The bronze man then left, going quickly and taking to the black shadows beneath stunted evergreen trees with a silent fading-out effect that made Lola Huttig gasp.

Doc circled widely to avoid the man with the rifle. He went to the house.

The place was large, so very large that undoubtedly there were servants. Doc pressed a rear doorbell. There was an abrupt end to conversation in what seemed to be a kitchen.

The house was made of stone and was the type seen in England, the part of England around the Scottish border. Twenty rooms, probably, and one or two of them fifty feet or so long. The evergreen shrubbery was neat enough to have been gone over with nail clippers and a magnifying glass.

A portly gentleman in a much-too-ornate butler's livery, minus the coat, opened the door.

Doc asked, "Is the master in?"

"No," said the butler curtly. "And we are not buying anything from peddlers." He started to shut the door.

Doc Savage put a hand against the door. "Who lives here?"

The butler strained to shut the door. He evidently considered himself a strong man, judging from the look on his face when he did not get the door shut.

Doc said, "I asked you who lives here."

He put a quality in his voice that was as formidable as the prow of a battleship bearing down on a rowboat. It went over the butler like cold water.

"This is the residence of Edwin Quell True," he said, speaking the way he was paid to speak.

"Does he have an owl?"

The butler popped his eyes, swallowed, said, "No, sir," sincerely.

"Where is Mr. Edwin Quell True?"

"He is not at home, sir."

"In his car?"

"Yes, sir."

"What kind of a car?"

The servant named a popular make, and Doc Savage said, "Thank you," and went away.

THE moonlight was gone, and the snowflakes were hard, like fine sand. Doc climbed the hill. The loose snow made noiseless going easy, but he had to be careful of sticks that might break beneath its surface.

Lola Huttig jumped and gasped, and Jasper squeaked in surprise, when the bronze man seemed to appear silently in their midst.

To Johnny, Doc said, "Do you mind getting in our car and letting yourself be shot at?"

Johnny never used large words on Doc Savage. "Knowing the bulletproof glass in that car," Johnny said, "I won't mind."

"Go back and get the car," Doc said, "and drive slowly to that house. Probably you will be shot at by that man down there with the rifle. If you are, I want to catch the fellow red-handed. So in case you are shot

at, act as if the bullet was fatal."

Johnny nodded and went away.

JOHNNY LITTLEJOHN came driving slowly up the drive that led to the house.

The kneeling man sighted carefully with his rifle and gave the trigger the slow squeeze of an expert. He was a man who knew where his bullets would go, evidently, because he whirled to his feet instantly for flight. He made two jumps, and Doc got him!

The man had a small head, not much of which was forehead. He had plenty of body, filled with muscles. It was not his first hand-to-hand fight. He went down with Doc Savage. He lost his rifle. He got after the tendon running downward from Doc's ear with a viciousness that showed he knew jujitsu. The right kind of action on that tendon would cause more or less complete paralysis. He also struck his blows with the edge of his hand, after the way of a jujitsu man.

They wrestled around in the snow for a while, and the man began to groan and gasp from a large dose of his own medicine.

Then suddenly the man was doubled over and crying. Not crying from pain.

"He made me shoot True," he sobbed.

"Who did?"

"Shair—Jeff Shair," the man blubbered.

A man crying is not pleasant. There is something about it that is like watching a dog kill a cat. Interesting, but a little sickening.

Down in the driveway, Johnny Littlejohn had put on an act. Following the shot, he had swerved his car into a tree. Not hard enough to damage the car, but with enough violence to make it look impressive.

Monk Mayfair and Renny Renwick came galloping down the hill, followed by Lola, Jasper, the pig and the chimp. They made a rather bizarre procession.

To help everything along, the be-liveried butler dashed out of the great house and bellowed, "Mr. True has been killed!"

Doc shook his prisoner violently. "You murdered that man. Shot him in cold blood."

The big jujitsu expert with the bullet head made blubberings.

Doc demanded, "Who are you?"

The man said, "West Pinestopp," through hands pressed to his face.

Monk came up. "Murder, eh?" he said impressively. "And there were plenty of witnesses."

Ham Brooks returned to the car, looked inside, collared the excited butler and said something that sent the man slinking back to the house in silence. Then Ham came to Doc and announced, "There's nothing we can do for him." He sounded very solemn. He took a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket. How he happened to have the handcuffs was a mystery.

Pinestopp croaked at them, "You are the police?"

Ham calmly showed him a card. It indicated Ham held a high commission on the metropolitan police force. A special commission, the card stated. It was genuine. Doc and the others had them.

Jasper pointed at Pinestopp and said, "I know him. He's been working for Mr. Shair."

"I was a skiing instructor," Pinestopp mumbled.

"You were a flunky," Jasper corrected. "The dumbest cluck I ever saw."

Pinestopp shuddered and put his face in his hands again. He muttered something about not knowing what he was going to do.

Ham said, "I know what you're going to do, buddy. You're going to sit in a nice electric chair with straps around you and a shaved place on your head, and pretty soon you'll give a jump, and after that they'll come for you with a box made out of cheap yellow pine."

Pinestopp's body seemed to wind up as if it were full of clock springs, and his eyes were like balls.

"Shair made me do it," he said hoarsely. "He has evidence that will convict my half sister of murder. He was going to turn it over to the police. I . . . I— What else could I do?"

Ham poked the man with a finger. "Nuts, friend. You expect us to believe that?"

Pinestopp's hands seemed to be squeezing something. "The evidence was a moving picture," he said. "It showed my half sister and another man killing a man in cold blood on the street."

Lola Huttig emitted a gasp.

Pinestopp turned slowly to Lola.

"That's right," he said.

"What . . . you—" Lola could not make words.

"That's right—you're my half sister," Pinestopp said.

"But I . . . I never saw you before!" Lola was aghast.

Pinestopp nodded. "I know you haven't. Look, your mother was named Anne Lola Colt before her marriage?"

Lola whitened. "Yes."

"All right, that was her maiden name. But she was married before. She was married to my father, Bill Pinestopp. The marriage split up, and my mother took her maiden name of Colt. My father took me. Your mother was my mother."

In a voice which, if it had had color, would have been a strained white, Lola said, "I don't believe you."

"Your mother," said Pinestopp, "liked strawberries, but they made her ill. She collected dolls. She was an amateur painter and once won a prize when she was fourteen years old. The picture that won the prize was called 'A Fawn at Evening.' Am I right?"

"Y yes," Lola whispered.

"You see, she was my mother, too," Pinestopp said.

Monk Mayfair said, "There's a car coming. Bet it's True."

Chapter VII. DEATH IS A QUESTION

MR. EDWIN QUELL TRUE looked as if, at the slightest sound, he would jump into a hole. But it would be a gold-plated hole.

"Really, this is dumfounding," he said. "Really, it is. Really."

He fumbled with his gold watch chain and twisted the diamond ring on his left hand. On his right hand were two other diamond rings with stones so large that, even in the moonlight, they glittered. He looked at his car, then at his great house. His shiver might have been from the cold.

"Shall we go inside?" he asked. "Really, please?"

Doc Savage nodded.

The bronze man had the peculiar habit of letting his associates push the questioning on occasions such as these. Not that Doc retired into the background. He had a quality of magnetic power that made him the focal point of any group, although he might not speak a word.

They entered a doorway large enough to admit a cavalryman on his horse, went from there into a library large enough to stable a troop of cavalymen. Suits of armor stood in niches around the walls, on guard under paintings that were large and subdued.

Edwin Quell True pointed a finger at Pinestopp and said, "Why did you try to kill me, Piney?"

Pinestopp swallowed and seemed too cramped with fear for words to come out.

Doc Savage said, "Answer the question, Pinestopp."

Pinestopp jumped as if a switch had been closed, said, "I do not know. It completely astounded me when Shair made the demand."

Doc asked, "You knew Mr. True, here, previously?"

"Oh, quite well," said Pinestopp. "Mr. True was the caretaker of Jefferson Shair's mountain lodge while Shair was in Africa."

"I was not caretaker," True corrected. "I had the lodge leased. I have abundant means"—he waved an arm—"as you can see."

Doc Savage asked, "You inherited your wealth?"

True bristled slightly and said, "That is an impertinent question, really. It happens I made it myself."

"How?"

"I am a financial speculator," True said.

Ham Brooks jumped. "Wait a minute—are you the one they call Wild Boy True? And Too Good To Be True. Are you that one?"

True smiled. "They also call me True is Stranger Than Fiction."

"That," said Ham, "explains the diamonds and everything."

Ham glanced at Doc Savage, but the bronze man was expressionless. Ham was fairly certain Doc had heard of Lucky Boy True, or Wild Boy True, or the other things he was called.

True was the man who, in spite of government restrictions calculated to lessen gambling on the stock market, had taken millions out of Wall Street, recently.

True studied their faces uneasily. "I cannot understand why Jefferson Shair should force Piney, here, to try to kill me. It is really puzzling; it really is."

Doc Savage asked, "Know anything about owls?"

True blinked. "Very little. That one"—he pointed at the owl Jasper was carrying—"is the first bird I have seen in months. We do not seem to have owls around here."

Monk groaned, "I was hoping somebody would explain the owls. Or, at least, an owl named Owasso."

"Really," True said, "you gentlemen can see I know nothing about this."

Doc Savage said—and his voice was surprisingly impressive, "Ham."

"Yes."

"You have an acquaintance in Wall Street, have you not?"

"Yes," Ham admitted. "I know some important men on the Exchange, and a few others."

"Get on the telephone," Doc Savage said, "and ask questions about Edwin Quell True, known as Wild Boy True and other names."

"What," asked Ham, "should be the nature of my questions?"

"When did True descend on Wall Street?" Doc said. "That can be your principal question."

A strong emotion crossed Edwin Quell True's face. He demanded, "You suspect me?"

"We are going to investigate you," Doc advised.

Edwin Quell True coughed and put his left hand to his mouth and kept coughing and brought up his right hand as if to get a handkerchief out of his breast pocket. But it was a gun he brought out. The gun was small and—this was to be expected—gold-plated and ornately carved.

True pointed the gun at them.

"Gaudy but deadly," he said. "Please be sensible, gentlemen."

THERE was a minute or two filled mostly with astonishment.

Jasper broke it by remarking, "The various species of owl include Asian tawny owls, eagle owls, snow owls, long and short-eared owls, screech owls, barn owls and spotted owls."

True moved his weapon enough to include them all. "Don't move," he said, "or there'll be dead owls."

He went back then, one foot behind the other with care, to the door. He was out through the door in a flash. The door slammed.

The lights then went out.

Several things followed. Pinestopp tried to escape. Monk and big-fisted Renny Renwick had surmised he would. They made a rush for Pinestopp and got each other instead. Monk swung a fist, so Renny knocked him down, not knowing it was Monk. Johnny Littlejohn rushed in to help them, and got embroiled in the mêlée. It was Ham Brooks who downed Pinestopp. The owl, Owasso, helped everything out by setting up a terrific squalling and squawking. And Jasper showed that he was just a kid after all by bursting into tears.

Doc Savage made light with a portable flash that had got tangled in his coat pocket.

Everything was about as to be expected, except the owl. Owasso was not in sight.

Absence of the owl was a little surprising, since doors and windows were closed tightly.

Monk growled, "That night chicken must've flew under a chair, or something." He got down and started looking.

Doc Savage solved what had happened. He went out the door and through the great hall. His flashlight beam leaped out like summer lightning and picked up a figure climbing into a car. Edwin Quell True. And he had the owl.

The snow still came down in hard flakes, and there was about as much moonlight as there had been, which came through rifts in the thin clouds. True's gun made four short red tongues in the night!

Doc Savage fell down. He was shot! It was one of the few times in his life he had been shot. He habitually wore a bulletproof undergarment—the thing was more than a vest—of his own design. He seemingly took great chances at times; but they were not chances, because he calculated the risks with care.

This bullet cut open the left side of his face and nicked something solid enough to send him reeling into the snow.

He was there in the cold hard flakes long enough for Edwin Quell True to drive away fast in the car and for the others to come out of the house.

Renny said, "Doc!" as if he were about to explode. He started to drop in the snow, but the bronze man got to his feet. He took ragged steps toward their car, leaving red spots on the snow.

He said, "True has the bird. He got away in his car."

Renny rumbled, "We'll fix that. Pile in, everybody!"

THEY used the car which Johnny Littlejohn had turned into the tree. It was the handiest machine. They had parked their other cars over the hill. Renny drove.

Headlights had been broken, it developed; they threw great shapeless balls of white into the void of falling snow. The car chased the white balls, and the motor sound was powerful. They skidded on

corners, skidded about as much as was safe. Then the motor coughed like an animal catching its breath. A moment later, it did the same thing. The car lost speed.

"Oh, holy cow!" Renny complained. "Something came loose when Johnny ran into that tree."

They had been gaining on the car ahead of them. But now there was no more of that.

"I'll be superamalgamated!" Johnny said. "We had a clue. The thing was beginning to lead somewhere. True grabbed the owl, so, obviously, he can explain all this mystery about owls. We were getting somewhere. But now he's escaping."

Doc Savage took a handkerchief away from the side of his face, and the color on it was not pleasant. "The radio transmitter," he said. "Switch it on."

Still somewhat dazed by the bullet when he had entered the car, Doc Savage had climbed into the back seat. But the radio microphone cord was long enough for Renny to hand it back to Doc. Doc said, "Long Tom," into the microphone. "Long Tom!"

Long Tom was Major Thomas J. Roberts, who looked as if he had matured in a mushroom cellar, and who would be known to the next generation for his work in advanced electricity.

Long Tom should have his short-wave radio receiver switched on to the wave length which Doc and his group used for intercommunication. This was a fixed rule.

Eventually, Long Tom's voice said, "What is it?" He sounded cranky. "I've got an experiment under way—"

Doc Savage asked, "Time to help us?"

"Oh, it's you, Doc." Long Tom's voice filled with interest. "Radio was over in the corner, and there's a lot of noise in the lab from the generators, so I didn't recognize your voice. What is it? Sure, I've got time."

"Get the gyro plane," Doc directed. "And meet us as quickly as you can. We are in a car. Bring infrared solution."

"Right," Long Tom said.

THERE was silence from the radio. In the interval, the car carrying Doc and the others had rough going. The snow was drifting; the motor was hacking like an influenza victim. Some consolation was the fact that the vehicle ahead seemed to be having difficulties. They could still see its headlights. And there were fifteen miles or so to go before it would come to a highway which, at this hour of night, was likely to be snowplowed.

The radio said, "Doc?" It was Long Tom. "I'm in the air with the gyro, now."

Monk said, "Brothers, he made a quick trip down to the water-front hangar."

Long Tom's voice asked, "What goes on? What are you fellows mixed in?"

Doc summarized the thing briefly.

"A man named Shair tried to bring us an owl, but he was chased away by a man named True. He got the

owl to us. A girl named Lola, an actress out of work, was innocently hired by persons unknown to decoy Shair into murdering a man. The plan worked. The girl Lola, trying to undo the harm she had innocently done, found that the persons unknown were after an owl. She also found a boy named Jasper, a rather unique youth, whose life she saved. An attempt was made by a man named Pinestopp to kill the owl, then to kill True. Both attempts failed. We caught Pinestopp and have him, and he says Shair made him commit the crimes. We also had True. True obviously knows the answers to the mystery. He seized the owl, and we are pursuing him, now. He is ahead of us in a car. Our own car does not have enough power to overtake him. Meet us as quickly as you can, Long Tom."

"This plane engine is wide open," Long Tom said. "You say this fuss is over an owl?"

"I hardly think it is over the owl," Doc said. "But the owl is probably the answer to the mystery."

"It's a queer thing, isn't it?"

"Before we get through with it," Doc Savage ventured, "we shall probably find it has some amazing aspects."

Monk and the others—no doubt Long Tom, also—were greatly impressed by Doc's remark about the future amazing aspects of the thing. It was unusual for Doc to make a comment like that. If the thing was going to be startling—and they would bet it was, Doc having made the remark—it would be *extremely* startling. Otherwise, Doc would not have mentioned the point.

A WHILE later, Long Tom's voice radioed, "I see the lights of two cars. They may be you and True."

Doc Savage said, "Switch the lights off and on, Renny."

Renny Renwick doused the lights briefly.

Long Tom said, "It's you all right. What do you want me to do?"

Doc said, "Can you get close enough to True's car to get infrared compound on the machine?"

"The idea is for True not to see the plane?"

"That," Doc said, "is the idea."

The night was thick enough with snow sifting down that they did not discern Long Tom's plane until it was less than a hundred yards above True's car. The plane was like a big mosquito poised for flight. It was an autogyro in the full sense of the word; an arrangement of whirling vanes could lift it straight off the ground or hold it motionless. It had one drawback. It was not fast. Fast in relation to motor cars with a top speed of ninety miles an hour or so; but it was slow compared to military planes which could tear off four hundred an hour or better.

The autogyro followed the car ahead. Then the plane lifted up, was lost in the darkness again.

Ham said, "He evidently hit the car roof with some of the liquid."

The liquid was infrared, active the way some materials, the radium compounds, are radioactive. Infrared light being outside the spectrum visible to the unaided human eye, the stuff was not noticeable. But with a scanning apparatus operating on the principle of a television tube, the liquid could be discerned at great distance as a noticeable blotch in the night.

Long Tom lifted the autogyro higher and higher. He would trail the car in which True was riding.

They reached a snowplowed highway, and True's machine quickly outdistanced them.

Doc Savage turned to Jasper. "Jasper," he said, "earlier in the day we asked you about the mystery of the owl. You gave us the impression of being unwilling to answer."

"Wasn't unwilling," Jasper said. "Just didn't know nothing."

Lola Huttig put in, "Jasper, when I first met you at Mr. Shair's house, you told me those men were after the owl."

"What men?" Jasper parried uneasily.

"The ones you called Terrence, Sloppy Stone and Harry."

"Oh, them," Jasper said. "Well, they came to see Jefferson Shair yesterday and demanded the owl. There was quite a row. I listened in. Shair called them by name. He called them some names besides their own. He used six or seven words I never heard before. He was sure mad."

Doc Savage asked, "Did you happen to hear why they wanted the owl?"

"Nah. You see, they tried to steal the owl. That was day before yesterday. Jefferson Shair caught them. He told them he would shoot their heads off if they didn't go back to their boss and tell him to lay off."

"Someone had hired the three men—Terrence, Sloppy Stone and Harry—to get the owl by stealth?"

"That," said Jasper, "was the general idea."

Long Tom's voice out of the radio advised them to turn east at the next main highway intersection. The electrical expert also explained that his plane was going smoothly, that he was keeping track of True. The snow was making a little frictional static in the car radio.

"Jasper," said Doc Savage, "where did the owl come from in the beginning?"

"Oh, Jefferson Shair brought him in out of the woods one day. He kept him in a glass ball for five days, then gave him to me for a pet. He is a very smart owl."

"Where was this?"

"At the mountain lodge."

Doc Savage was silent for a moment. "Jasper, you say Mr. Shair kept the owl in a glass ball for five days?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a ball?"

"Ball," said Jasper, "is an inking device printers use, a game, the head of a hammer, a part of the thumb, a bloom, a batch of black ash, a seed pod, a white streak, a type of horse, as well as a rounded mass."

Doc said patiently, "What kind of ball was it, Jasper?"

"Glass," Jasper muttered. "I only got a brief look at it through a door. Mr. Shair saw me looking, then jumped and closed the door."

"Where was this ball at the time?"

"In a room in the lodge," said Jasper, "where Mr. Shair never let me go."

The bronze man then did a strange thing. He made a small trilling noise, his absent-minded habit in moments of mental stress.

Ham and the others stared at Doc. The trilling meant something important had occurred to the bronze man. They could not know what it was. Jasper and his glass ball with the bird inside seemed to have no sensible meaning.

"Jasper," Doc Savage said abruptly, "where did you pick up your rather startling tidbits of knowledge? For instance, the demonstration you just gave. The word ball. How did you happen to know so many of its meanings?"

"Mr. Shair," said Jasper, "made me memorize the dictionary."

"Did you have much trouble doing it?"

"Not much," Jasper admitted. "I know lots of things that are more fun."

Doc Savage said no more.

Finally, Monk growled, "Jasper, you mean to tell me you know the dictionary by heart?"

"I never said that, bean face," Jasper retorted. "I said Mr. Shair made me memorize parts of it."

"Why?"

"Wonder," said Jasper, "is a sweet cake, an evil or a mischief, and an emotion of surprise or astonishment."

They were finally in the city, and Doc Savage stopped the car at a taxi stand.

"Edwin Quell True was very much afraid of something we would learn when we started investigating how long he had been working in Wall Street," Doc said. "Monk, you and Ham leave us here. Take a cab to headquarters. Start work on True. Learn everything about the man that you can learn."

"We going to miss some excitement by leaving you?" Monk asked, an eye on pretty Lola Huttig.

Doc said, "Take Miss Huttig with you. Also Jasper and Pinestopp, here. Do not let them out of your sight."

"Oh," said Monk, relieved. "O. K., Doc."

Monk and Ham, Lola and Jasper and Pinestopp, got out of the car.

To Renny and Johnny, Doc said, "You will go with me."

They drove south, then east. The buildings became tall around them, cold stone against the night sky. Finally, Long Tom's voice came out of the radio. "True's car has stopped. Broadway and Eighty-ninth Street."

"Holy cow!" Renny rumbled. "That's a busy part of the city. I hope we don't lose him."

Chapter VIII. BLOOD ON HIS HANDS

THERE was an overcoat, a thing of loud gray checks, which Doc had not been wearing. He put it on. When Broadway and Eighty-ninth came close, he said, "Pull in to the curb and wait." He got out and walked through the blustering cold, looking for Edwin Quell True.

True was easy to find. He was in a restaurant. He sat at a table and absent-mindedly stirred an oyster stew. Once, he fished an oyster out and ate it. The rest of the time he seemed to be thinking.

Doc went back to the car and moved the machine to where the restaurant entrance could be watched.

Renny muttered, "What's wrong with just going in and putting the grab on him?"

Johnny blew on his bony knuckles. "Avolation may be adducent of cognoscence," he said.

Renny scowled and complained, "You are worse than Jasper, with them words."

Doc Savage touched a bandage which Lola Huttig had applied to his face during the ride into town. The wound True's bullet had made was hurting.

Doc said, "Johnny has the idea. We will follow the man. He may lead us to something, or attempt to do something that will be the answer to this affair."

Renny turned on the car heater. It was not uncomfortable in the machine. Nothing happened for a long time. Then Long Tom's voice said, "I landed this autogyro in the park. I don't think anyone saw me. I'll wait around for developments. If you want me, say so."

Renny picked up the radio microphone and said, "You'll languish in jail if the Civil Aeronautics Authority catches you. Remember there's a rule against flying too low over a city." Renny clicked off the mike, chuckled, and added, "Being in the clink wouldn't hurt Long Tom's complexion any, at that."

They sat there another hour. Then Edwin Quell True came out of the restaurant, walked briskly to his car, and drove downtown. He traveled three blocks, turned left into a street of brownstones, angled south, then stopped.

Doc watched True disappear into a house.

"Take the back door," he told Renny and Johnny. "Carry pocket radios with you."

The bronze man watched Renny and Johnny dash away. He gave them time to get into the courtyard which probably backed the row of brownstone houses that stood shoulder to shoulder to present a solid stone front to the street.

Renny reported over one of the tiny portable radios that all was quiet in the rear. He mentioned its being like a tomb. He sounded displeased. He liked action.

"Give me five minutes," Doc said. "Then come in, but it might be best to do it quietly."

More pleased, Renny said, "Sure."

Doc walked up steps on which the snow rested in worn grooves. There was only one set of tracks in the snow, so they had to be True's tracks.

He put a handkerchief over his hand so as to leave True's fingerprints, and tried the door. It was unlocked. He went in, moving slowly, a step at a time. After the second step, he breathed deeply, testing

an odor that seemed to be incense. Only it was not incense! He did not realize that until he was falling forward into a mental blackness that seemed without limit or proportions, substance or existence. He seemed to fall slowly until there was no more motion, no more of anything!

THE small wiry man with the white muffler and white stocking cap came out of the rear door and said, "Mr. Savage sent me."

Renny and Johnny moved cautiously out of the darkness. "Yeah?"

"He asks me," said the man with the stocking cap, "to tell you gentlemen that everything is satisfactory."

"Yeah?" Renny said. "He caught True, eh?"

"That's right."

"Who're you?"

"I am not important," the man said. "My name is Doe. Not John Doe. Joseph Doe. I was fortunate enough to be of small assistance to Doc Savage, of which I am very proud."

Joseph Doe extended an article wrapped in a newspaper.

"Here, take this," he continued. "Mr. Savage asked me to give it to you. He instructed me to ask you to take very good care of it, because it is important. It seems that it explains something concerning owls."

Renny grabbed the article. "What is it?"

"I'm sure I don't know. But Mr. Savage asked me to request you to come inside at once." Joseph Doe stepped back and held the door open for them.

Renny and Johnny entered the house. Renny was cautious. He had one eye on Joseph Doe. But he did not expect Joseph Doe to jump back and slam the door, locking them in the house, which was what Joseph Doe did.

Then Joseph Doe made fast squeaking tracks in the snow, leaving.

Renny hit the door. He hit it with his fist. It was Renny's vaunt that there was no wooden door with a panel he could not knock out with his fist. He did a good job on this one, but the crossbars were something else. He fought with them. He got hold of the knob, but that did no good.

He finally drew back and used his machine pistol on the lock. The pistol happened to be loaded with explosive pellets, and although he fired only one, the result was a demolished door and temporary deafness for both Renny and Johnny.

They dashed out and got themselves cold looking around for the little man in the stocking cap.

"He's gone," Renny said. "We better go back and find out what happened to Doc."

THEY went back to the house hurriedly. Something, they knew, must have happened. Renny had stuffed the package handed him by the little man into a coat pocket. Such was Renny's concern over what might have happened to Doc that it never occurred to him to open the parcel and learn what it held.

Two men in blue coats got in their way as soon as they entered the house.

"All right, it's the law," one of the men said.

There were other men in blue uniforms in the hall.

Suspicious, Renny growled, "All right yourself! Let's see something to identify you. I've met fake cops before."

"Can't you read a badge?" demanded a policeman.

"I can buy a hatful of those badges for ninety-eight cents apiece," Renny growled.

A man with a square forehead and eyes the color of deep-blue marbles stepped forward. "You know me, don't you, Renwick?"

Renny stared at the officer. "Sergeant Foster," he said. "I guess you are cops, after all." The big-fisted engineer frowned. "What ticks off here?"

"We thought you might tell us," Foster said.

"I can't tell you anything," Renny assured him.

"Won't? Or can't?"

Renny shrugged. "You know how Doc Savage works, Sergeant Foster. He keeps things to himself, fights his own battles, when there are any. Usually, the police approve of what he does and let him go ahead."

"There might be occasions," said Foster, "when they wouldn't."

"What do you mean?"

"This might be one of the occasions."

"I still don't get you," Renny told him.

Foster jerked his head. "Come in here." He wheeled. Renny and Johnny followed him. Johnny noticed that the policemen kept hands close to their guns and were a little too silent. It did not look good.

Sergeant Foster opened a door cautiously. "Be careful," he warned. "Don't let any of these things out."

They stepped into the room, closing the door quickly, and Renny and Johnny saw that Sergeant Foster referred to the owls. There was not one owl; there were at least twenty. Some of the owls were tame and others were wild and frightened, and their fluttering made it look like a hundred owls instead of twenty or thereabout.

"I'll be superamalgamated!" said Johnny.

He did not mean the owls so much as the three dead men and the one live one which lay on the floor.

The live man was Doc Savage; he was sitting rather than lying, and he wore handcuffs! There was an officer with a gun nearby to keep him on the floor.

The three dead men had something vaguely familiar about them. Renny and Johnny placed them after a moment. These were Terrence, Sloppy Stone and Harry. The three men who had framed the murder of the actor on Jefferson Shair. The trio who had—when Lola Huttig was following them—visited Jefferson

Shair's apartment to get an owl and kill Jasper.

They were quite dead from what a knife had done to their throats.

Their pockets were wrong side out.

Doc Savage's pockets bulged with stuff that did not belong to him. He started to move some of the things from his clothing.

"Leave it in your pockets," the policeman ordered harshly. "The photographer will be here in a minute, and we want a picture of you just the way we found you."

Renny demanded, "What is that stuff in your pockets, Doc?"

Doc indicated the dead men. "It seems to belong to them."

Renny's jaw fell. "You mean—"

"A thorough job," Doc said. "Gas. Then they brought me in with the bodies. Planted the contents of the dead men's pockets on me."

Sergeant Foster made a pained gesture.

"Alibi," he said, "is something they all use." He compressed his lips. "You mean to tell me that you were overcome with gas, and then it was made to appear that you had killed these men?"

"There is no evidence," Doc Savage said, "that I killed these men."

Renny rumbled, "You better be less free with your accusing, sergeant."

Sergeant Foster gave Renny a narrow-eyed look. "By the way," he said, "what is that package in your pocket, Mr. Renwick?"

Renny started. "Holy cow!"

Foster snapped, "See what that package is, officer!"

A policeman stepped forward. Renny rolled his eyes longingly at the door, and a policeman lifted a pistol warningly. Renny subsided, let the cop lift the package out of his pocket.

Renny had a premonition of what they would find in the parcel. He told Doc Savage, "This will make it complete." He was right, for it was the knife! The blood on its blade was still sticky.

RENNY RENWICK did a thing which surprised the police, but which was typical of Renny. He seemed not bothered by the sudden evidence that they had walked into a colossal frame-up. That took acting; he was plenty bothered.

Renny examined the owls with vague interest.

"Hello there, Owasso," he said.

One of the owls rolled his head around, walked sidewise along the back of a chair, then went to sleep again. The bird was Owasso.

A surprised cop said, "What the heck? You know one of these owls?"

"Owasso? An old friend," Renny said.

The cop snorted. "What're all these owls doing here?" he demanded.

"That," said Renny, "is a puzzle that would—well, never mind. What are you going to do with these owls?"

"You've got more than owls to worry about," the officer said shortly.

Chapter IX. TROUBLE IS LIKE BANANAS

SERGEANT FOSTER was worried by the magnitude of what he had uncovered. He ordered an officer to go telephone the precinct skipper to hurry to the place and also to summon the district attorney. Then Foster stood and stared at the owls.

"This apartment," he said, "was rented by a man named Edwin Quell True. We'll investigate True later. He isn't at home, that's sure."

Doc Savage made no comment.

"What I don't understand," Sergeant Foster said, "is these owls."

An officer came up from downstairs. "The basement is full of boxes and cages the owls came in," he said. "He's been buying them everywhere."

"Who's been buying them?" Doc Savage asked.

"A man named Pinestopp, the tags on the boxes say."

"Officer, refrain from answering the prisoner's questions!" Foster snapped.

The policeman colored. "Uh—sorry, sir."

Sergeant Foster planted himself in front of Doc Savage. "You better talk, Savage. You were found here with your pockets full of articles belonging to the murdered men. We know the stuff belonged to them, because it includes their wallets with their names and personal letters which they had received. We also find two of your men in possession of the knife used, or probably used, to commit the killings. It looks as if they were getting rid of the knife."

Doc Savage's flake-gold eyes were strangely alive. "Mind answering a question?"

"I might mind. I wouldn't know until I hear it."

"How," Doc asked, "did, the police happen to turn up here?"

Foster smiled thinly. "I suppose you think an anonymous voice telephoned us."

"Something like that."

Foster's smile got thinner and he shook his head. "The patrolman on this beat heard two men discussing a murder that was to take place here. They—the two men—discovered that the officer had overheard. They slugged him. The officer revived, turned in a call, and we came."

"It amounts to the same thing as a telephone call from a person who refused to give his name. A little more clever, is all." The bronze man sounded matter-of-fact.

Sergeant Foster snorted. "You don't mean to tell me the knocking out of the patrolman was staged to tip us off? You don't expect me to believe that."

"You may," Doc Savage said quietly, "learn that is what occurred."

Foster shook his head again. After that, there was silence.

Renny broke the tension with, "Doc, Pinestopp is in this. If he bought these owls, he's in it."

Doc shook his head slightly. He spoke in ancient Mayan, a tongue they used for consultation when they did not wish to be understood. The language was so ancient that not a dozen people in so-called civilization spoke it. Doc suggested that Renny not discuss the matter at the present time.

"Who's Pinestopp?" demanded Sergeant Foster.

No one said anything.

The telephone rang. Almost everyone but Doc Savage jumped and stared at the instrument. Sergeant Foster sidled over as if he expected the thing to jump and bite him, picked it up, said, "Hello, True speaking."

Someone must have sworn at the sergeant, judging from his expression. He said, "Huh!" and "Yes," and, "is that so? I'll be damned!" into the instrument. Then he hung up.

Foster swung slowly to face Doc Savage.

"We sent a squad car down to your headquarters to pick up the rest of your associates," he said. "They found a rather queer thing when they got there."

Emotion suddenly appeared on Doc's metallic features. "Queer?"

"Your headquarters," Sergeant Foster said, "is a mess! There has been a fight. There is a dead man in the reception room. And no one else in the place."

THE bronze man was entirely quiet for at least a minute. Renny and Johnny stared at each other, losing color. All three of them were thinking of the same thing.

"Who"—Doc's voice was very low—"is the dead man?"

Sergeant Foster stared at the bronze man. "That, I am not going to tell you," he said. "You have been told too much already."

Doc Savage spoke in Mayan. He said one Mayan word which meant three English words. "Hold your breath."

Johnny and Renny knew what was coming. Anaesthetic gas. Odorless and colorless stuff that would produce quick, but temporary unconsciousness. They drew air into their lungs, held it there. They watched Doc Savage, and saw him innocently rub his right heel against his left leg as if the leg itched. They knew the gas was in a container there and that Doc was releasing it.

When the first officer dropped—it was a uniformed patrolman—they came to life. Renny lunged to the window, tried to raise the sash. It was stuck. Doc Savage, after unlocking the handcuffs with a key from Foster's pocket, picked up a chair and smashed the glass out of the frame.

They went out of the window. This was the first floor, a front room. Twelve feet or thereabout to a hard concrete areaway.

A policeman was at the house door. Five more officers were getting out of a squad car. One of them yelled.

Johnny took a heel off his shoe, and threw it at them. At the sidewalk in front of them, more correctly. Shoe heels are favorite places to carry concealed objects, and Johnny carried a spare smoke grenade there. It was simply a cake of highly inflammable substance that produced a great deal of smoke. It was ignited by a stripper fuse of the type used on railroad fuses.

The thing spouted a cloud of smoke that was more startling than anything else. It looked like a black monster suddenly materialized on the sidewalk.

Doc Savage said, "The park."

They ran. There were no more words. Not until two shots had blasted behind them, and the lead went skating past on the pavement. Then Renny said, "Aren't you the boy with the gadgets! Smoke bomb in your shoe heel. Imagine!"

Johnny snorted. "The quintessence of pragmatism," he said.

They rounded a corner. "What does that translate to?" Renny puffed.

"Good idea, under the circumstances," Johnny suggested.

"Oh, I won't deny it." Renny veered across the snow-whitened street. "Here's the park. How we gonna find Long Tom? Those cops got our radios."

Doc Savage said, "The logical spot is north of here. Not far from the bridle path."

A car roared around the corner behind them. The smoke had not delayed the police long. There was a stone fence around the park at this point. They vaulted it, but not before there was more shooting behind them. The bullets missed by enough to make it evident that the police were shooting into the air.

Doc said, "New York policemen are marksmen. As soon as they become earnest with those bullets, we will have trouble."

The police car seemed to skid half a block on the icy pavement. It came to a stop against the curb. Judging from the sound, a wheel smashed, because there was a considerable crash.

A police voice yelled, "All right! No more shooting in the air. They've had their warning."

Renny said, "Holy cow! That's what I was afraid of!" and put on speed.

FINDING Long Tom and the autogyro was not as difficult as it seemed. There was, in fact, only one spot really suitable, and remote enough, for a plane to alight. Not that an ordinary plane could have landed anywhere in the park except the great greensward to the south. But that spot was too prominent, too brightly lighted. Renny and Johnny were less familiar with the layout of the park, and it smacked of

black magic when Doc Savage came out abruptly in a clearing. And there was the autogyro.

They no more than appeared in the open space than the big rotors started whirling. Then Long Tom recognized them. He started to cut the engine.

"Let it run," Doc said hastily. "And get this thing in the air."

Long Tom's pale face was yellowish in the glow from the instrument panel. He said, "I heard some shooting," in an interested voice.

Then he hauled on the cant lever which caused the autogyro to jump upward. The shadow of the ship below them was a grotesque convulsing thing on the snow that got smaller. Then there were six or eight loud hammer blows against the skin of the fuselage.

Renny said, "Good thing this skin covering is bulletproof alloy."

"Who's shooting?" Long Tom asked.

"Police."

Long Tom turned a face that was a wide mouth and staring eyes. "Gadzooks, as Grampa Roberts used to say," he said in a low voice. He gave the cant lever a harder yank, hit the throttle with his palm. "What do they want with you?"

"Other than their obvious wish to shoot us," Renny told him, "there's an item of murder."

"Whom did you kill?"

"Appearances," said Renny, "indicate we did a triple thing on three fellows named Terrence, Sloppy Stone and Harry."

"The three owl hunters?"

Renny nodded. "And Jasper hunters," he added. "Too bad they didn't get Jasper. You haven't met Jasper, have you?"

Long Tom said, "I'll look forward to it."

Johnny Littlejohn, in a grim voice, with unusually small words for him, said, "What about Monk and Ham and the others?"

Doc Savage said, "Get over the spot where True's car was standing when we last saw it."

The bronze man's voice was not loud, nor was it charged with tearing emotion. But there was a quality to it that the others caught. They knew what it meant, which was that Doc Savage knew as well as they did that things didn't happen the way they had just happened. Not naturally, they didn't.

The trap at True's place had been set for them deliberately. Someone had known they were going there. The someone had known it far enough in advance to get three men to the spot and murder them and prepare the gas. The gas was unusual. Not many men knew there was such a gas or how to obtain it. It was hard to obtain. But the gas had been there. And the three murdered men. And the two conversationalists who had themselves been overheard by the cop and had knocked the cop over the head to insure proper attention to the matter.

(It is the policy of Doc Savage never to reveal the nature of gases and other equipment familiar to him,

for fear that in untrained hands these things might be harmful.)

It was all so very clever that it was hair-raising.

Also something had happened to Monk and Ham and Lola Huttig and the others. As a result of the something, another man was dead in Doc Savage's downtown headquarters. The identity of the other man they did not know. The dead man could be Monk or Ham!

THERE was no sign of Edwin Quell True's automobile in the darkened street. Long Tom indicated where the machine had stood. The closest inspection of the spot through the infrared scanning device was fruitless.

"I'm not surprised," Renny said, rumbling his rage. "I think it was True who set the law on us back there."

"Why'd he do that?" Long Tom asked.

"To stop us bothering him. To get rid of us. To put us where we would be out of his way. That's obvious, isn't it?"

"Murdering three men," Long Tom pointed out, "seems to be a lot of bother to go to."

"It is a regular nightmare," Renny muttered.

Johnny Littlejohn took a deep breath. "Either there is something of immense proportions back of this or someone has an insane disregard for human life."

Doc Savage put the infrared scanner on the cabin floor. The device was about the size of a press camera—the large type, about five by seven by four inches, which you press to your eye to focus.

"The police will be watching headquarters," he said. "They also know about our water-front hangar on the Hudson, the one in the warehouse. We had best stay away from both places."

Johnny said, "How about my place, Doc? We could work from there."

"The one on lower Max Street?" Doc asked.

Johnny was surprised. "I didn't know you knew about the place," he said. "Yes, that's it."

Doc told Long Tom, "Land on the East River above Brooklyn Bridge. We can taxi from there into a steamship pier that belongs to a foreign concern, and which is vacant, now."

They came down slowly to the deckled strings of lights that was Brooklyn Bridge. The water was black under them, with here and there a white scab that was floating ice. The ship—its wheels retracted so that its fat hull could take water like a duck—smacked the surface. Waves were large enough to pitch them about, making the autogyro difficult to handle.

It was smooth when they got between two abandoned piers. High warehouses on the piers sheltered them from the wind. They strung the ship out with lines to each dock.

A flashlight beam sprang upon them unexpectedly. "The watchman," Renny said. "I'll talk to him."

The big-fisted engineer went away, but was back soon. "It's right as rain."

"What did you do?" Long Tom asked. "Bop him with one of those steam-shovel buckets you call hands?"

"I just gave him my credentials," Renny explained.

"Credentials?"

"Greenbacks, duly indorsed by Uncle Sam," Renny said.

They walked through the iced and blustering night. The streets were unpleasant to the eye, deserted. The smell of the fish market mixed awesomely with the wind now and then.

Johnny said, "I like solitude for study. I'm not bothered with visitors in this neighborhood."

He turned into a hole that looked as if it might be an opium den, or the back door of a junk shop.

Renny took a machine pistol—he had brought the weapon from the plane gun rack—and carried it ready. "Whoever we're mixed up with seems to know a lot about us. Maybe they know about this place."

He was wrong. Or at least there was no one upstairs. There were just long, large rooms filled with rock samples and bones of dinosaurs, with maps and volumes on archaeology and geology, with the things that went with Johnny Littlejohn's profession. The place looked what it was—the retreat of one of the greatest living archaeologists and geologists.

DOC SAVAGE said, "We had better tackle this thing in an organized fashion."

The bronze man assigned parts in a quiet voice. "Renny," he said, "you check over the beginning of this affair. Go back and see that Lola Huttig told us the truth. Check up on the actor who was murdered so that Jefferson Shair would get the blame for the killing. Be careful while you do your checking. Do not let the police pick you up."

Renny nodded and went away. He could tell that Doc Savage was feeling very grim.

Doc said, "Johnny, you work on Edwin Quell True. You can get information from Wall Street men, probably. Find out what you can."

"True broke loose from us when you mentioned finding out when he descended on Wall Street," Johnny said. "I think that will be my principal line of questioning."

"Good idea."

Johnny went away.

"Long Tom," Doc finished, "you take Pinestopp, the man who tried to kill the owl, and who tried to kill Johnny, under the impression that he was shooting at True."

"Righto."

Doc Savage walked into the workroom. It was not exactly a laboratory; it was a place where Johnny tested rock and ore specimens. There was an array of chemicals, the bottles marked with formula symbols. Doc began taking down stuff, things which he could mix to form harmless concoctions for changing the color of his hair, lightening his skin. Materials for a disguise of sorts.

LATER, Renny Renwick burst into the room.

"Doc!" he yelled. "What do you think! Do you know that Ham Brooks has a brother?"

Doc Savage nodded. "A half brother," he corrected. "The fellow's name is Oliver Brooks. They barely know each other, I understand. The half brother is older than Ham, and he is an English subject. Has lived always in Africa—"

The bronze man was suddenly silent.

Renny nodded. "That's it."

"What is 'it'?" Doc asked sharply.

"The actor that Jefferson Shair killed was Oliver Brooks, who was Ham's half brother," Renny said. "If you ask me, there was no coincidence in that murder."

Chapter X. BROTHER'S SECRET

DOC SAVAGE entered his headquarters building as a stoop-shouldered, white-haired, pleasant-faced, simple-looking old gentleman, whose career was nothing more exciting than selling newspapers. He had a bundle of papers under an arm, wore a slipshod suit and a badge which identified him as an employee of the morning newspaper. He entered as if he had business in the building, waited until an elevator was empty, and stepped into it.

"Take me up, Joe," he said, using his natural voice.

The operator jumped, whirled, became pale. "Mr. Savage!"

Doc said, "Go for a ride, Joe. And tell me what happened here last night."

Joe swallowed his astonishment. He set the elevator for slow speed, and leaned against the side panel. "I know as much about it as anybody," he said. "I saw part of it. I didn't see the guys go up. Nobody saw them go up. They didn't walk, either. We think they were in some big boxes that were delivered to one of the upper floors by the freight elevators. I told the police about the boxes. They investigated the Monarch Costume Co.—that's who the boxes were addressed to—and it was a phony. That is, somebody had rented the office, and they didn't have anything in it. It was a phony, all right."

Doc listened to this patiently. "I am interested in the excitement that followed," he said.

Joe grimaced. "Excitement it was, too. Hell broke loose! These people—the ones from the boxes—were waiting for your men on your floor. I guess it was just a plain fight. I heard the fracas. I heard about fifty shots. They sounded as if they came from different kinds of guns. Then, afterward, there was some kind of gas. The stuff was still in the hall when the police came. They had to carry out two cops. It didn't hurt them, though. Just knocked them out."

"There was one dead man?"

"Yes."

"My people—what happened to them?"

"An elevator. All of them. I saw it go past, and tried to get to the power panel to stop it. But they had figured on that. The door of the power-panel room is generally unlocked, but this time it was locked."

"And after they got them down in the elevator?" Doc asked.

The elevator operator made a distressed gesture. "I wish I could tell you. I wish I knew. The police wish they knew, too."

"The dead man?" Doc Savage asked.

"He is in the morgue, I guess. The one two blocks over and three south."

"What was his name?"

"I have no idea," said the boy. "I got a look at him, but that is all. I didn't know him."

They reached the top floor, and the elevator operator reversed the controls and they began moving down again. There was no vibrations in the car worth mentioning, and the cables slipping past were less of a sound than the wind outside the skyscraper tower. "Police are waiting in your headquarters," Joe said uneasily.

Doc said, "Can you describe the man who got killed?"

The boy was silent a moment. Then he lifted a white face. "I thought it was Ham Brooks," he said. "I'm not sure."

Doc Savage said nothing, made no comment whatever, either during the remainder of the descent in the elevator or after the cage reached the lobby. He did not speak while walking out of the building. There was nothing unusual about him except that his complexion was more lead than bronze.

THE morgue was not an imposing building, and had no need to be. Not that it was particularly drab. It wasn't. A theater next door gave an odd touch of gaiety to the gray brick receptacle for death.

Anyone who walked in and asked to look at the man found dead in Doc Savage's headquarters would be an abrupt object of police attention. He would be lucky if he did not land in detention as a material witness.

That was why Doc Savage used the fire escape, a glass cutter on the window, and a chemical on the iron bars inside the window. The bars were ornamental; ordinarily, bars are on the outside of windows, but these were on the interior. The chemical foamed without noise and gave off a vapor that was so violent it forced Doc to retreat down the fire escape for a while. But when he came back and pushed against the bars, they broke off. The chemical had done its work.

(The exact formulae for chemical mixtures employed by Doc Savage are purposefully deleted. In the possession of a criminal, for instance, the one Doc Savage has just used would be a distinct asset to the crook.)

Doc Savage went down a hall, then a flight of stairs. He knew the building, and he lost no time.

Outside, it was early morning; and inside the morgue, this was the quiet hour. The air reeked of disinfectants, of brass polish; but there was no odor of death.

A sergeant sat at a desk beside the door that led to the refrigerated room where the bodies were kept.

From outside, Doc said, "Sergeant, come here, will you?"

The officer looked up, got to his feet, moved toward the door. Doc made his voice sound far away, said, "Hurry. Here at the door. Look!"

The officer rushed past without a side glance. Doc Savage stepped out from behind the door which had concealed him. He went into the morgue and began searching.

It was not Ham Brooks.

It was a man who did look vaguely like Ham, but the resemblance was only in size and coloring. The face had a hawking vicious cast. Doc had never seen the man before.

The sergeant returned to his desk, puzzled. He muttered, "I wonder who the hell that guy was," and sat down.

Doc held the door open a crack. He used his voice again, making it sound far away, and demanded, "Hey, have you got the clothes and stuff off that guy who was found dead at Savage's place?"

The officer stared at the outside door, from which he thought the voice was coming. "Sure," he said. "Who're you?"

Doc came into the room, came quietly, and got hold of the officer's arms above the elbows. The man let out a bark of astonishment. Doc changed one hand to the man's throat. They fought for a while, and the loudest noise was a chair upsetting.

Doc used a hypo shot of a drug mixture which temporarily paralyzed the officer's arm, leg and throat muscles. The drug had been taken from a supply which Johnny had been keeping at his place.

The policeman sat there in impotent, helpless rage while drawers were yanked out of his filing cabinets.

The stuff that had belonged to the dead man—it was plainly labeled in the efficient police fashion—was in the fifth drawer of the first cabinet. The dead man's name was Elbert Wang. He had not looked Chinese. But that was his name—Wang.

There was a penknife, some sales-tax tokens from three Southern States on the Atlantic seaboard, cigarettes, a cigar band, silver and copper coins. One of the coins was a South African piece, and two silver ones were Portuguese.

There was a little notebook, a cheap one that could be bought at almost any dime store. Pictures of owls were pasted to its pages. There were about forty owl pictures, each one different, although all were not separate species of owls. There were pictures of eagle owls, snow owls, barn owls, both European and American species of others.

There was no word of writing in the book. Just the pictures. They had been clipped out of reference books, evidently, because the printed name of the species was beneath each picture.

Doc Savage spoke to the policeman. In spite of the paralysis of the drug, the stuff was as harmless as the novocaine dentists use; in fact, it was a similar, but more potent, drug. The officer could hear. His mind was not impaired in the least.

"The owls," Doc Savage said, "are probably giving the affair a zany touch that is fooling everyone."

The bronze man then departed.

He took with him only one article. His taking the thing seemed to bewilder the policeman. The object obviously had no meaning to the cop. It was one of the Portuguese coins. The coin was bright and new.

WHEN Doc Savage walked in on Johnny Littlejohn at the latter's downtown establishment, the gaunt archaeologist and geologist looked up cheerfully and said, "Glad to see you back, Doc. Who was it got killed? At our headquarters, I mean."

Doc Savage said, "A man named Elbert Wang."

"Wang?"

"Monk and the others," Doc said, "were probably carried off somewhere. At least, they were alive when taken from the building. That would indicate that the purpose of the raid was to get them alive."

"Why?"

"That," Doc said, "is not exactly clear."

Johnny pulled in a deep breath. "I'll be superamalgamated if I see heads or tails of this thing, yet," he said. "However, I've been getting some dope on Edwin Quell True."

"What about True?"

"He's a new boy among the wolves," Johnny explained. "He blew into Wall Street only a few weeks ago, and he's been knocking them goofy. There's a story that he walked into a broker's office with an old suit of clothes, no money for his next meal, talked them into loaning him five dollars, and ran the five up into no telling how many millions. Now, he's got a penthouse on Park Avenue, that palace where we found him on Long Island, a yacht long enough to reach from here to there, and a few pints of diamonds."

Doc Savage became strangely thoughtful. "All of this in a few weeks?"

"Nine weeks, as near as I can tell."

Johnny was then startled, because Doc Savage made the trilling sound that all of them had come to know meant a great deal. Almost always, the trilling indicated Doc had reached a conclusion, or that some surprising fact had come to him.

Johnny waited for Doc to comment. Doc said nothing.

"I wish," said Johnny, "I had True's touch for gold. Millions of dollars in nine weeks. Imagine! All legal, too. Or legal enough that the Federal government can't hang anything on him."

Doc Savage took a small object from a pocket.

"Johnny," he said, "you dabble with numismatics?"

"Coins? Sure."

Doc extended the coin he had taken from his pocket. "Can you identify this one?"

Johnny turned the coin. "Portuguese," he said. "First one I have seen."

"Is it likely," Doc asked, "that many other people in the United States have seen such a coin?"

"Practically an impossibility, I would say," Johnny said. "That coin—the first batch of this coinage—left the Portuguese national mint less than a week ago. Seven days ago exactly."

"It was in the possession of the man found dead in our headquarters."

"That," said Johnny, "means one of two things. Either he was a collector who got the coin by transatlantic air mail, or he came from Portugal mighty recently."

"Portugal has an African colony."

"Yes."

"The man also had an African coin in his pocket."

"I'll be superamalgamated!"

"The government," Doc Savage said, "is keeping a close check on people who come to America from Europe by airplane these days."

Johnny jumped to his feet. "I have a friend who can do something for us there," he said.

WHILE Johnny Littlejohn was on the telephone, Long Tom Roberts and Renny Renwick came in and reported. Long Tom had been checking on Pinestopp.

"The man seems to be a half-baked skiing instructor," Long Tom said. "He has no criminal record. There are no Pinestopps at all in the police rogues' gallery, as a matter of fact. He has been working for Jefferson Shair as skiing instructor, as he told us."

Doc asked, "Any record of his being related to Lola Huttig?"

"I didn't find any."

Renny Renwick said, concerning Lola Huttig, "As far as I can learn, Lola Huttig is what she said she was. There is a Lola Huttig registered with the actor's union. She had a small part in the play 'Three for the Money,' and a better part in 'Question Mark,' the tragedy which had a short run last spring."

"What about the actor who was killed?"

"Ham's brother?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't able to learn a thing. The police just identified him as Ham's brother by an insurance policy which he had in his pocket. The insurance policy was an old one, made out to his mother and to Ham as secondary beneficiary in case of his mother's death. It gave Ham's New York address, so there was not much doubt."

Johnny came in. His face was tight. "I'll be superamalgamated!" he said. He stared at them.

Obviously, Johnny was about to explode with information.

"I've got something here!" he said dramatically. "How many of you fellows think Lola Huttig was what she said she was?"

No one spoke.

Johnny said, "Lola Huttig, Ham's half brother and Albert Wang came from Africa to the United States, via Portugal, three days ago."

Complete silence held the room for a while.

Renny rumbled, "Let's get this straight. Lola Huttig, the actor who was killed by Jefferson Shair, and the man found dead in our headquarters—all came from Africa?"

Johnny nodded. "By plane."

"That," said Renny, "mixes it up a little."

Long Tom frowned. "Did they bring any owls with them?"

Johnny said, "No owls. But I've got something else."

Doc Savage became interested then. "What else have you learned?"

"All three of them have been staying at a hotel on Fifty-seventh Street," Johnny said. "I got that from a government agent, perfectly honest, who owes me a debt of gratitude. The Federal government has been keeping track of people who are important and in enough of a hurry to use transatlantic planes to get over here these days."

Doc Savage came to his feet. "We might visit that hotel and see what we can find," he said.

Chapter XI. GUILLOTINE

THEY were near the hotel on Fifty-seventh Street when Doc Savage changed his plans slightly.

"Long Tom," the bronze man said, "call police headquarters and make them think you are a newspaper reporter. Find out where the owls were taken."

"The birds which were in the room in True's apartment with the three murdered men?"

"Yes, those owls," Doc Savage said. "When you find out where they are, go to the place and hang around. Keep out of sight."

Long Tom was disgusted. "An owl watcher!" he muttered. But he got out of the machine, and stalked away through the cold morning.

Doc Savage drove on toward the hotel. He was using Johnny Littlejohn's old car, but they had changed the license plates, putting on Pennsylvania license tags. The Pennsylvania plates were not fakes; they were simply registered in the name of Mr. Johnny in Pennsylvania.

Johnny and Renny had been without sleep throughout the night, as had Doc Savage. They showed it in nervousness and under their eyes. Doc Savage was less jittery, but there were lines on his metallic features that had not been there before.

They were up against a desperate situation. It was not so much the tension that bothered them as the helplessness of it. They could not help feeling a complete futility. There had been at least five killings. Monk and Ham were in trouble. The police were after Doc and the others. And there was this

unbelievably silly stuff about owls.

Renny said fiercely, "There's the hotel where Lola Huttig, Ham's brother from Africa and this Wang fellow put up."

They walked into the hotel, and Doc Savage said, "Good morning," to the hotel clerk. Doc was still wearing his disguise as an elderly gentleman, although he was wearing better clothing than when he had visited his headquarters building as a newspaper peddler.

"Yes, sir," said the clerk. "What can I do for you? Something nice with bath at nine dollars?"

Doc said, "I'm sorry—no. I am calling on my good friend, Oliver Brooks."

The clerk nodded at the telephone. "Use the house phone. Suite 1804."

With the gentle persistence of an elderly person, Doc said, "Could you tell me if Mr. Wang and Miss Huttig are also staying here?"

"Same floor," the clerk said. "Suite 1804 for Brooks; 1807 for Wang; 1816 for Miss Huttig." He frowned slightly. "But you will have to use the house phone."

Doc Savage nodded and thanked him politely. The bronze man then went to the bank of telephones and picked up an instrument, made sure the slightly suspicious clerk was watching him, and pretended to call upstairs. He smiled widely as if he had received a satisfactory answer.

"Thank you," he said to the clerk. They entered the elevator. "Eighteen," the bronze man said loudly. The clerk was satisfied.

While they were riding up, Renny muttered, "Nine dollars for a room. You need a mint to stay here."

"Or to be another Edwin Quell 'Too Good To Be True' True," Johnny suggested.

Renny said, "If we ever catch that fellow, I want his formula."

THE elevator suddenly stopped. The operator looked around, scratched his head. He was a short dark man with a great deal of hair in which to scratch. "Very unusual," he said.

The elevator operator fooled with the controls for a while. "Very unusual," he insisted. "I guess it must be the connection box on top of the cage."

The operator climbed up on the hand railing with the agility of somewhat of an acrobat. "I'll see," he said. He opened a hatch in the top of the cage.

Doc Savage grabbed the man's legs. "Get out of this thing!" he shouted at Johnny and Renny. "Get the door open!"

The operator kicked and made enough snarling noise to be a cat. Renny and Johnny stared, astounded. "Get out!" Doc shouted.

"But—"

Doc said loudly, "This hatch in the top of the cage was unfastened! Can't you see it's a trap!"

Renny and Johnny saw then. They began fighting the door. They did not exactly understand why Doc wanted them out of the cage. But his orders were to get out. They did not question them.

The elevator cage door was not hard to force back. The cage proved to be a few feet above the floor level. Renny scrambled out. Johnny followed. Renny leaned back, tried to assist Doc in holding the kicking, yelling operator.

"Get out!" Doc said grimly.

The force in the bronze man's voice shocked the big engineer back out of the cage.

A moment later, Renny was completely white, and shaking so that he had to sit down on the floor. Because the cage had dropped. Another moment of delay, and Renny would have been guillotined!

He stared at the cables whistling in the elevator shaft.

"That cage is falling!" he croaked.

Chapter XII. HOT TRAIL

LONG TOM ROBERTS was selling peanuts. He was peddling them from a small wagon which had a gadget that also whistled and popped corn. Long Tom had never liked whistling. Peanuts were not his favorite fruit. He had been forced to pay the former proprietor five dollars rental for the peanut cart, and he was not happy about that. He was inclined to be conservative where money was concerned.

His peanut peddling was confined to the street in front of a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals.

It was the first time that Long Tom had heard owls classed as animals.

The owls were in the place, however, and that was why Long Tom was outside. He walked up and down, pushing the cart that whistled. He sold two bags of peanuts. A dog tried to bite him. A cop demanded his vender's license, giving Long Tom a bad moment, lest he be recognized as a Doc Savage aide at a time when the police were looking for Doc and anyone connected with him. But the officer looked at the license—provided by the former proprietor of the cart as part of the five-dollar purchase and was satisfied. He went on.

The next customer was a bit more to Long Tom's liking. He was not particularly susceptible to the opposite sex, but this one was enough to make a wooden Indian turn his head.

She was not too young—though in her twenties—was shaped in the right way and dressed as if a lot of thought had been put on her by expensive modistes. She had sea-blue eyes—the Gulf Stream part of the sea—and hair that was the color of good Spanish leather, touched with enough gold to make it arresting. Her hands and feet were small, but the dark purse she carried was large.

She said, "A bag of peanuts, please."

"Yes, ma'am!" said Long Tom. "Right hot off the griddle. The very best—I hope."

She opened the big purse. "How much?"

"One dime, a tenth part of a dollar," Long Tom said enthusiastically. "Only I wouldn't recommend them too highly."

She looked up. "You wouldn't?"

"Not these peanuts. I ate some a while ago, and they must have been cured in kerosene." Long Tom grinned.

The girl fumbled in her purse.

"My pet owl might like them, though," she said.

She showed Long Tom the small but impressive snout of an automatic pistol!

"An old campaigner like you"—she moved the gun enough to show what she meant—"should know what to do from this point on."

Long Tom looked into her eyes and knew what he had better do. He had better stand still. He did.

Shortly, there was a racket from the direction of the animal society's building, and Long Tom said, "Mind if I look?"

"Assuredly not," said the girl. "It might show you that we mean business."

Long Tom turned his head. The racket had been caused by one man knocking another down with a short club. The one who got felled was wearing a society attendant's uniform. The one who did the knocking was large and solid, built for the job he was doing.

The man with the club and another man ran into the building. They were gone an efficiently short time. During the interval, there was one shot, two screams, and the sound of something breaking. They came out carrying an owl. Owasso!

"You," said the girl with the gun, "have done enough looking."

A moment later, a closed car, a long but not pretentious sedan, pulled up at the curb.

"What you got there?" a man asked.

"A grandma who had big eyes," the girl said. "He was selling peanuts, only he wasn't."

The man said, "Long Tom Roberts, the man of the volts and amperes, unless I miss my guess. Get in here, electrical wizard."

The girl asked, "You want to take him along?"

"I don't want to very bad," the man said, "but I guess it would not be a bad idea, since the man with the brains gave us such orders."

The girl opened the car door. "Sometimes, I wonder if the man with the brains really has them," she said. To Long Tom she said, "Climb in there, my ill-looking peanut salesman."

Long Tom climbed into the car.

He stared at Doc Savage.

"Holy cowl As Renny would say," Long Tom muttered.

THE driver of the car—the man who had spoken to the girl—turned around and made a short but rather impressive speech.

"You two try talking and you'll get your guts full of lead," he said.

He had a hatchet face made out of dark stone and other qualities which conveyed the impression he meant what he said.

They talked, anyway. They did it with their fingers. Not a word was said. It was a slow conversation, because they had to go carefully and accompany their finger talk with squirmings and other symptoms of nervousness so that deaf-and-dumb sign language they were using would not be noticed.

The conversation consisted mostly of Doc Savage explaining what had happened to him. He told about the visit to the hotel, and the mishap in the elevator.

The elevator operator, the bronze man stated with his fingers, was thus obviously a planted villain. A very efficient one. The efficiency of the fellow, and the fact that he was planted there, went to prove what they had already started to realize. They were up against an incredibly clever enemy—a foe who had been outsmarting them to such an extent that it was not in the least funny.

It had taken genius to guess that they would find out that Ham's half brother, the murdered actor, Lola Huttig and the mysterious man named Elbert Wang who carried the very latest Portuguese coin, and who had been murdered in Doc Savage's headquarters, all had come from Africa within the last few days and were staying at the hotel on Fifty-seventh Street. Genius had guessed they would learn this. Genius had foreseen the effectiveness of planting a man in the hotel, where Doc Savage and the others would never suspect a man being planted.

Doc mentioned the mechanics of his capture. The elevator, he explained, had been freed of its governor—the cables had not been cut or anything like that—so that it had fallen with great speed to the basement. There, four gentlemen who were loitering at the spot for the purpose had shown Doc Savage the business end of guns. And here he was.

Here they both were, Long Tom commented slowly in the sign language. And where next?

Aloud, Doc Savage said, "Where are you taking us?"

"On a wonderful, wonderful trip," the driver said, and laughed.

The girl also laughed, but rather strangely. She had been looking at Doc Savage, and it was obvious she approved of him. Approved of him a great deal. Enough that she had started chewing her lip.

Doc said, "Why?"

"Why what?" the man asked.

"Why whatever you're going to do with us."

"Oh, that." The man laughed again. "A little bird shall lead the way.

"A little bird, a little owl," Doc suggested.

"Not a very little owl. Hah, hah, hah," the man said. "Now shut up before you get some lead in that place I mentioned."

Doc said, "A very clever little bird he is, haven't you noticed? Perhaps—"

The man turned around. He was utterly fierce. There was tiger in his eyes.

"I got permission to kill you if necessary," he said. "Damn my soul, don't think I won't!"

"Why?" Doc said. "It would seem a little unnecessary."

"Because," said the man, "I'm scared stiff of you."

THEY left a suburb of New York in a plane.

Lola Huttig sat white-faced in the plane and said nothing.

The ship was equipped with skis. It was a recent job. So recent that the job was just being finished by two men, evidently the pilot who owned the ship and the helper. Flier and helper were two of a kind. The kind of men you expect to see when you visit a jail. They could fly, though.

The plane bounced across a rough field and finally lifted into the air. They took off crosswind. As soon as he was off, the pilot lowered the windward wing to get enough slip to keep them on a straight course. He climbed the regulation four hundred feet of altitude before he made a left turn, as if consciously taking off in airport traffic. He did everything else by the rule, too. There did not seem to be much imagination about his flying.

From pale lips, Lola Huttig said, "Mr. Savage, I've been so mistaken about this thing!"

A man said, "Girlie, close your trap."

Lola said, "It isn't what I thought it was at all."

The man asked, "You want to lose half that pretty face, girlie?"

Lola said, "I have been a part of it from the first. I didn't know that. Ham Brooks was part of it because his half brother—"

The man said, "Girlie!" and hit her. He used his hand. It was a large calloused hand, and it landed on her temple hard enough so that Lola fell over sidewise, unconscious.

Doc Savage made a strangled sound and started to get up. A man menaced him with a pistol. The man who had slapped Lola said, "Kill him if he gets funny." The pistol holder nodded.

There was silence in the plane cabin for a hundred miles. Mountains passed below. They were rocky monsters, asleep under snow. They were not large mountains. The plane turned north into the cold.

The sun stood above them, then started sliding down in the sky. Afternoon, then late afternoon. It was very cold in the plane cabin. The heating system was not adequate. They got into a storm, not a bad one, but the pilot made it seem bad because he flew the plane like a nervous civilian pilot up with a civil aeronautics inspector for his flight test.

Doc Savage did a thing that plainly made the others think he was crazy. He took his exercises. Or part of them.

Actually the bronze man was so much on edge that he had to do something to relax. He had no idea where he was being taken, or why. Even the fact that he was alive puzzled him. He did not, actually, believe he was in danger, provided he remained meek. He could not explain that.

These men in the plane were afraid of him. None of them was acting naturally. There were seven men, Lola Huttig, the pretty girl who had trapped Long Tom, and Long Tom himself. Long Tom sat in a glum stew, doubtlessly trying to figure out this mystery about owls and people from Africa. To say nothing of the encyclopedia boy, Jasper.

They worried about Monk and Ham, also, until Lola Huttig said suddenly, "Monk and Ham are safe. They are in another plane headed north like—"

The man knocked her loose from her consciousness again, and laughed about it.

So Doc Savage took his exercises. Not the very energetic muscular ones. Just the ones where he strained muscle against muscle—a very effective system of development, once it was mastered. The ones for his facial muscles intrigued the men in the plane.

"He's gone crazy," one of them said with conviction.

Doc avoided the mental portion of his exercises. The regular routine was divided into a number of sections designed to cultivate the sense of hearing, sight, touch, taste, and so on, as well as straight muscular ability. The whole routine was too complex for the plane. Also, the bronze man had a definite purpose in what he was doing, and mental exercise was not what he needed at the moment. His mental machinery was in enough of a whirl as it was.

The physical exercise did what physical exercise will almost always do—gave his nervous system relaxation.

The others were convinced he was insane.

Chapter XIII. SNOW BIRD

THE cabin stood on the shore of a lake. It was a naked kind of a lake with nothing to recommend it, in particular, except that the snow-covered ice was an excellent place to land a plane. The ship in which Doc Savage was being carried came down there.

The fly-by-the-book pilot got mixed up somewhat, and put the ship down in a slight crosswind, so that the landing was rough, skidding and altogether dubious.

The pilot did a poor job of taxiing across the frozen lake to the cabin. He seemed to be accustomed to land planes, where there were wheel brakes to depend on. He did one ground loop inadvertently, which, but for the smooth ice, would probably have scuffed a wing off the ship.

"Get out and stretch," a man ordered Doc Savage.

There was another plane near the cabin. It was a large ship and fast. Runners were on it in place of landing wheels.

"Get into the cabin," the man added.

The cabin was big in a hog-house kind of way. It had been built without imagination, without concern for appearances. The fireplace was fieldstone. The logs were chinked with grass and mud.

Doc Savage wondered—but hardly believed it was—if this could be the mountain lodge of Jefferson Shair, which had been mentioned. Probably it wasn't. It was not very pretentious.

The mountains around about were not impressive, were too wooded and furred with brush to offer good, or spectacular, skiing. The impression had been that Shair's lodge was in strictly expert skiing country.

Lola Huttig was marched into the lodge.

Doc Savage and Long Tom were urged to another door. Plenty of gun muzzles accompanied them. The men with the guns were scared. They seemed to have heard about Doc Savage.

The mountain wind kicked up a flurry of snow and pushed them in through the door. Damply odorous warmth that was less desirable than the cold tried to push them back outdoors again. The place smelled of cobwebs, pack rats and old sparrow nests.

Monk and Ham and other occupants of the second plane were there. Jasper looked disagreeable. Pinestopp was not in sight.

Doc Savage asked, "You are all safe?"

"Safe," said Jasper, "is a word meaning a piece of leather, the edge of a rasp, a tray under a bathtub, an iron or steel receptacle for valuables, as well as safety from harm."

"Amen," Monk said. "I would say none of the definitions applies to us, unless it's the one about a piece of leather. That's what I would say."

Jasper nodded. "You said it, baby frightener."

Doc asked, "What are we doing here?"

Ham Brooks answered that. "I gather that it's for no good," he said.

A man came in from another room. He indicated Doc Savage. "Bring the big one in here," he ordered. They carried, dragged, Doc into an adjoining room that was no more inviting than the first. "Strip him," the man ordered. "Take everything off him. Everything. And don't give his clothes or anything else back to him."

A man laughed. "Kind of cold for September, ain't it? Must be about zero outside."

The other also laughed, but grimly. "We'll give him a leopard skin."

It turned out he actually meant that. Only it was a bearskin. It was not in too good shape.

"BLAZES!" Monk said when they conducted Doc Savage back into the room, attired sparingly in the bearskin.

Lola Huttig caught her breath. The other girl, the one who had captured Long Tom Roberts, was also impressed. Her eyebrows went up. "Not bad, is he?" she said to Lola Huttig. "Samson must have been like that before she used the scissors on him."

"Samson," said Jasper, "was the Israelite by that name. It is also applied to posts used where great strength is needed, such as in supporting the deck of a ship, for starting a log, and to support the walking beam in an oil-well drill rig."

Doc Savage looked at Lola Huttig thoughtfully. "Oliver Brooks and Elbert Wang are dead."

Lola looked at him blankly. "Who were they?"

Doc Savage was not watching her, now. He was looking over Lola's head at the other girl.

He added, "But killing them did no good."

The other girl seemed to come up slowly on tiptoes, then sink back. The words had hit her.

Ham Brooks blurted out, "Oliver Brooks, did you say? I've got a half brother by that name. He lives in Africa." Ham's jaw sagged suddenly. "Great grief. Come to think of it, I heard from him a couple of weeks ago. Letter from southern part of Africa."

Doc Savage wheeled abruptly. "What was in this letter from Oliver Brooks?"

"It was kind of a funny letter," Ham said. "I don't mean humorous. It just asked me where I could be gotten hold of on the eighteenth of the month." He snapped his fingers violently. "Say, that was yesterday! That was when all this started happening!"

"Did you answer the letter?"

"Yes, I did. I cabled. His letter said he would like a reply by cable, so I sent him one. I never heard from him after that. I didn't know what he wanted. He did not say in his letter."

Doc Savage was silent for a while.

"Oliver Brooks intended to come to you for help," the bronze man said finally. "That is why he was killed."

Ham went whitely silent.

Doc Savage turned to the girl who had trapped Ham. "You came from Africa with Oliver Brooks and Elbert Wang. You came by plane. You were in a great hurry."

The girl was getting pale. She tried to be defiant.

"Hurry," she said, "is a mild word for what we were in."

Doc Savage watched her intently. "There was a great deal at stake, was there not?"

She was silent a moment. Then she shuddered.

"The most important thing," she said tensely, "in the history of mankind."

She said it with such low intensity that it was utter truth. They could not doubt it. It gave Monk and Ham and Long Tom a strange sensation.

Something had to be behind this, of course. They had known that. The something had to be of enough consequence to cause the deaths of at least four people. But it had been a vague thing, the motive.

Now, unexpectedly, they were told it was a very big thing by the girl's tone. The most important thing in the history of mankind, she had said. That was pretty big. It sounded like an overstatement. But the girl's way of saying it somehow made it seem genuine.

A man put his head in the door. He was wearing a muskrat-fur cap. He said, "The bulls of the woods want the prisoners in the big room."

THE girl from Africa beckoned stiffly with a hand, indicating where they should go. Doc moved ahead, because that appeared what they wanted, probably so more of them could watch him from behind. They walked into a large room which was not as bad as the others, but which, like all the rest, was entirely without furniture. This was an abandoned cabin which they had purloined for a brief purpose.

A man was pacing in front of a window, and his words gave the purpose. He delivered them angrily. "The damned fool!" he snarled. "The truckload of gasoline should be here. Why hasn't he delivered it?"

Pinestopp and Edwin Quell True were standing with their backs to the flames jumping in a fireplace.

True said, "Are you sure your friend is dependable?"

"Sure he's dependable!" the man snapped. "I used to live in this country, didn't I? I worked with the guy, didn't I? I offered him plenty of money over the telephone to supply us with gasoline here at the cabin, and he's the kind of a bird who would cut off his mother's leg for that much money. He wouldn't double-cross me, either."

"Perhaps," suggested True, "he doesn't know where this cabin is."

"The hell he doesn't! We used to hide our loads out here when we were bootlegging. He knows where it is, all right. He owns it!"

"Then," said True, "the snow probably has the roads blocked."

The man who was worried about the gasoline stamped back to the window. "We've got to have more fuel to go on," he said. "It wouldn't be safe to stop at any airport. Not with this load of prisoners we've got." He stood glaring out of the window, or pretending to do so, because part of his attention was on Doc Savage—and uneasily.

Pinestopp had hardly lifted his eyes. He seemed totally interested in a knothole in the floor; he looked as if he wished he could crawl away through it and escape this situation.

Edwin Quell True looked over Doc Savage's body. The bearskin they had given him was not much more than a bathing suit in coverage.

"The cold does not seem to affect your body, does it, Mr. Savage?" True remarked. "I have heard a great deal about your physique. Extraordinary, I would say. Fully all that it is said to be."

Doc Savage indicated True, then Pinestopp.

"You two fellows buried the hatchet?" he asked.

True grinned. He was making himself grin.

"Yes," True said. "Buried it in you, wouldn't you say? At any rate, we came to our senses and saw that, in the face of a common enemy—or rather, two common enemies—there was strength in union."

Pinestopp made a grimace that was intended to be a satisfied smirk. Actually, it was not much of anything.

Doc said, "Two common enemies?"

True nodded. "Jefferson Shair and yourself."

"Shair is your enemy?"

True snorted. "Do you have to insult our intelligence with a remark like that?"

"My apologies," Doc Savage said with a touch of irony.

True bent forward from the hips. "Look," he said. "This is unfortunate. I regret it. Mr. Pinestopp, here, regrets it. My men, here, would probably regret it if they were not making so much money from Pinestopp and me, mostly me. I am sure the men who have died regret it."

"That makes the regrets practically unanimous," Monk Mayfair put in.

True bowed slightly. "Excluding Jefferson Shair, of course. I imagine he has no regrets. He is not the kind of man who would."

A man came in from outdoors. He said, "There is a pack train coming up the trail. About twelve or fourteen horses, looks like. Think they've got five-gallon gasoline cans tied to their backs."

The man who had been worried about his friend who owned the cabin emitted a relieved grunt. "That'll be Six-shooter with the gasoline," he said. "I guess the trail was blocked so he couldn't make it with the truck. Lots of snow down in the foothills, and they don't plow this road."

NEWS that gasoline for the planes was coming cheered Edwin Quell True. He smiled and rubbed his hands together.

"Mr. Savage, I'm really doing the only thing I humanly can, under the circumstances," he said. "I wish you would understand that. Probably you won't. But I do wish you could."

Doc said, "It is hard to see it like that."

"You must think it is different than it really is," True said. "Actually, I believe you do. Actually, I believe you have mistaken ideas."

"I would gladly," Doc said, "be corrected."

True whirled to Pinestopp. "Shall we try to correct him, Mr. Pinestopp? What do you say? Shall we?"

Pinestopp lowered his eyes uneasily and muttered, "I don't know. I don't know about him. I wish he was in Timbuktu, or I was there."

True clapped his hands. "Actually, I think I shall tell him the true facts. I think it would be best, Mr. Pinestopp."

"Ugh!"

Pinestopp said. Or that was what it sounded like.

Taking a half step toward Doc Savage, True said, "Mr. Savage, this man Jefferson Shair is a cruel beast. An unbelievably vicious man. He did something horrible to three people, of whom I am one."

Monk Mayfair said, "It couldn't have been anything incredible he did to your pocketbook. I've heard about you being a lion in the Wall Street wolf pack."

Edwin Quell True did not seem to think that was funny. He shuddered.

"Shair," he said, "had two friends in Africa. They knew what he was doing. They were Oliver Brooks and Elbert Wang. Oliver Brooks happened to be a half brother of Mr. Ham Brooks, here, but that was only incidental. He—"

Ham snapped, "Only my friends call me Ham. You will please refer to me as Mr. Brooks, or Theodore Marley Brooks."

"Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks." True bowed. "I apologize."

Ham shrugged.

True said, "You gentlemen see the foundation of this affair, do you not? Jefferson Shair doing something terrible to some people here in America; his two friends in Africa—Oliver Brooks and Elbert Wang—knew what he was doing. That was the situation two weeks ago."

Doc said quietly, "You are not telling us much."

"Oh, but I am." True smiled grimly. "Shair's victims decided to fight back. I was one of the victims. So was poor Pinestopp, here. So was that boy, Jasper. So we—"

Jasper yelled, "Leave me out of that, you money grabber! Shair didn't do nothing to me. He's a swell guy, Jeff is!"

"Poor Jasper," True said. "You did not understand. You have never understood. You are still a little clod."

Jasper bloated with indignation, tried to think of something to say, and finally blurted out a definition. "Clod," he said, "is a knot of worms, the neck of a cow, a loaf of bread, a piece of earth, and an unbright fellow."

True laughed.

"To return to my exposition of what has happened and why," he said, "we victims of Jefferson Shair banded together and turned on him. Shair became scared. He sent for his two friends from Africa, Oliver Brooks and Elbert Wang. They came at once."

True laughed again, gleefully this time.

"But we had *foreseen* that," he continued. "In Africa, *we* had a friend." He turned and bowed at the girl who had trapped Long Tom. "Miss Johnson, here. Miss Johnson knew Oliver Brooks and Elbert Wang rather well. Well enough so that she was able to persuade them to take her into the fold. Our friend, Miss Johnson, joined Oliver Brooks and Elbert Wang. We asked her to do so. Is that clear? We had planted a friend of *ours* in the Shair gang."

Doc Savage said, "Miss Johnson came to New York with Oliver Brooks and Elbert Wang?"

"Naturally."

Doc added, "Using the name of Lola Huttig?"

True chuckled. "That was wonderfully clever, don't you think? Lola Huttig is related to Mr. Pinestopp. Half sister. Quite a coincidence—Oliver Brooks is Ham Brooks' half brother, and Miss Huttig is Mr. Pinestopp's half sister. That gave us the idea of having Miss Johnson pose as Miss Huttig. You see, Mr. Pinestopp, at that time, had not joined us. He was—if I may use a slang expression—Jefferson Shair's

pup at the time. He has since joined us. Last night, in fact. A bit involved, don't you think?"

Doc Savage looked at them steadily. "Why have Miss Johnson use Miss Huttig's name?"

"Oh, something could have gone wrong," True explained. "And in that case, we wanted the police to get on the trail of Lola Huttig, which would lead them to Mr. Pinestopp, which would have, in turn, involved Shair. It was just a thought. It might not have worked."

"What," Doc asked, "about the rather brazen device which tricked Miss Huttig into persuading Jefferson Shair to kill Oliver Brooks?"

True lost his smile. He looked as satisfied as a fox.

"That," he said, "was an excellent use of psychology. We knew Shair would suspect the scheme, and follow along with what Miss Huttig wanted him to do, in the hope of finding out what was behind it. He did. He got surprised. He didn't know we had trick blanks in the gun. He was very, very astounded when he killed his friend, Oliver Brooks."

Doc Savage looked at them steadily for some moments.

"For a change," he said, "why not tell some truth?"

True stiffened. "For example?"

"Why not," Doc said, "tell about the owl?"

"The bird has no importance," True said quickly.

Doc said, "Only enough importance so that every man who has been killed so far has been killed over the owl."

True slowly whitened with rage.

"That kind of damned intelligence on your part," he said, "might easily cause your death."

Pinestopp muttered, "We should have knocked them off back in New York."

True shook his head slowly.

"They are perfect examples, perfect subjects, for the test I wish to make," he said. "So we will take them with us."

Chapter XIV. WHY THE OWL WAS WISE

THEY waited while the cans of gasoline were removed from the pack horses and emptied into the two planes. Six-shooter, the man who had brought the gasoline, was big and sullen and asked no questions.

Monk asked, "Doc, how much of what he told us was the truth?"

"True? It was a clever story, with enough truth to confuse us, he hoped."

"Then some of it was the truth?"

"Yes."

Before they could go deeper into that, they were loaded into the plane. All of them in one ship, this time. They were bound and placed on the cabin floor. Edwin Quell True rode in the plane, and Pinestopp. The pilot was not the one who flew by the rule book. This one was good.

There was one other man. He had a revolver and stood over them the whole flight. He would not allow them to exchange a word.

They flew for two hours.

Then Doc Savage was forced to his feet, made to take a seat. He was lashed there. Monk and Ham, Long Tom and Lola Huttig were forced to do likewise. Pinestopp put a sheepskin coat around Doc Savage.

It turned out that the change from floor to seats was not an act of kindness.

It wasn't kindness. It was rather hideous deceit. They were bait. Bait there where they could be seen through the plane windows.

The airplane landed on the snow in a level mountain meadow and went flying through the powder flakes to stop near a fine log lodge.

Pinestopp sprang out of the plane.

"Shair!" he shouted. "Oh, Jeff! Look who I've brought to you!"

Jefferson Shair came out of the lodge. Doc Savage had not seen him before, but he recognized the man from Lola Huttig's description and the description given by the boy from the candy shop when Shair had first tried to bring the owl to Doc's headquarters. Shair had a rifle.

Pinestopp bellowed in well-imitated delight.

"Jeff!" he cried. "I've brought Doc Savage and some of his men! Look—they're here in the plane."

The man with the gun was sitting on the plane floor, out of Jefferson Shair's view. He said, "One blat out of you fellows, and I'll see what the five bullets in this gun will do to you!"

There was nothing to do but sit there. If there had been anything else, there was not much time to do it.

Because Pinestopp ran to Shair, holding out his hand like an old friend. And Shair took the hand, obviously thinking Pinestopp was a friend. Pinestopp hit him over the head. He used a silk handkerchief filled with broken ice.

Jefferson Shair put his hands straight out in front of him and fell on them.

Edwin Quell True leaned from the plane, screaming, "Kill him! Kill him, now!"

Pinestopp half turned. He shouted, "That's not necessary, right now. We might need him."

True did not insist, which was strange.

THE lodge was magnificent. Each log was perfect, and they were fitted like cabinetwork, so that there was no need of chinking. This was not Western country, but the cabin was furnished. There was Navaho stuff: rugs and pottery, blankets and sand paintings. Here and there was a Mexican gimcrack, but not

many. The Mexican stuff was mostly hammered silver, and it was expensive, the workmanship good.

Doc Savage's hands were still tied when he was thrust into a large bedroom. The room had large windows, and it was difficult to understand just why it had been selected as a prison chamber. Difficult only until Doc got a look through the window. There was a cliff outside, a sheer drop.

Monk and Ham, Long Tom and Lola Huttig, were brought into the room. Their hands were bound. Jasper was shoved inside.

Pinestopp said, "True, you and the pilot and the other man stay here and watch them."

"Where are you going?" Edwin Quell True demanded.

"Outside," said Pinestopp, "to see that the plane is out of the way and that a fire is built so that, when our other plane comes in, they can tell the wind direction. We made a mistake and landed crosswind. If the other plane lands the same way, and the wind should be a little stronger, they might crack up."

"That's right," the pilot said.

Pinestopp went out.

Monk Mayfair looked unhappily at Doc Savage. "How much longer do we put up with this, Doc?"

The door opened again, and Pinestopp dragged the senseless form of Jefferson Shair inside. He dropped Shair on the floor. "He might return to his senses," he explained. Pinestopp then went out again.

Monk repeated his question. "How long do we play meek like this?"

The man with the pistol said, "Right up to the day of your death, homely face. And this might turn out to be the day!"

Doc Savage watched Jefferson Shair. The man has his eyes open. He was watching True and the guard. Whenever either True or the guard would glance in his direction, Shair closed his eyes hastily. Shair was entirely conscious.

Doc said, "Ham, did they change your shoes?"

"No," Ham said. "You were the only one who had his clothing taken from him."

Doc said, "Use the gas in your boot heel."

That was risky. The guard or True might have shot Ham Brooks. Which would have been a shame, because there was no gas in Ham's shoe heel.

The guard did the other and natural thing. He sprang headlong and fell upon Ham's legs, clutching them.

Ham did a very neat job of a trick which he had practiced many times. He got the man's head between his knees. He did it with a convulsive jump and by being prepared. It was a head scissors, in wrestling parlance, one of the most efficient holds in that it was exerted by the largest muscles in the body. Ham put on pressure for all he was worth. The trapped man made moans, gasps and snorts of helplessness.

While True was popping his eyes at that, Doc Savage came to his feet silently in spite of his bound ankles, and fell against True. True upset. Doc got on top of him, did an act with an elbow that brought True's head down on the floor. The man went loose.

Jefferson Shair sat up on the floor.

Ham's victim stopped making noises, and beat the floor feebly with a fist. The blows were like the tail-fluttering of a fish out of water, and they became weaker, then stopped.

"Nice," Long Tom said.

"The word nice, believe it or not," said Jasper, "also meant lewd, lascivious or wanton, once upon a time." He sounded pleased.

Doc Savage said, "Shair, cut us loose."

Jefferson Shair hesitated. He seemed uncertain. His words showed how unsure he was. "I . . . I don't know why you are here," he said uneasily. "It might—that thing you just staged—overpowering of these two men—could be a trick to win my confidence."

Doc said sharply, "Do not be idiotic! The thing we care least about is your confidence. Cut us free!"

Shair still hesitated.

"There is another plane load of them on the way," Doc said rapidly. "They may be here any time. They have the owl."

Shair jumped. "The owl? The one named Owasso?"

"Yes, Owasso."

Jasper said, "He's not kidding you, Mr. Shair. It's the truth. We been having a heck of a time what with getting kidnaped and people being murdered."

Shair looked about wildly, then dashed to a wall plaque which consisted of an Indian tomahawk, a bow and arrow and a feathered headdress, arranged for display. He came back with the tomahawk and chopped Doc loose.

Doc freed Monk, then turned the tomahawk over to him to use in loosening the others. Doc told Jefferson Shair, "Listen!"

Shair put his head back and on one side for a moment, then said excitedly, "It's an airplane. The rest of them are coming!"

"What," Doc asked, "is the situation on weapons?"

"I have one rifle with a telescopic sight," Shair said, "but I do not know what became of it. I had it when they knocked me out."

"Pinestopp has that gun, now," Doc explained. "What is the quickest route out of here?"

"This way," Shair said. "I'll show you."

Doc Savage took Lola Huttig's arm. "Can you ski?"

"Yes," she answered. "Just a fair job, though."

"Shair, can we get skis?" Doc demanded.

"Sure. We'll go by the ski hut."

BEFORE they reached the ski hut, Shair led them through a room which was a great deal more interesting. It was a neat place with three long tables in the center and the walls packed with shelves. The table contained apparatus of a chemical nature, and the shelves held bottles and metal containers.

The plane was circling slowly around the lodge, judging from its noise.

"They may have guns in the plane. Machine guns, that is. Rifles would not be so bad," Doc said. "We better wait here a few seconds, until the ship starts landing."

Jefferson Shair stared at Doc Savage. "Just who is against me, now?"

"Who are in the plane up there, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Just some thugs who have been hired by True and Pinestopp."

Shair shuddered. "So True and Pinestopp have actually merged. I had the idea previously that they had been working separately. Each man for himself."

Doc Savage made no comment.

Shair bit his lip. "Have I got time to talk?"

"Go ahead and talk," Doc said, "and we will interrupt you."

Shair nodded. "Edwin Quell True summoned three friends from Africa to work with him. There was a man named Oliver Brooks, another named Elbert Wang, and a girl named Miss Johnson. What became of them?"

Ham exploded. "Wait a minute! You say those three were working for True?"

"Yes," Jefferson Shair said.

"True told us different. He said you summoned my . . . Oliver Brooks and Elbert Wang to help *you*."

"A lie," Shair said calmly.

Ham bristled. "Oliver Brooks happened to be my half brother. I hesitate to believe he is a crook—or was."

Shair shook his head. "He wasn't, I think. I have never seen Oliver Brooks, that I know of. But I gathered from what I overheard that he turned out to be honest and was a menace to their plans because of that."

"That," Ham said, "must be why they killed him."

"Killed him?"

"Oliver Brooks," Ham said, "was the fellow you were tricked into shooting when you played Sir Galahad to Miss Huttig, here, right at the beginning."

Shair became white. He stared at different objects in the room. "That wasn't the beginning," he said slowly. "This has developed over a period of years."

Doc Savage put in, "There were three other men named Terrence, Sloppy Stone and Harry. They also are dead."

"I am not surprised," Shair admitted. "They were three thugs hired by Pinestopp. They learned what Pinestopp wanted from me."

"You mean," Doc said, "that Terrence, Sloppy Stone and Harry started looking out for themselves. So Pinestopp had to kill them?"

The plane made another moaning swoop overhead.

"I don't know if that was why he killed them," Shair said. "But Pinestopp would have to kill them. He was setting out to get rid of everyone who knew too much about the affair."

Ham Brooks put in grimly, "That True and Pinestopp have been ingenious devils. They tricked you into killing Oliver Brooks—"

Shair nodded. "They thought they could use that to frighten me into giving them what they wanted. It did not work."

The plane motor sound became abruptly less.

Ham said, "And they did a fiendish job of killing Terrence, Sloppy Stone and Harry—and even Elbert Wang—and laying the job onto us."

Shair said grimly, "Why shouldn't they be clever? They were subjects for my experiments. True and Pinestopp, and little Jasper, here."

Jasper, astounded, said, "Me—a subject for what?"

Monk said, "That plane is landing. We better postpone this."

They headed for the door. Long Tom muttered, "What gets me is why that danged owl was so wise."

Chapter XV. OF THE MIND

JUST as they were going out of the door, Jasper pointed and let out a yelp.

"There!" the kid said. "There's the glass ball I saw Mr. Shair keeping the owl in a long time ago."

"Yes, Jasper," Shair said. "Come on."

"Yeah, get a move on, you little encyclopedia," Monk said.

The cold seized them when they stepped outside. It made Doc Savage realize suddenly that he wore nothing but the improvised bearskin and the sheepskin coat which they had put on him.

The ski shack was small. It was warmer there. The building was made of logs, and evidently heat was piped from the lodge.

The skis were on racks. There were more than a dozen pairs, most of them the short, narrow slalom or touring model, much used in Europe. There were two pairs of heavy jumping skis, with triple grooves for steadiness in the rushing descent before the jump and afterward.

Jefferson Shair said, "This is a break." He pointed at perhaps a dozen pairs of ski shoes. "I had them out here oiling them and never took them back to the house."

Doc seized a pair of shoes that looked large enough. His feet were not small. "Put them on," he said.

Monk muttered, "Have we got time?"

"Without skis, we would be helpless in this deep snow," Doc said.

They laced on the ski shoes frantically and began adjusting ski bindings.

Ham said, "What was that glass ball Jasper mentioned?"

Shair hesitated. Ham told him, "You might as well out with it. Doc probably knows what this is all about, now. The rest of us are sure to find out. Doc will tell us, if no one else."

Shair shrugged.

"I used the glass ball to treat the owl," he said. "Jasper got a glimpse of it one day through the open door. He did not understand that I was treating the owl. He never understood."

"Treating the owl?" Ham eyed the man.

"Experimenting with the method of administering the Vitamin M," Shair explained.

"Vitamin M?"

Shair shrugged, this time apologetically. "Well, that is what I have designated it. Vitamin M is as good a name as any. The M simply occurred to me after I had been calling the stuff Mental Vitamin for some time. Mental—M. M for Mental Vitamin."

The plane had landed, and suddenly they could hear shouting.

Doc said, "Come on." He picked up an armload of skis. Monk took the remaining ones. They left no skis in the hut. Doc asked, "These all the skis on the place?" Shair nodded.

They went out into the cold afternoon. There was about five inches of powder snow over a crust. The crust was not thick enough to support them. They broke through.

Doc suggested, "Put on the skis, now. There is a short downhill run, then a swing around that mass of stone will put us out of sight."

They were shot at three times going down the slope, but the marksmanship had a hasty quality, and the lead hit no one. It sounded viciously close.

MONK MAYFAIR had been digesting what Jefferson Shair had told them. Shair's conversation, to Monk's notion, had been incoherent, hasty. The man was excited. He was like a man jerking cats out of a sack and saying, "Here's one. And here's another." That was understandable. Monk didn't blame Shair. Shair was in trouble.

Shair was a man who had been in trouble for some time, judging from the way his face looked. The lines around his eyes looked as if they had been put there with a black pencil.

Someone took two more shots in their direction. The lead went somewhere else, but the pair of reports cracked out in the valley with violence. An army rifle, or some other caliber of that size, perhaps a .270.

"Where we going?" Monk demanded.

"Up the mountain slope," Doc said. "Keep our altitude. If they get too close, we can always go down."

The same tactics you use in an airplane fight, Monk thought. Keep your altitude. He looked back to see how the others were making out on their skis. They were doing very well. Doc's aides could all ski. Jasper was floundering, but Doc Savage was helping him; so the kid would be all right.

Jasper saw Monk watching him. "Skis," said Jasper, "were invented by a Norseman named Olaf the Ache. Something should have been done about Olaf."

Monk grinned. Then he lost the grin. Great grief. This brat Jasper! The kid had memorized part of the dictionary! Yet, Doc Savage's investigation of Jasper's previous life showed that Jasper had been a boy so dumb that he was unable to memorize the multiplication table. Monk suddenly recalled that Doc Savage had made his trilling sound when he learned that fact about Jasper.

Monk glanced at Doc in surprise. So *that* was when Doc Savage had realized what was behind this. Monk felt a touch of self-disgust. It had been right there before them all the time, the truth had. And none of them—at least Monk hadn't—had seen it.

"Jasper was a dumb kid who had been turned into a mental phenomenon by your Vitamin M?" Monk asked Jefferson Shair.

A flurry of bullets arrived. These were close. "They've climbed on the lodge roof," Doc said. "Get down and work up this gully."

Shair answered Monk's question. "Yes, that is why Jasper is now the youth he is."

"Pest would be a better word," Monk said cheerfully.

Jasper said, "Lay off me, you short-haired object."

Jefferson Shair told Monk, "Edwin Quell True and Pinestopp were also subjects for my experiments."

"Yeah," Monk said. "I begin to see that."

"The experiments," Shair said bitterly, "were a failure."

"It strikes me they were a hell of a success," Monk told him. "I never saw two slicker crooks in my life."

Jefferson Shair made a miserable gesture. "The acceleration of their intellects resulted in unbalanced personalities—individuals without a social intellect commensurate with their mental capacities."

Monk thought that over, trying to figure out what it meant.

Ham Brooks yelled out suddenly and pointed. "I thought they didn't have skis!" he exploded.

A procession of men on skis was flashing across a clearing. They were coming from the lodge. They came double-stemming down an abrupt slope with snow flying, and each man made a fairly good Christy to the left and shot out of view.

Jefferson Shair said, "This is not good."

Monk considered the remark superfluous. Anybody could see it was not good.

DOC SAVAGE indicated a long ridge of rock. The ridge was exposed, and snow had been swept clear of the stone by the wind.

"Up there," he said.

Monk surmised what the bronze man planned doing, and grinned. When they reached the rock ledge, Monk was ready and promptly scooped pretty Lola Huttig up in his arms. He knew that would disappoint Ham.

Doc said, "That's the idea. Half of us will carry the other half. Take off your skis, to make it easier."

The hump of the ridge concealed them from the pursuers. They started downhill. Monk carried Lola, Doc carried Jasper, and Ham, to his disgust, rode the back of Jefferson Shair. Shair gave Ham a ride that stood his hair on end. They were not a hundred yards down the slope before Ham would rather have been in the clutch of an eagle.

Monk told Lola, "They'll think half of us went the other way, following rock which will not show our tracks. They may split up to follow what they think is both parties."

Lola said, "Mr. Savage is ingenious, isn't he?"

"I'm pretty good myself," Monk warned her.

"What will they do if they catch us?" the girl asked anxiously.

"They'll get themselves all beat up with my fists," Monk told her grimly.

"And then?"

"They're liable to make us dead," Monk said without any illusions. "We're unarmed. They've got guns galore."

Doc called, "Shair, you know this country. What is our best bet?"

"Our best bet," Shair said grimly, "would be a miracle. I don't know anything else that will save us."

This about coincided with Monk's private opinion. They were good on skis but not a lot better than the men who were following them. And they not only had no weapons; they had no food. No blankets, either. Probably no matches.

Doc began going straight up a steep slope. He used the herringbone climb—each ski planted ahead of the other at as nearly right angles to the slope as flexibility of leg muscles would allow.

Monk grimaced. He even wished Ham was carrying Lola. He looked at Ham riding on the back of Jefferson Shair. Even Shair was having tough going. Monk's legs felt as if they would split open. The ache ran up as far as the back of his neck. Ham helped the situation not at all by grinning widely.

At the top, Doc Savage surprised Monk—and apparently the others also—by stopping.

Shair said, "We've got to keep ahead of them. They have rifles."

Doc lowered Jasper to the snow. "Get back a slight distance, and roll up a snowball apiece," he said. "Get the balls about three feet in diameter, not less, then roll them to the edge."

"Oh!" Ham said. "You are going to roll snowballs down the slope at them."

Monk rubbed his aching legs, then began rolling up a ball of snow. The snow was barely damp enough to ball. It was a good idea. A ball of snow going down that slope would soon become as formidable as a derailed locomotive taking a river bank.

Monk finished his snowball, sank down beside it. "Shair," he said. "I've got a question."

Jefferson Shair crawled to his side. "Yes, what is it?"

"Those fellows, True and Pinestopp, had us prisoners for a while," Monk said remindingly. "They could have done almost anything they wanted with us."

"Yes."

Monk scowled. "Why didn't they make a move to kill us? It wasn't because they were afraid to. They had already killed those other poor devils."

Shair said, "They killed Oliver Brooks, Elbert Wang, Terrence, Sloppy Stone and Harry, all because the men who got murdered knew too much. True and Pinestopp were trying to keep the secret of Vitamin M for themselves."

"That," Monk said, "is all the more reason for their trying to get us out of the way. Why didn't they?"

Shair hesitated. "They wanted to experiment on you."

"Yeah, I heard them say that. Experiment how?"

Shair said, "You will be surprised to know—"

Came an interruption in the form of five shots. The bullets hit close. Ham yelled, "Here they come!"

Doc Savage lifted his head for a quick look down the slope. Four men were making an upward rush, while others covered their charge with rifles. A moment after Doc lowered his head, a bullet passed where it had been, making a bullet's characteristic hissing suck and snap sound. Doc said, "Two of the snowballs."

Monk heaved his snowball, then turned and burrowed through the snow to the shelter of a rock. Long Tom let go his snowball, then likewise took cover.

Performance of the tumbling snowballs—about three feet in diameter when they started rolling downward—was impressive. It was terrifying! The balls got huge, and pieces broke off and formed other balls, so that the two missiles became a dozen, some large enough to smash down trees.

Ham, after it subsided, said regretfully, "They all got out of the way. But they won't try coming up that hill again."

Shair said, "It will take them about an hour to go around. This is the only route up that cliff for about three miles." He glanced at the sky. "But they will still get here before dark."

DOC SAVAGE crawled over to Shair and said, "You were about to tell Monk something just before they tried to rush us. I am curious to know what it was."

"Oh, that." Shair brought out a cigarette and a windproof lighter. "I was about to tell Mr. Mayfair that my experiments leading up to development of the mental vitamin followed the usual course."

"Meaning?"

"I first found what causes stupidity. You know—like the scientists first discovered there were germs, then developed a method of killing them."

"This stuff of yours," Doc Savage suggested, "is properly a brain food?"

"Yes, but a little more complex than that," Shair replied. "You see, I began my experiments in Africa. I've worked on them for years. Oliver Brooks and Elbert Wang were associated with me in Africa as laboratory men. They knew what I was doing."

"What did you start to tell Monk?"

"Somehow," Shair said, "people never seem to think it possible for a scientist to come from Africa. They think of Africa as a place where lions roar and elephants trumpet. Well, it is. But I carried on my laboratory work, anyway. It was not difficult."

"What," said Doc, "did you start to tell Monk?"

"That I have two compounds developed," Shair explained. "I have one which will make a man—or any other living thing—very dumb. It is the opposite of Vitamin M. It does the thing which Vitamin M cures."

"Why were you going to tell Monk that?"

"Oh, he was asking me why you fellows were kept alive," Shair replied. "It was because they wanted to use the opposite of Vitamin M on you. You were highly intelligent men. They could dope you up with the stuff, and you would become stupid. They wanted to test it."

"Why?"

Shair shrugged. "Some devilish scheme, probably. I imagine Edwin Quell True had some idea of giving it to a very rich or powerful individual—once he knew how it would work—and cheating the rich man after he became stupid. In fact, True mentioned such a possibility to me once. That was before I realized he was an incorrigible crook."

Talking seemed to depress Jefferson Shair. He sank his chin in his palms. His face was long. "I should have had better sense," he said, "than to tamper with men's minds. I should have known you cannot upset the balance between mental capacity and social intellect which nature has taken millions of years to develop."

"At first glance, it looks wonderful," Doc said. "Brain food which will make dumb men very clever. Turn a dumb boy like Jasper into a mental marvel."

"I got Jasper out of an orphan home because he was so dumb," Shair said miserably. "But look at him! A brain capable of amazing things. But no balance, no sense of values. He memorizes the dictionary and quotes it. Does utterly childish things like that."

Doc said, "Properly handled, the thing has possibilities."

Shair groaned. "I wish I had never found it." He gestured down the slope. "We wouldn't be here, now, unarmed and without food, hunted by a gang of killers who are sure to get us."

Chapter XVI. LONE WOLF

MONK MAYFAIR sat in the snow and toyed with envious thoughts. He thought about the brain food. The course of his thoughts, like all rivers and streams, eventually ended in the ocean. Monk's ocean was one of envious desire. He wished he had some of that mental vitamin.

He watched Ham. Monk and Ham had conducted a good-natured rivalry for years. Hardly a day passed but that they had a quarrel. They had the habit of pulling gags on each other, and the score over the years was about half and half.

Monk scowled. Ham was talking to pretty Lola Huttig. He was comforting the young woman, making her forget the danger. He was doing himself some good, too, it seemed to Monk. Monk was disgusted.

With some of that mental vitamin, Monk reflected, he would be able to outclass Ham in all respects. Which would be swell.

There was enough kid in Monk that getting the brain food and becoming Ham's definite superior suddenly became vitally important.

Monk grinned fiercely. He grasped the skis, eased back into the shrubbery, and crept away from the others.

He traveled two hundred yards, and his conscience got the best of him. He went back. He looked for Doc Savage. The bronze man was not in sight.

"Blazes!" Monk said. He sat down. But he did not remain there long. He got up and left.

Monk's idea was to circle widely and go down the steep cliff face on skis. The snow was loose, and the cliff too steep to be climbed. But going down it was a different proposition.

He found a point that looked possible. He took a deep breath. He went down, stemming. He gathered speed, probably sixty miles an hour. He was going too fast for any kind of stem turn, or even a telemark. He used the pure Christy turn, made with powerful and rhythmical weight shifting on his skis.

He was white and perspiring when he finally managed to brake with his sticks to a moderate speed of forty miles an hour or so. Expert skiing country, someone had called this. It was worse than that. It was man-killing country.

However, no one had shot at him, so probably he had not been seen. He changed his course, made for the spot below the lodge. Then he climbed upward slowly. He made an inspection from behind an evergreen thicket.

Two men were guarding the planes.

After a while, another man came and stood in the door of the lodge, looking upward, apparently listening for some sound that would indicate how the chase was progressing.

Monk grinned. He was relaxed, now. Trouble was his dish, and danger somehow had never meant anything to him. It did not occur to him that his one-man expedition was suicidal.

He worked upward, followed the thickets close to the lodge and left his skis. He took a ski pole, however. It was a steel pole with a sharp point, a deadly weapon.

He walked cautiously into the lodge. And immediately, he had a piece of luck. The guard, the man who had just stood outside listening, walked unwittingly into Monk's arms. Or close enough so that Monk got him.

Monk got him with both hands and with force. He slammed the fellow against a wall and did his best to ram a fist through the man's stomach to his backbone. Then, while the man was green and gasping, Monk listened. No one came. This fellow must be the only one in the lodge.

Monk put his face close to the prisoner's face and said, "Where is this brain food?"

The captive croaked in horror. Ham often said that Monk's face was the most unearthly thing yet created, which was not too much of an exaggeration.

"Come on," Monk snarled. "Where is it?"

The man jerked an arm. He finally managed words. "In there, the yellow suitcase," he said. He pointed.

Monk hit him then. Monk hit him the way he wanted to do it, and jaw bones and teeth came loose. Monk placed him tenderly on the floor.

He went in and found the yellow suitcase.

THE stuff was in small vials. It looked like molasses, with a touch of licorice. Monk eyed one of them. The label said:

WARNING!

NOT MORE THAN TWO TABLE-

SPOONFULS EACH FOUR HOURS.

Monk snorted.

"If I ever needed this stuff I need it now," he muttered. "I'm going to have to be very mental indeed to get away from here and get back to the others."

He drank a bottle of the stuff. It was a little more than the prescribed dose of two tablespoonfuls. About four tablespoons, to be exact. But Monk figured he was constitutionally fitted for a bigger dose.

The bottles—all of them—had green labels, he noted. He stuffed his pockets with them.

He did one other thing. The owl, Owasso, was in a cage. Monk turned him loose.

"Come to think of it, I never have found out why you are so important," Monk told the owl. "But scat, anyway. Scat! Go off and hunt rabbits."

The owl ignored an open window. The bird flapped after Monk when the latter started outside.

"Scat!" Monk said. The owl ignored the command.

Monk managed to creep outdoors without being discovered. The owl flapped to a tree and alighted.

Monk snapped his feet into the ski harness, and moved away. The owl followed him.

"Go away, you night chicken!" Monk muttered. "Go find a nice mouse."

Monk was hopeful that the mental vitamin would begin to show results. All he could feel, however, was a burning in his stomach. As if he had taken a very potent drink of tequila, the Mexican beverage made from cactus.

He worked his way cautiously through the trees. As soon as he dared, he threw a snowball at the owl. Owasso bristled his feathers indignantly, but did not depart.

Monk made another snowball, this one with a rock inside it, and was about to throw it when a voice said, "You hit that owl, goblin face, and I'll make you sorry."

Monk jumped a foot. It was Jasper. It was the others, also. Ham and Long Tom and Lola Huttig and Jefferson Shair. All of them but Doc Savage.

"I left you up on the mountain!" Monk gasped.

"We came down," Ham explained unnecessarily.

It was Lola Huttig who said, "Mr. Savage has a plan. He had gone down to the lodge to get the mental vitamin, the brain food."

"Huh?" Monk said.

"Mr. Savage," added Lola, "has explained his plan. We will seize the brain food. There is only a small quantity of it, and True and Pinestopp do not know how to manufacture more of it. They will follow us to get what we have. We will lead them into a trap."

Monk opened his mouth to say that Doc could have saved himself the trouble, that he, Monk, had the brain food in his pockets.

But Jefferson Shair stopped the speech. Shair's words stunned Monk.

"Mr. Savage will get the red-labeled bottles," Shair said. "They contain the mental vitamin."

"Red labels?" Monk said hoarsely.

The labels on Monk's bottles were green.

"Yes," Shair said. "The green labels are on the bottles which contain the stuff having the opposite effect."

"What do you mean—opposite effect?" Monk asked.

"The green bottles," Shair said, "will make a man stupid!"

Monk felt as if he had been shot.

Or worse.

IT did not interest Monk at all when Jefferson Shair explained why the owl, Owasso, had been the source of so much trouble.

"It is possible," Shair said, "to kill an animal—or even a person—which has been treated with the mental vitamin. By analyzing the brain tissues, the chemical content of the brain food can be ascertained. That is a peculiarity of the stuff."

"Then True and Pinestopp," said Ham Brooks, "were after the owl so they could kill him and make such an analysis?"

"Yes." Shair eyed the owl. "An analysis of the bird's brain tissue would show the chemical content of my formula."

"Then why," said Ham, "didn't they just analyze the owl after they got him? Why come up here?"

Shair shrugged. "Greed. They wanted to get me out of the way. They wanted the other stuff, the concoction that makes a person stupid."

Ham asked, "Could you analyze the brain of a dumb person and find out the nature of *that* compound?"

Monk had a hideous feeling that Ham was looking at him when he said that.

Shair laughed. "Oh, no, that wouldn't work," he said. "It just happens that the brain food is more subject to analysis after it has been taken into the brain tissues. Strange, of course. Just one of those freaks of science."

Monk tried two or three times, finally managed to ask, "Could you make a guy dumb with one mixture, then make him bright again with the other."

Shair shook his head. "That does not seem to work."

Jasper stared at Monk for a while. "What's the matter with you, goon face?"

"Nothing," Monk said with horror.

SUDDENLY, shot sound was on the air. A single report. Then half a dozen. From the direction of the lodge. And then a man was bellowing an alarm.

Lola Huttig said proudly, "Mr. Savage."

Doc joined them shortly. He was moving fast on skis. He had a package—the bottles with red labels, Monk reflected grimly.

"Get going," Doc said. "They will be after us."

They traveled fast for a while. Monk saw that they were heading back up the mountain again, following roughly the same course they had taken before.

Doc evidently had spotted some natural trap for their enemies on the first trip up.

They were not chased immediately. Somewhat surprised, they sat down to get breath and wait.

Doc decided aloud, "The three at the lodge are worried. They are waiting for the others to come back before they chase us." The bronze man was silent a moment. "A very strange thing down there at the lodge."

Ham asked, "What do you mean, strange?"

"A man was lying unconscious in the lodge," Doc said. "He looked as if he had been hit a terrific blow."

Monk did not explain how that had happened. He held his head in his hands. The less anybody knew about what he had done, the better it would suit him. He could feel himself getting dumb.

Long Tom reported, "Here they come at last." The electrical expert gripped his ski poles. "Want me to go on ahead, Doc?"

Doc Savage nodded. "You know your job."

Monk hoped that Long Tom knew his job, whatever it was. It speedily became evident that they were going to be overhauled. Doc's party was tired. The group behind, some of them at least, were fresh. And the pursuers were in a murderous frenzy.

They came to what amounted to a trail along the face of a steep slope. It was a ledge, probably twenty feet wide. Not difficult skiing, but with a deadly drop on the right, the sheer slope on the left.

The ski tracks which they themselves had made earlier were now underfoot. And suddenly Monk knew what Doc planned. It was a simple thing. So simple, Monk reflected sadly, that even he could still understand it.

They moved perhaps a hundred and fifty yards, and Doc said, "All right. We take cover here."

An avalanche in the past had left boulders on the ledge, and they crouched among these.

The pursuers appeared shortly—True and Pinestopp and the whole gang. They were packed close together, except for two stragglers, who were farther back.

Doc let them get well out on the ledge.

He stepped out into view. He shouted, "True! Pinestopp! Look above you!"

Long Tom was above them. Two hundred yards up the sheer slope. He had a great snowball balanced.

Doc got under cover swiftly, because Edwin Quell True had lifted a rifle.

Then one of the stragglers shot Long Tom.

The rifle report was a vicious snap. The two stragglers were well clear of any avalanche that might be started by Long Tom's snowball. Probably, that was why one of them fired so willingly.

Long Tom went down convulsively. He was hard hit. Pain made him tie into a knot. And his agony spasm dislodged the snowball.

The snowball was big, at least five feet. It toppled over slowly. It split on the first bounce. But there was enough left to cause havoc. The sticky snow gathered in great lumps. They whirled downward.

It was not an avalanche. Nothing so spectacular. Just a rolling flood of loose snow that pushed out on the trail and carried True and Pinestopp and the others over the cliff!

The sounds they made going over were not pleasant, and for fully five minutes a man could be heard screaming down below. He screamed steadily, so continuously that it was hard to imagine when he took in breath.

Jefferson Shair climbed down to the screaming man, but the cries stopped before he got there, and Shair came back and shrugged gravely.

Ham and Monk went up to Long Tom.

"His hip bone is shattered," Ham yelled down. "He's also got a broken wrist."

Long Tom had had his right hand at his side when the bullet hit him, and the slug had broken both wrist and hip bones.

Both stragglers—the man who fired the shot, and his companion—had fled. Later, one of the planes left the flat near the lodge and lost itself in the sky. The pair must have been aboard, because they were not seen again.

"Gratitude," said Jasper, "is the state of warm and friendly feeling awakened by a favor received. Which is what we owe those two lizards."

Chapter XVII. NO WISE MEN

TWO weeks after that day, Ham Brooks walked into Doc Savage's headquarters and fell into a chair. Ham held his sides and laughed until his eyes ran tears.

"Oh, mamma!" he chortled. "I just found out the funniest thing in my life."

Doc Savage showed interest.

"Monk," Ham explained, "raided that cabin that afternoon ahead of you, Doc. He got what he thought was the brain food. He took a whole bottle at one gulp. He was going to get smart."

Doc Savage frowned. "Mr. Shair and myself checked the vials of Vitamin M, and found none missing."

Ham blew up again with mirth.

"That's just it," he said. "Monk got the green-labeled bottles. The dumbbell maker. He got that by mistake. He drank a whole bottle of it."

Doc straightened. "That is serious."

"It's funny to me," Ham roared. "It doesn't seem to have any effect on him. That's what makes it a scream. The stuff couldn't make Monk any dumber."

Doc looked at the lawyer suspiciously. "Did you tell Monk that?"

"Yeah," Ham said. Ham took off his necktie and opened his shirt. There was a large bruise on his shoulder. "Yeah, I told him. This is how close he came to braining me with a paper weight."

The telephone rang, and Doc picked up the instrument, said, "Yes, Mr. Shair. Come right up."

Ham sobered slightly. "That Jefferson Shair?"

"Yes. Shair is coming up, now."

"He's been mighty scarce the last two weeks," Ham said thoughtfully. "What has he been doing?"

Doc Savage's metallic features were expressionless. "Shair said he had some thinking to do."

Ham considered that. "What are you and Shair going to do about that brain food?"

"That is up to Shair," Doc replied quietly. "It is his property."

"He has all the stuff, hasn't he?"

Doc looked strange for a moment. "Yes, Shair insisted that he have the entire supply of the substance."

Jefferson Shair was a man with a mission. He lost no time getting it off his chest.

"Mr. Savage," Shair said. "I have reached a conclusion. My Vitamin M, as I called it, is a tragic thing. It speeds up the brain's mechanical efficiency, but it does not speed up in like proportion the appreciation of the use of such efficiency. In other words, it is mental efficiency unseasoned by experience, proving simply that nature has the correct balance after all. A great brain without the social intellect to match it is exactly what we have seen it to be—a menace to the owner and to others."

Doc Savage made the low trilling that was his habit in moments of surprise.

"You have destroyed Vitamin M?" he asked.

"I have," Shair said grimly. "Every bit of it! And I am wiping from my memory all thought of the formula. I will never manufacture the stuff again. No one can ever make me tell the formula. The process of its making is very intricate, and I doubt that I could do it now without my notes. I have burned those."

Utter silence held the office after the man's statement. There did not seem to be much for anyone to say. Shair had announced his decision. He had spoken flatly. They had come to know the man well enough to be sure he meant it.

In Ham's mind was the thought that probably it was better that way. He suspected that Doc agreed. Probably, the bronze man had foreseen this. Otherwise, he would not have turned the stuff over to Shair.

Shair cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"I have an added confession to make," he said. "It concerns that other formula—the material for making men stupid."

Ham sat up straight.

"The latter compound," Shair said, "does not exist."

"Doesn't exist!" Ham blurted. "You mean the stuff wasn't genuine?"

"Molasses," Shair said. "With a little harmless acid added to burn the tummy of anyone who took it. For effect."

"Great grief!" Ham yelled. "Why did you claim there was such a thing?"

Shair looked uncomfortable. "A product of my distracted condition," he explained. "I got the idea I could make everyone think I had the means of righting the damage I had done with the brain food. I guess I had gone completely asinine for a while. Nervous desperation, I believe, led me to invent the existence of the stuff. It was purely imaginary, I assure you. It never existed."

Ham thought that over.

He doubled up with laughter.

"Don't tell Monk there was no stupifier," he said, hysterical with glee. "Don't tell him. Do me that favor. It'll be years before I get another joke as good as this on Monk. Don't spoil it!"

Shair grinned faintly. "You are not angry with me—about my decision."

"Right," Doc Savage said, "means conforming to justice, suitable, proper, to restore to natural position, and the side opposite the left—as Jasper would say."

THE END