



THE SPOOK OF GRANDPA EBEN

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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*Scanned and Proofed
by Tom Stephens*

Chapter I

THE name on his birth certificate was Wilmore Riggs, so it was natural for everybody to call him Billy Riggs. He was a pleasant young man; the name fitted. He was twenty-four years old.

He had inherited the small black Indian-head charm from his Grandfather Eben, whom he had never seen, but whose rascally reputation had always secretly amused him. Grandfather Eben had been dead thirty years or so, but Eben's awful reputation was still going full blast. Grandfather Eben was certainly the skeleton in the Riggs' closet.

Billy Riggs had worn Grandfather Eben's Indian-head as a watch charm for a long time.

When he was a kid, attending grade school, Billy Riggs had read the fanciful story about Aladdin and the lamp that Aladdin rubbed, and the genie that popped out to serve as Aladdin's servant. Later Billy had seen the story presented, with Hollywood embellishment, in two motion pictures. He had been much impressed when the Aladdin in the movies rubbed the lamp and the genie came out; the titanic proportions of the genie had awed Billy Riggs.

It had never occurred to Billy Riggs that there could be any possible similarity between Grandpa Eben's Indian-head and that magic lamp of Aladdin.

Because Billy Riggs had too much common sense to believe that such stuff was possible.

But it came to pass otherwise.

It came to pass otherwise on a Monday morning, 8 a.m. to be exact.

Mr. Harland Crown Copeland, piloted by a large Negro chauffeur in his limousine, pulled into the filling station where Billy Riggs was employed. Harland Crown Copeland rolled down the rear window of the limousine and gave young Billy Riggs a look of contempt and mean, unforgiving hatred.

“I will take four gallons of gas, jailbird,” Harland Crown Copeland said.

Harland Crown Copeland was president of the town's largest industry, Copeland Chemical Co., and a generally hated man. He was practically without admirers, and certainly without friends. A summary of his character would include most of the unpleasant words in the dictionary. He was selfish, ignoble, sneaky, stingy, baleful, malignantly hateful, and diabolically vengeful. You could say everything about him except that he was not important. He was about the most important man in town, but that was only because he owned most of the town. He was a hound after a dollar. He thought a lot of his dollars. Take one of his dollars, and he hated you worse than if you had chopped off one of his fingers.

Billy Riggs ran gasoline through a hose into the tank of Harland Crown Copeland's limousine. Billy's neck was red with embarrassed rage.

Another car drove into the filling station at this point, and stopped on the other side of the pump island. The driver of this car was Ezra Strong, a pleasant young man who was general manager of a small local concern which was now engaged in manufacturing torpedo driving mechanisms. Ezra Strong waited patiently, smiling at Billy Riggs.

“I'm surprised you're not back in the State penitentiary,” Harland Crown Copeland said to young Riggs.

Riggs flushed. “Mr. Copeland, you haven't any right to talk to me like that.”

“You're a born thief.” Harland Crown Copeland pointed at the gasoline gauge. It registered just a fraction of a cent short of the exact amount. “You have swindled me out of a little of my gasoline,” Copeland said. “In the course of a day, I imagine you rob enough people to make it worth while.”

BILLY RIGGS was sick with embarrassment, because Harland Crown Copeland was speaking loud enough for Ezra Strong to hear. Ezra Strong had heard, and he was frowning.

“You'll be back in the penitentiary, Riggs,” said Harland Crown Copeland emphatically.

Billy Riggs was not a sheep. Enough was enough. He stepped grimly to the limousine window.

“Mr. Copeland, I never stole a nickel of that money which came up missing when I was working for you,” he said. “I am convinced the money got into the wastebasket by mistake and was burned. But I couldn't prove that. So you had me tried and sentenced to two years in the penitentiary. I served my sentence. I paid my debt to society. Let me alone.”

“You haven't been cured of being a thief.”

“I never was a thief. Let me alone.”

The chauffeur was sitting very still with a wooden expression on his face, obviously not liking the way his employer was acting. The chauffeur was a new man, hadn't had the job over two weeks, and Billy Riggs

wondered as a side thought how long the man would be able to stomach his job.

Harland Crown Copeland glared at Billy Riggs.

“I must remind Police Chief Flannigan to keep a close watch on you,” he said. “And I must remind your employer that if he expects any Copeland Chemical Co. trade, he should not employ jailbirds.”

Young Riggs trembled with rage and sick helplessness. He happened, purely by chance, to clutch the Indian-charm which was attached to his watch chain. He looked down at the charm.

“You see this?” he asked grimly, indicating the charm. “My Grandfather Eben owned it, and when he met somebody who deserved what was coming to them, he used to rub it and make a wish. And whoever he wished against would get their just desserts.”

Billy Riggs gave the charm a violent rub.

“Grandfather Eben's spook, wherever you are, give this old man what he's got coming to him!” Riggs said violently.

Harland Crown Copeland laughed contemptuously.

“You're crazy,” he said, “as well as an inveterate thief.”

Then he spoke curtly to the chauffeur, and the limousine rolled away.

BILLY RIGGS stood there helplessly, realizing he had been a fool, and thinking: Now I'm going to lose this job.

A pleasant voice—Ezra Strong's—spoke, saying, “That was telling off the old dollar ferret.”

“Hello, Mr. Strong,” Billy Riggs answered miserably. “Yes, but it was kind of silly, wasn't it? And what good will it do me.”

“You think he'll get you fired?”

“I know darned well he will. Mr. Roberts, who owns this filling station, has already been ordered to fire me and he refused. Copeland ordered the chemical company employees to stop buying their gasoline here, and business has fallen off more than half. Mr. Roberts is a good guy, and he might stand by me, but I can't see him go broke on my account. I'll have to quit.”

“Copeland is a mean old rascal, all right.”

“Brother, that guy in the 'Christmas Carol', Scrooge, couldn't hold a candle to him for meanness.”

“Don't feel badly, Riggs. Nobody in town but Copeland really thinks you took that money.”

“I feel awful, anyway,” Billy Riggs confessed.

“Old Copeland is so mean he's almost a comic opera character. But, unfortunately, he's flesh and blood, and owns most of the property in town.”

“I know.”

“Brace up.”

“The hell of it is, now that I’ve been in the penitentiary, the army doesn’t want me,” Billy Riggs said sadly. “Getting turned down by the army because of that gives a man a pretty bad feeling, Mr. Strong.”

Ezra Strong nodded sympathetically. He was looking at the Indian-head charm which young Riggs was wearing on his watch chain.

“You know, it would serve the old miser right if that curse you put on him sort of worried him.”

“Oh, that.” Billy Riggs looked at the charm uncomfortably. “That was a silly thing to do, wasn’t it?”

“Maybe not. It was better than just giving him a cussing, wasn’t it?”

“Perhaps. A cussing wouldn’t have done me any good.” Billy Riggs fingered the charm ruefully. “It wouldn’t have given me as much satisfaction.”

Ezra Strong indicated the charm. “You say that belonged to your grandfather.”

“Yes. Grandfather Eben Riggs.”

“Did he live around here?”

Billy Riggs shook his head. “No. He was a roamer. Grandfather Eben is the skeleton in the family closet.”

“Quite a guy, eh?”

“He sure was. If there was any devilment around he didn’t get into, I never heard about it. Of course, like a lot of old-timers, his reputation has probably gotten bigger than he was.”

“What business was Grandfather Eben in?”

Billy Riggs grinned faintly. “Monkey business, mostly, from what I’ve been told. You see, I never knew him. He died before my time. He died at the head of an army of two hundred adventurers who were trying to kidnap the head Lama of Tibet. Got killed in the battle.”

“That kind of a bird, eh?”

“Grandfather Eben,” said Billy Riggs, “won and lost at least ten fortunes, and each one was more than a million dollars. I know that for a fact.”

“He must have been lucky.”

“He was something. I always heard he attributed it to this charm.”

“Let’s look at that charm,” Ezra Strong was interested.

BILLY RIGGS carefully unhooked the little ornament from his watch chain and passed it to Ezra Strong for inspection. Strong turned it curiously in his fingers. It was a tiny carving of a human head done in some shiny black material.

“What’s it made of?” Ezra Strong squinted at the thing. “What kind of black stone is this?”

“I don’t know. I took it to a jeweler once, and he didn’t know either. I understand Grandfather Eben claimed it was a drop of the devil’s blood that had frozen.”

“Frozen?”

“Well, the theory was that it is so much hotter in hell where the devil lives that this climate on earth was relatively cold enough to freeze the drop of devil's blood as soon as it dropped out of the wound. Of course that's tripe, but it's part of the story.”

Ezra Strong smiled. “Well, it's a good story.”

“Yeah, it is, at that.”

“Makes you feel better just to handle the thing and talk about it, eh?”

“I guess so.” Billy Riggs looked startled. “Hey, you're kidding me. I feel better since I've been talking, but the reason for that is that you generally feel better after you talk your troubles over with somebody.”

“Maybe.”

“No maybe to it. It's a fact.”

Ezra Strong weighed the charm. “This isn't an American Indian's head.”

“Oh, no. It's an Indian from India, a Hindu or something.”

“But handling it makes you feel better?”

“Aw, shucks, Mr. Strong. You're joshing me.”

Ezra Strong laughed. “Let's try a little experiment, Billy. Why don't you take the thing and rub it and wish more bad luck on our mutual friend, Copeland. Or is that the way it's done?”

Billy Riggs nodded. “That's the idea. It's supposed to put a spook or a hoodoo or something after the fellow you wish against.”

“Here, let's try it out.” Ezra Strong extended the charm. “Rub and put a hoodoo on Harland Crown Copeland.”

Bill Riggs grinned feebly. “You're making fun of me, Mr. Strong.”

“No, honest. Try it.”

“It's silly.”

“No, it's not silly. It's a dose of psychology you can give yourself. Doing it will make you feel better, so go ahead and do it.”

Billy Riggs' grin became more genuine. He liked Ezra Strong, although he did not know the man very intimately. Strong was a young man who had a good reputation, made a respectable salary, and was often on Chamber of Commerce committees for one thing or another. A substantial citizen, you would call him. It was true that talking to Ezra had made Billy Riggs feel better, so he decided to take Ezra's advice about the charm, although of course it was hooey. But as Ezra said, the psychology of it might make him feel better. And goodness knew, he needed any bit of cheering up that he could gather.

“O. K.” Billy Riggs rubbed the charm vigorously. “This is the way I understand Grandfather Eben did it.” He rubbed the charm some more, and in a grim tone, talked to the spook.

“Spook,” said Billy Riggs, “do your stuff. Private spook of Grandfather Eben, go to work on Harland Crown Copeland and show him the error of his ways. Scare the dickens out of him. Make him clean up those miserable tenement buildings he owns, make him give some money to charity, and make him buy a flock of War Bonds.”

Ezra Strong laughed. “You didn't ask the spook to make old Copeland let up on you, Billy.”

Billy also laughed. “Oh, I can take it if Copeland can. The spook probably couldn't work that kind of a miracle, anyway.”

“Spooks can surprise you.”

Ezra Strong got eight gallons of gasoline and drove on his way. Billy Riggs looked after him and grinned. Ezra could sure cheer you up with his foolishness.

For of course the business about the charm was foolishness.

Chapter II

THE spook of Grandfather Eben did not lose much time getting to work on Harland Crown Copeland.

The limousine reached the chemical plant, and the chauffeur parked it in the reserved space.

Harland Crown Copeland alighted grandly. He spoke to the chauffeur. “George, polish the car. There are three pairs of my shoes in the back. Polish those. Then get a rake and rake this whole parking lot, and be sure you save all the paper and tinfoil. Paper and tinfoil are worth money.”

“Yassuh,” said George. This was enough work to keep two men busy all day.

“Then,” said Copeland, “you can buy your lunch. You understand that you buy your own lunch. Then go over the cars of my employees in the parking lot and find one with a good tire that is the same size I use on my limousine. Take that tire and put it on my limousine, then find the owner of the car and inform him that I need the tire, and it is his duty to sell it to me.” Harland Crown Copeland adjusted his coat and started for his office. “Tell him,” he called over his shoulder, “that I will pay him a dollar and a half difference between the tires.”

“Yassuh,” said George. “And what do Ah do with mah spare time?”

Harland Crown Copeland pretended not to hear the question, since he was not sure whether it was sarcasm, or whether George was just dumb. He preferred not to have a fuss with George because the fellow was a good chauffeur and seemed satisfied with the miserable salary he was receiving. With all the well-paid defense jobs now to be had, chauffeurs who would work for peanuts were scarce.

“Oops!” gasped Harland Crown Copeland. “Get out of my way, damn you!”

He had the impression that he'd run into something.

But there was nothing there.

Preserving his dignity, Harland Crown Copeland now glanced at his arms, and at his feet, for he thought that he had run into a piece of fine wire, or a cord, or something that had yanked him to a halt. But there was no wire or cord.

He started forward again.

Thump! He stopped.

“What the devil!” he muttered.

A GOOD many unpleasant things had happened to Harland Crown Copeland in his lifetime. A man with his miserable disposition and grasping traits was bound to be insulted frequently. But he understood the reasons for the insults, and actually took a kind of vicious pleasure in receiving them, because he invariably had taken something, usually in the form of dollars, from the individual who dished out the insults. He figured that he had the best of the bargain every time.

It took very little to bring out the ugliness in Harland Crown Copeland. The ugliness came out now. He delivered a vicious kick at the air—seemingly there was nothing else—in front of him. He howled, grabbed his bruised foot, and danced in pain.

“Damn you!” he shouted. “You're fired! I won't have practical jokes on my property!”

There was no answer. Harland Crown Copeland's rage increased in proportion to the growth of the foolish feeling he had because he was shouting at nothing at all.

“Get that thing away!” He gave a violent shove.

He put both hands out in front of him, and pushed. He pushed until his feet skidded. Pushed against nothing.

The idiocy, the impossibility, the tacit goofiness of what he was doing struck Harland Crown Copeland. He stopped pushing. He retreated a few paces. He pulled down his sleeves and adjusted his hat.

“You're fired! You hear me!” He spoke loudly and wrathfully.

Discharging employees who opposed him in the slightest degree, whether intentionally or not, was his favorite method of taking revenge. He supposed someone was perpetrating an unusual joke, although he couldn't understand exactly how it was being done. But he was certainly going to fire whoever was responsible. He would not only discharge the culprit, but he would see that the person didn't get another job in town.

“You're discharged!” he roared.

Then he wheeled and walked in a different direction.

He took about ten paces and—thump!

This time, Harland Crown Copeland didn't push, kick or curse. He reached out very cautiously and felt of the—apparently—empty air in front of him. He explored with his fingers.

He nearly screamed.

He jerked his hands back as if they had touched something hideous.

He could *feel* it, but he couldn't see it! And the feel was awful. It was soft, sort of bristling soft, like stiff fur. And it was strange to the touch, not particularly cold or clammy, but just strange without his being able to tell exactly what made it strange. But the worst thing of all was his conviction that it was alive.

“You're fired!” he screamed. “Get off my property!” He whirled wildly, howling at the chauffeur. “George! Come here! Help! Bring a monkey wrench! Kill this thing! Come here!”

George came galloping with a wrench. “What's yoah trouble, boss?”

“Kill this thing!”

“What thing?”

“This! Here it is!” Harland Crown Copeland lunged at the spot where he had encountered the phenomenon—and it wasn't there. He felt around with his hands. But there was nothing.

“I doan' see what yo' want hit,” said George, hefting the wrench.

HARLAND CROWN COPELAND had difficulty controlling himself. For the first time in his adult life he had encountered something he did not understand, and worse, something which he did not have the least idea how to best.

“There was something here.”

“Ah doan' see nothin',” said George.

“Well, it was here.”

“Ah doan' see it.”

“Damn you, don't call me a liar!” The old moneybags was slightly incoherent.

“Nossuh.” George looked around. “What was it?”

“Something in my way.”

“Ain't nothin'.”

“There was. And don't tell me there wasn't.”

“Nossuh.”

“Strike around with that monkey wrench.”

“Strike at what?”

“Just hit around in the air. You may be able to kill the damned thing.”

George rolled his eyes. He didn't strike a blow. “Was this heah thing alive?”

“Of course it was. Go ahead and strike at it. Beat its brains out.”

George didn't make a move. “Ah ain't swattin' no spook. Might be bad luck.”

Harland Crown Copeland now seized hold of himself, because he'd had time to realize that he was behaving like a crazy man. A crazy man! The idea was sickening, and sobered him instantly. It overpowered even the horror of what he had just encountered; in what appeared to be nothing but thin air.

“George.”

“Yassuh.”

“Don't you tell a soul about this, you hear. If you breathe a word of it, you are discharged.”

“Yassuh. What'd you call me for?”

“It was a joke.”

“Joke? You doan' look like no joke.”

“Well, it was a joke. And don't you tell anybody.”

George nodded vehemently. “Yassuh.”

“Go back and start polishing the car.”

“Yassuh. You suppose dat was Grandpa Eben's spook gettin' after you?”

“Grandfather Eben's spook? Oh, you mean that silly stuff the thieving Riggs boy said.”

“Yassuh.”

“Ridiculous. Go start polishing the car.”

“Yassuh.”

Harland Crown Copeland walked toward his office, and George moved back to the car. George, however, could be heard emitting a loud chuckle. And a remark which George made also reached Harland Crown Copeland's ears.

“He sure soun' funny, tryin' tuh fire Grandpa Eben's spook,” was what George said.

HARLAND CROWN COPELAND reached his office without encountering any more spectral difficulties. But he was shaken. He flopped in his swivel chair, and wished he had a drink of whiskey for a bracer. He was too stingy to keep any liquor for himself, but he knew his head clerk kept a bottle to revive an occasional stenographer who fainted, quite possibly from overwork.

He rang for the underpaid, timid old maid who served as his secretary.

“Sarah, get me the whiskey bottle from Grimm's desk.”

Sarah was disturbed, and not by her employer's agitation. She seemed hardly to notice that anything unusual had happened to Harland Crown Copeland.

“There are two men—”

“Get me the whiskey! Do you want me to fire you!”

“Oh, no, sir.” Sarah scuttled away, returning shortly with the liquor bottle. “There are two men to see—”

“Tell them to go away!” Harland Crown Copeland snapped. “I don't want to talk to anybody. Get out yourself. Get out!”

“Yes, sir.”

Not more than thirty seconds after the timid and flustered Sarah left the office, the door banged open, letting in two men. The new arrivals stalked in without a by your leave.

“So that's the secretary you pay so poorly,” said the shorter of the newcomers. “You ought to be ashamed of such slavery.”

“Get out!”

The two newcomers calmly pulled up chairs and sat down.

One of them, the short one who had just spoken, was a remarkable fellow who bore a pleasant but striking likeness to an ape about five feet two inches tall. He had reddish hair, which looked as if it had been transplanted from a Fuller brush, and wore a tweed suit which was as loud as a Fourth of July. The amiable grin on his homely face seemed to be a permanent fixture there.

This remarkable-looking fellow had been followed into the office by a remarkable-looking hog, or pig. The shote had legs as long as those of a rabbit, and a pair of ears which should have been wings.

The second man, in appearance, was most of the things the first man was not. He was lean, dapper, wasp-waisted, dressed in a business suit that would have delighted a tailor. He had a large mobile mouth, the kind of a mouth which orators usually have. He carried a black cane.

The second man was trailed into the office by a small animal which was either a chimpanzee or a dwarf ape. But whatever the animal was, it was remarkable because of the resemblance it bore to the first man, the short one with the reddish hair and the grin.

Harland Crown Copeland looked at the two newcomers and their two animals.

“Get out!”

“Eh?”

“Get out!”

“Not us,” said the homely one.

“I'll throw you out!”

The homely stranger examined the irate moneybags critically. “You'll need about six more like you to throw me out, and even then I wouldn't bet on it. Anyway, you haven't the right.”

“Right!” Harland Crown Copeland screamed. “This is my factory, damn you!”

“Calm down.”

“Calm down!” Harland Crown Copeland screamed. “Two clowns and a blasted zoo walk into my office—and you tell me to calm down! In my own office! Get out!”

THE two strangers glanced at each other, obviously enjoying the situation.

Then the dapper one, who had the orator's mouth, stood up and extracted a bunch of credentials from

his inner coat pocket.

“Mr. Copeland, may we introduce ourselves. This homely gentleman, here, who is, I am sorry to say, spiritually the ape which he resembles, is Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair. Frequently called Monk Mayfair, for obvious reasons.”

The dapper man pointed a thumb at his own chest. “I am Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks.”

“Called Ham Brooks, for a reason not so obvious,” said the homely Monk Mayfair.

(These two gentlemen have squabbled for years over that nickname of Ham. Monk Mayfair hung the name on Marley Brooks as a gag when he found that Brooks had sort of a fixation that amounted to a horror against ham, pigs, pork in any form. Monk is always looking for anything he can use to gouge Ham Brooks mentally or spiritually. Their quarrel is an endless classic.)

The dapper man became indignant. “I don't care for that nickname, Ham. Very close friends occasionally get away with using it. I'm afraid that will not include you, Mr. Copeland.”

Harland Crown Copeland was staring at the two men with a different expression, a look of surprise and uneasiness.

“Ham Brooks and Monk Mayfair!” He licked his lips nervously. “You—ah—Doc Savage?”

“That,” said Monk, “hits the nail on the head. We are associated with Clark Savage, Jr., or Doc Savage, as you have just called him.”

“Ah—”

“So we didn't come from the zoo,” Ham pointed out. “Although my companion, Mr. Mayfair, undoubtedly escaped from one in his youth.”

“You—” Harland Crown Copeland swallowed. His swallowing was done with some difficulty. He didn't look well.

Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks now took turns in announcing the reason for their presence.

“Doc Savage,” said Ham, “owns a share of the capital stock in this company, the Copeland Chemical Co. He bought it just recently and he's checked up on the place because of that.”

“We,” said Monk, “are two members of a group of five men associated with Doc Savage.”

“We are Doc's assistants,” said Ham.

“There are indications,” said Monk, “that you are delivering inferior chemicals on the concern's government contract. Doc Savage doesn't like the idea of a company in which he's interested jerrying its chemicals in a time like this; when there's a war.”

“Monk is a chemical engineer, one of the best in the business,” Ham said.

“I'm here to see that the chemical production is up to snuff.”

“I'm a lawyer,” said Ham.

“He's an overdressed shyster who chases pretty girls,” said Monk.

“That's a lie. The only time I chase them is to warn them against you.”

“That makes two lies.”

Ham Brooks stopped quarreling with Monk Mayfair and leveled an unexpected, accusing arm at Harland Crown Copeland. He shouted, “There are reports that you are profiteering, that you are shystersing the government out of money! As a lawyer, I am here to investigate that!”

Harland Crown Copeland turned white.

“Doc Savage sent us,” Monk Mayfair said, to put a period to the explanations. “And, brother, don't try to pull anything on us. We're a pair of he-witches when we're aroused, and we arouse easy. In fact, we're aroused most of the time.”

“That's right,” said Ham. “Just looking at Monk's odious face arouses me.”

“And vice versa.”

Chapter III

THE unorthodox nature of his visitors by now had thoroughly confused Harland Crown Copeland. They were behaving as if they were intoxicated, which they obviously weren't. Another alternative was that they were a pair of pixilated gentlemen, a couple of mental rabbits—but the fact that they were associated with Doc Savage gave the lie to that.

Harland Crown Copeland was suddenly and unutterably frightened. If the two men had been serious and determined, he would not have felt as he felt now. He knew how to deal with serious men. You could watch them and get some idea what they were going to do next and counteract their moves. But this pair had come galloping on to the scene like a couple of bloodhounds who already had treed their game. The feeling it gave Copeland was anything but good.

He did not feel guilty, though. He felt indignant instead. Indignant that anyone should interfere with his doings. Since the government was throwing money around so generously, he did not feel in the least guilty about grabbing all of it he could get.

A man was a fool if he did not take advantage of opportunity. There might not be another war in Harland Crown Copeland's life span, never another chance like this. Other defense plants, under less cunning management than Copeland Chemical, were paying labor more than a dollar an hour. If labor could rob the government in that fashion, Harland Crown Copeland felt entirely justified in doing some robbing himself.

His thoughts traveled in this vein for a few moments, and so he became very indignant at Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks that they should presume to interfere. What if he had cut the quality of certain chemical products below specifications, and what if he had manipulated shipping records so that he was collecting for more than the plant turned out? What damned business was it of this pair of men? Why didn't they leave a man alone?

“Get out!” Copeland jumped up angrily. “Leave this plant!”

Monk grinned at him. “So you're guilty.”

“Get out!”

Monk waved an arm. "I'm going down and check the chemical analysis of your finished product, and do some analyzing of my own. I'll soon know whether you've been hooking our army."

Ham also waved an arm. "And I'll check the shipping records and your books. I'm curious to know whether you've been getting paid for more than you delivered."

Harland Crown Copeland trembled with rage. For a moment, he was inarticulate. Then he shook his fists at them.

"This morning," he screamed, "a young man set his personal witch on me. I hereby set the spook on you two nosy fellows, curse you!"

After he said that, he looked silly, because of course it was a foolish sort of an outburst to make.

HAM BROOKS remained in Harland Crown Copeland's private office and ordered all the company books and shipping records to be delivered to him. He opened a brief case of his own, explaining that it contained an accurate record of what the government had actually received from the plant, and that the records all had better check.

But Monk Mayfair left the office, saying he was going to analyze the finished chemicals.

However, Monk did not go directly to the finishing line and packing sheds, instead he detoured to the company parking lot where George the chauffeur was industriously polishing the Copeland limousine.

"Hello, Doc," Monk said.

George, who was no Negro at all, stopped polishing the limousine. "Have you confronted Harland Crown Copeland yet?"

Monk nodded. "With words. But he's guilty. It sticks out all over him."

"Yes. In the two weeks I have been acting as his chauffeur I have uncovered unmistakable evidences of guilt."

Monk grinned at the bronze man. "That's a good disguise. I see you are using that new hair dye I worked out, and my skin dye. How does it work?"

(Doc Savage, of course, is actually a man of remarkable physical ability and size whose skin has been bronzed by tropical suns. Hence the term "The Bronze Man," often applied to him.)

"The skin dye needs more research. It holds its color well enough, and is unaffected by soap and water as far as fading or removal goes, but soap causes some irritation to the skin."

"I'll work on that, first chance I get."

"These eye caps are more efficient than any others I have used. They disguise eye color quite well, yet interfere very little with normal vision."

"Well, it's a good disguise. Copeland never tumbled, eh?"

"Never."

"What kind of a guy is Copeland, Doc?"

“Completely mean.”

Monk chuckled. “Well, I guess we got him upset, all right. He said a funny thing a while ago when he was giving us hell. Called down a spook and set it after us.”

Doc Savage looked at Monk Mayfair thoughtfully. “Grandpa Eben's spook?”

“He didn't say whose spook it was. Said a young man this morning had occasion to sick it on him. So he passed it on to us.”

“That is strange.”

“Huh?”

“A short time ago, while crossing the parking lot toward his office, Harland Crown Copeland behaved most strangely. Seemed to bump into something, push against it, and kick at it.”

“What was it?”

“There was nothing visible.”

Monk popped his small eyes suspiciously. “Hey, you aren't pulling my leg.”

“It is the truth.”

“He kicked at something, eh?”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“At first, he insisted it was there, that it was alive, and he wanted me to beat it to death with a monkey wrench.”

“That sounds as if he was crazy.”

“Yes. Copeland realized it sounded that way. And so he ordered me not to tell anybody about it.”

Monk laughed heartily. “The old chiseler must really think this Grandpa Eben's spook is after him.”

MONK went on to the packing sheds where it did not take him long to see that most of the chemicals being packed for shipment were below the grade which the plant was supposed to supply to the government.

Full of indignation, Monk went back to Harland Crown Copeland's office.

“Listen, skinflint, I've already found evidence that the chemicals are below quality.”

Ham said, “Call him worse than skinflint. You should hear some of the things he's been calling me. Such words!”

“Get out!” Copeland yelled. “You have no right here!”

“I want him to call the cops and throw us out,” Ham said.

“Don't he want to?”

“No. He's as guilty as can be.”

Monk beckoned at Copeland. “Come on, you gyp.”

“Where you taking me?” Copeland was alarmed.

“Not to jail just yet. That will come later.” Monk beckoned again, angrily. “Come on. I'm going to take you down to the packing sheds and show you the chemicals are below par.”

Copeland glared at them. “If anything is below quality, it is the fault of my foreman. I didn't have anything to do with it.”

“You strike me as the kind of a guy who would saddle the blame on somebody who was innocent,” Monk told him. “But it won't work this time. Come on. We're going to look into it.”

“Why don't you let me alone?” Copeland shrieked.

Monk and Ham eyed him curiously.

“Brother,” Ham said, “I actually believe you are sincere in thinking we should let you chisel and gyp our country in time of war. I'm beginning to think you do not have the least idea of the difference between right and wrong.”

Copeland glared.

“You going with us?” Monk sounded hopeful. “Or do I have to grab you by an ear and drag you?”

“I'll go,” Copeland snarled. “And I'll sue you for assault and kidnaping.”

“If this keeps up”—Monk was more hopeful—“you can add battery to your charge—when you get out of the hospital.”

Harland Crown Copeland stalked along with them. He was shaking with rage and pale with uneasiness.

The two animals accompanied the group out of the office building. Monk introduced his pig formally to Harland Crown Copeland. “Copeland, this is Habeas Corpus. Habeas, this is Harland Crown Copeland, and people would call him a pig, which you can consider a thoughtless libel.”

Copeland clenched his fists with rage.

Ham said, “Copeland, my pet is named Chemistry. He belongs to a royal strain of chimpanzee, regardless of what Monk Mayfair may say about his ancestry. Chemistry, this is Copeland, and you should hide your face when you look at him. He isn't something nice to look at.”

Copeland shook with wrath.

He shouted, “Damn you meddlers! I hope that spook gets you!”

Monk laughed. “Ham, you hear that. He's got a spook that does his dirty work.”

“You'll see!” the distracted Copeland shrieked.

THEY met Grandfather Eben's spook in the areaway between the drying rooms and the loading shed, and the meeting was pretty much the same as Harland Crown Copeland's earlier meeting with the spook had been.

Monk walked into it first, and bounced back, said, "Oof!" He grabbed his nose, which began to bleed slightly. "Who the devil would leave a wire stretched across a place like this?"

Harland Crown Copeland turned quite pale. He pointed. "There is no wire."

"So there isn't." Monk stared. "What the dickens!"

Ham, who thought Monk was pulling some kind of a gag, said, "Oh, cut out the foolishness. Let's get the goods on this old gaffer and slap him in jail, and then you can play spooks."

Ham then strode forward. He ran into something. It brought him to an abrupt stop. He put both hands out in front and did some exploring.

Ham jumped back horrified.

"There's something there!" he yelled.

Copeland said, "Grandfather Eben's spook!" He was gripped by terror, and he whirled and ran—ran wildly for about five paces, then brought up with slamming violence against what looked no more solid than ordinary atmosphere. The shock stunned him, and he sank to the ground, dazed, putting his hands to his nose which had been flattened as Monk's had been.

Monk's eyes were about to come out of his head.

"There's two of them!" he said.

Ham Brooks had been fairly incredulous up to this point, reluctant to exchange the reasonable belief that Monk was perpetrating a practical joke for the fantastic idea that there was something—something manifestly impossible—near them.

Ham yanked his cane apart. It was a sword cane with a long flexible blade, the tip of which was coated with a chemical that would produce quick unconsciousness. Ham advanced with the sword jabbing.

"We'll see if it's swordproof," he said.

It was. Ham encountered the thing, and the moment he felt it against the tip of his blade, he became agitated, gave the sword a jab, and the blade bent nearly double before it snapped. The blade broke off close to the hilt, flew back violently and would have speared Monk with the coated tip had Monk not dodged wildly and successfully.

"You be careful!" Monk yelled. "I've always figured you would damage me with that blasted sword cane some day."

Ham jumped back in alarm. "What is the thing?"

"So you think there's something there?"

"Of course."

"Well, well, for a minute I thought you didn't believe me."

“What is it?”

“Monk touched his bruised nose gingerly. “Grandpa Eben's spook, I guess.”

“Don't be silly!”

“Well,” said Monk, “you supply the smart answers yourself, then.”

“There is no such thing as a spook.”

“Of course not,” Monk agreed. “We're just dealing with our imaginations.”

Ham began fishing around, rapping at the empty air with the remains of his sword cane. He made quite an extensive exploration, covering the spots where they had just encountered the—whatever it was—and finding that there was nothing there but empty air.

“Is it gone?” Monk asked.

“Yes, it's gone.” Ham nodded. “And so is my confidence in my sanity.”

THEY spent four or five minutes getting over their surprise and returning to something near normal mental equilibrium, after which they collared Harland Crown Copeland in a manner that was not gentle.

“What kind of a gag was that?” Monk demanded.

“I—it was that spook.”

“Now don't give me that kind of talk. I was born some little time ago and I've been back and forth over the world somewhat, and I haven't run into any such a thing as a spook before, and I'm not willing to think I just ran into one.”

“You felt it.”

“Yeah, I felt something.”

“What was it like?”

“Kind of a feeling like I hadn't felt before.”

“But alive.”

“Yeah, alive. It felt alive, all right.” Monk shook Copeland angrily. “Now quit stalling. I want to know what it was.”

“It was the spook,” Harland said desperately. “That's the only thing I can think of it having been.”

“Spook?”

“Yes. I will say that, even if I do sound crazy.”

“You sound crazy, all right.”

Harland Crown Copeland had made a practice all his life of blaming other people for his own misdeeds, and now he suddenly remembered this spook doing was not his act at all, but the work of young Billy

Riggs.

“It's Billy Riggs' fault.”

“Who's he?”

“A gasoline filling station attendant who stole some money from me and served a term in the penitentiary, and will probably wind up in the penitentiary again.”

“He was probably innocent of the charge,” Monk said. “What makes you blame him?”

“He set the thing on me.”

“The spook?”

“Yes.”

“How'd he do that?”

“He rubbed a funny black watch charm he was wearing, and said for Grandfather Eben's spook to get after me. And it did.”

“This Billy Riggs just rubbed the charm and wished, eh?”

“Yes.”

“You claim that's the truth?”

“Those are the facts.”

Monk glanced at Ham and winked. “You know, Ham, I think we could have him locked up in the bird house on the strength of this story he's telling us. Shall we do that, or shall we let him stand trial for defrauding the government on his war contracts?”

Ham pondered the question. “I would hate to deny the fact that I felt the thing, too, although I would like to deny it. Except for that, I would say let him go to the boobyhatch. But under the circumstances, I would hate to tell my part of the story on the witness stand.”

“Meaning,” said Monk, “that they might put us in the hatch, too?”

“If they didn't, after hearing our story, they would be nuts themselves.”

“I hate to admit it, but you got something.”

“I suggest we look into this further.”

“Talk to this Billy Riggs, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“What about the underage chemicals and the falsified shipping records here at the plant?”

“Oh, they can wait an hour or two.”

“You think we can solve this cock-eyed mystery in an hour or two?”

“If we can't, we're running below form.”

Monk nodded. “Let's see if we can.”

Chapter IV

YOUNG BILLY RIGGS looked at them in astonishment and—when he saw Harland Crown Copeland in the limousine—considerable displeasure when they drove into the filling station. The big chauffeur, George, wore a quizzical expression, and he had worn it all through the drive from the chemical plant to the filling station. George seemed to be wondering what was going on.

“You again!” Billy Riggs addressed Harland Crown Copeland angrily. “Why don't you stay away from here and leave me alone!”

Harland Crown Copeland was back in form.

“Don't you dare talk to me like that, you young jailbird,” he said. “You are in more trouble.”

Billy Riggs' face tightened. “Another frame-up, I suppose.”

Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks got out of the limousine, and Monk said, “Your name is Riggs, I presume.”

“That's right,” said Riggs. “And whoever you are, you're in mighty poor company when you're with this old scoundrel.”

Monk grinned. “You needn't tell us about Copeland. We are gradually finding out about him ourselves.”

Billy Riggs examined them suspiciously. “You're a strange-looking pair of goons.” Then, as Habeas Corpus, the pig, and Chemistry, the chimp, got out of the limousine, Riggs exploded, “Hey, is this a portable zoo?”

“This is Ham Brooks, and I am Monk Mayfair,” Monk said. “The full names are Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks and Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, if you want to be impressed.”

“Humpty and Dumpty on a raft!” said Riggs. “So what?”

“Are you trying to be courteous?”

“You bet I'm not,” said young Riggs. “What do you expect? You come in here with that old rascal. Like travels with like, I always say.”

“You won't talk to us civil?”

“I don't intend to.”

“Then we'll talk uncivil,” Monk said readily. “We want to talk about Grandpa Eben's spook, which is kind of an uncivil subject, anyway.”

Billy Riggs' mouth fell open in genuine astonishment.

And an automobile drove into the station, with Ezra Strong at the wheel. Ezra stopped the car, put his head out of the window and asked, “Something wrong, Billy?”

“I have some visitors,” said Billy, “for whom somebody is probably looking with a net. Or do they catch dingy fellows with a net?”

“What makes you think they're dingy?”

“Heck, they're asking me about Grandpa Eben's spook.”

THIS brought a roar of laughter from Ezra Strong, and he lost no time climbing out of his car. “Boy, oh, boy! I want to be in on this!”

Monk examined Strong. “Who're you?”

“Ezra Strong.”

“Go on, roll your little hoop away from here. There's too many in the party now.”

Ezra Strong asked, “By too many, meaning Grandpa Eben's genie is the surplus?”

“Genie? I thought it was a spook.”

“Genie or spook, what's the difference?”

“So you know about it, eh?” Monk asked thoughtfully.

“I was just driving by and saw the excitement, and thought I would drop in and see if my friend Billy Riggs needed any moral support,” Ezra Strong explained.

“I need some kind of support,” said Billy Riggs. “I think somebody is off their bat.”

Harland Crown Copeland pointed at Ezra Strong and shouted loudly and accusingly, “That man was in the station here this morning when young Riggs put that thing on me. He knows all about it!”

Ezra Strong gave Copeland a bedeviling grin. “Yes, old man, and in case you are interested, after you left, Billy and I gave the charm a few extra rubs and wished you some more bad luck.”

“If it's bad luck you wished him, you certainly gave him a sackful,” Monk said. “Plus the ghost or spook or whatever.”

Ham asked, “Charm? What charm?”

“This. He means this.” Billy Riggs fingered the Indian-head gadget. “But this whole thing is getting pretty foolish.”

Ham extended a hand. “Let me see it.”

Both Ham and Monk inspected the little ornament, with Copeland and Ezra Strong looking over their shoulders.

“I wish we had old Johnny Littlejohn here,” Monk said, trying to decide the nature of the bit of stone or jewel from which the thing was carved. “He'd know what this was.”

Ezra Strong contributed gleefully, “I know what it is. It's a frozen drop of the devil's blood.”

Both Monk and Ham scowled at him, and Monk said, “You think this is mighty funny, don't you?”

"I think it's hilarious," Ezra Strong confessed. "I haven't laughed so much since I fell in the well down on the farm."

"You wouldn't," said Monk indignantly, "be implying that our minds are slipping?"

"Do you think you're crazy?"

"No."

"They never do," said Ezra. "So it's a bad sign."

AT this point, George the chauffeur made an explosive noise that conveyed infinite disgust with the situation. He threw open the car door, got out and stalked into the filling-station washroom without a word to anybody.

"Now, what's the matter with George?" asked Harland Crown Copeland.

"George," said Ezra Strong, "seems to be indignant."

Monk and Ham exchanged uneasy glances. "George" was probably indignant, all right. Monk whispered to Ham, "Doc probably isn't too enthusiastic about us going off spook chasing when we are supposed to be straightening up the mess at the chemical plant."

This proved to be an excellent guess. Presently Doc Savage came out of the washroom, and he was no longer George the chauffeur, but his normal self, a giant man of bronze with unmistakable evidences of startling physical strength and a hint of his enormous capability in his speech and manner. He had removed the "invisible spectacle" type lens caps from his eyes, which were one of his most remarkable features, his eyes being like pools of flake gold always stirred by tiny winds.

The change was so great that Harland Crown Copeland didn't recognize him, although Doc still wore the chauffeur's uniform.

"Who the devil are you?" Copeland demanded.

"Clark Savage, Jr.," Doc said.

"Well, go away!" Copeland snapped. Then he paled. "Oh, you . . . you are Doc Savage?" He looked as if he was about to faint. "You're George—you."

Doc Savage turned to Monk and Ham and demanded, "What on earth are you fellows up to?"

"We're chasing a spook," Monk confessed uneasily.

"The job you came here to do is get that chemical plant to producing chemicals that come up to specification," Doc said. "It just happens that the war effort needs those chemicals badly. Now, what did you say you were doing, again?"

Monk was uncomfortable. "Spook chasing."

"There is not supposed to be such a thing as a spook."

"That's what we thought."

“Then what are you doing here?”

“But, Doc, we *felt* it!”

“Felt what?”

“The spook.”

Doc Savage was silent for a few moments. Possibly long enough for his feelings to simmer down.

He said, “The chemicals and the war effort come first. If you want to chase a spook, you can make a hobby of it. But our job is at the plant. There is a war.”

MONK and Ham rode back to the chemical plant, feeling crestfallen because it was obvious that Doc Savage was right. The phenomena they had encountered in the factory yard—the spook or whatever—was quite interesting, but it was a mistake to let their curiosity put the thing ahead of the war effort in importance.

“It was your fault we got sidetracked,” Ham told Monk.

This accusation, which Monk considered unjust and said so, started a row which lasted most of the day, whenever they were together, which was not a great deal of the time, since their separate tasks kept them scampering.

Harland Crown Copeland left the factory in a howling mixture of rage and terror in the middle of the afternoon, and they let him go. “He's just hampering us underfoot,” as Monk expressed it. “And we've already got the goods on him.”

The damage had been quite serious as far as past shipments of chemicals from the plant were involved, but it was a thing that could be quickly remedied. Monk merely instituted the proper mixes and proper temperatures, eliminating the cheap substitutes which Harland Crown Copeland had caused to be used, and a first-rate batch of chemicals began coming out of the loading sheds.

Ham Brooks, with his book work, had a more difficult mess. He not only had to unearth evidence of duplicity and conniving on the part of Copeland, but he had to get the material in such form that it would stand up legally in a court of law.

“This job will take several days,” Ham complained. “Pitch in and help me, Monk.”

“Pitch in, nothing. It's your job.” Monk had been making a tour of the plant, a tour of inspection, as he called it, and had sized up the feminine prospects. They were good enough to make him approve. “If I do any pitching, it will be to these lonesome-looking gals around the plant,” he told Ham.

“While I slave away on these books, I suppose.”

“Sure.”

At five o'clock they knocked off with the day shift, washed up and got their hats. Neither Monk nor Ham attempted to make sheep's eyes at the pretty stenographers and plant workers who were leaving at the same time, which was not like them. Without straying at all, they walked to a car which they had rented for use while in town.

“Shall we get Doc?” Ham asked.

Monk's tone sounded injured. "Doc seemed a little critical of our ghost chasing earlier in the day. He suggested we take it up as a hobby. Wasn't a word said about his joining us."

Ham grinned. "We wouldn't want to bother him with a little thing like a spook, would we?"

"No, we wouldn't," Monk said. "I think we'd better pick up Billy Riggs first."

Chapter V

BILLY RIGGS looked at Monk and Ham wearily when they drove into the filling station. "You two funny-boners again, eh? What is it this time, little red pixies dancing in the grass?"

"You about to get off work?"

"I get off at six."

Monk grinned. "How about having dinner with us, then driving out and talking to Harland Crown Copeland about that spook of Grandpa Eben."

"I don't want to talk to Copeland. If I never see that old man, it will make me that much happier."

"You'll enjoy the talk. We're going to give Copeland hell."

"You are? That sounds more enticing."

"Get in."

"O. K. In about five minutes it will be closing time, and I'll go along. You fellows aren't serious about there being a spook, are you?"

Monk looked uncomfortable. "We don't like to think we're serious, but as a matter of fact, we are. There was something queer, and we don't know what it was, but we want to know."

Promptly at six, Billy Riggs locked up the station, then climbed in the car. "The Town House is a good place to eat."

"You know that Ezra Strong who was around, thinking the thing was so funny?"

"Oh, Ezra. Sure."

"Know him very well?"

"Just to talk to. But I've known him that way for four or five years. He's all right. He's a nice fellow."

"Why was he so interested?"

"Oh, he was around this morning, and he talked me into wishing that hoodoo on old Copeland the second time."

"Talked you into it, eh? Why'd he do that?"

"He said it was psychology, and it should make me feel better. And sure enough, it did. But I guess just giving old Copeland a good cussing would have made me feel better, too. It was probably just a matter of relieving my feelings."

“That was his excuse, eh?”

Billy looked alarmed. “Oh, now, you've got old Ezra all wrong.”

“We'll see. Where does he live?”

“What are you going to do?”

“Pick him up and take him along. He thought the thing was so funny, I want to entertain him some more.”

They found Ezra Strong at his apartment in his shirt sleeves, and with one side of his face lathered. “I shave in the evening.” He listened to them explain why they had come.

“Sure, I want to go along. I was right on the job and helped sick the spook on old Copeland in the beginning, and I want to see the fireworks right straight through.”

He burst into a howl of laughter.

“I guess you think we're all crazy,” Monk told him.

“Well, it's very entertaining, to say the least.”

“Yeah,” Monk agreed. “The trouble is, me and Ham both *felt* the darned thing.”

“I told them the Town House was a good place to eat,” Billy Riggs said uncomfortably. “That O. K. with you, Ezra?”

THE meal at the Town House was good as far as the food was concerned, but not very productive with regard to information about Ezra Strong. Monk tried to pump Ezra Strong about himself, but Strong burst into howls of laughter. Finally Monk became embarrassed and gave it up. Ezra Strong seemed to be a likable cuss. But in Monk's opinion he thought the whole thing was too damned funny. Monk was feeling silly about the matter to begin with, and he didn't like being laughed at uproariously.

Billy Riggs and Ezra Strong insisted that they match odd man for the dinner, and they stuck Ham Brooks, much to Monk's pleasure. The bill came to nearly seven dollars.

“Now,” said Monk, “we will all go out and heckle old Copeland.”

“Bet the old miser is in bed by now, to save electricity,” said Billy Riggs.

But Copeland was not in bed. He was wide awake, in fine voice and tongue. He took one look at them, and told them, collectively and individually, what he thought of them. His vocabulary of low-life expletives was a remarkable one for a factory owner and the leading property owner of the town.

Monk let him run down, then explained, “We're interested in that spook proposition, and we want to get at the bottom of it, so you might as well let us in.”

Harland Crown Copeland surprised them by letting them into his home. “If you learn anything, I want to know about it.”

The house was an ancient mansion in good repair and well furnished, the fittings evidently had been inherited from some ancestor with a taste for richness and luxury. They had been well taken care of, but that was about all. Looking around, one could note nothing that looked as though it were of recent

enough vintage to have been purchased by Copeland, except for the electric-light fixtures, and there was some doubt about them. It was the home of a stingy man, but also a man who knew how to take care of his possessions so as to get the most out of them.

By way of opening the fireworks, Monk looked at Copeland and asked, "Could this be a personal devil of your own that is haunting us? I hear you are mean enough to have a personal devil."

Copeland expressed an acid opinion of Monk's appearance and ancestry.

"I don't understand it," the moneybags said. "It is undoubtedly the work of Billy Riggs who, as you should know, is a jailbird."

"I didn't!" Billy Riggs yelled. "You aren't fools enough to think I could conjure up an invisible devil just by wishing for one."

"Up until today," Monk said, "we weren't fools enough to think we could run into something invisible and alive."

This got the best of Ezra Strong, and he burst into a bellow of laughter. "Invisible and alive!" He went off in another spasm of mirth.

"Shut up," Monk said.

"Yes, shut up or we'll throw you out of here," added Ham.

"Let's throw him out anyway," said Harland Crown Copeland. "I never did like the fellow."

"Ezra is my friend," said Billy Riggs indignantly. "Stop picking on him."

Ezra Strong whooped again in a helpless convulsion of glee.

Monk eyed him sourly and said, "I just wonder who's picking on who."

"We're not getting anywhere," Ham complained.

MONK checked an impulse to kick the furniture because the whole affair was so ridiculous, and pointed a finger at Billy Riggs. "What about your Grandfather Eben, Riggs? Tell us about him."

"Eben is the skeleton in the family closet," said Billy. "He died thirty years ago. He was a great rascal. At one time he was president of a Central American republic, and another time he owned a whole oilfield in Oklahoma, and another time he almost got to be emperor of part of China. The German kaiser offered a reward of a million dollars for his head back in the 1890s."

"He got around, all right."

"He sure did, and into everything."

"Was his name Eben Riggs?"

"Yes, but he wasn't known as Eben. The name they generally called him was Wildbuck Riggs."

Ham's jaw fell in astonishment. "Why, I've heard of him. He was quite a reprobate; everything you've said, and more. He started life as a lawyer."

“Began as a lawyer, eh.” Monk grinned. “An excellent foundation for a career of rascality.” He waited for Ham to blow up at the remark, but Ham disappointed him.

“Wildbuck Riggs,” said Ham, “was sometimes called the luckiest man alive.”

Billy Riggs nodded. “That’s what they called Grandpa Eben. And he admitted it. He gave all the credit to this Indian-head charm.” Billy removed the charm from his watch chain and placed it on the table. “You fellows want to look at it again?”

Everyone did want to examine the charm, but they got no satisfaction out of the inspection, not even when Harland Crown Copeland brought a magnifying glass to help out.

“That’s a carving of a Hindu head, or at least an Indian,” Ham said. “I wish we had old Johnny here. He’s an archaeologist and a specialist on races, and he could give us more information.”

Harland Crown Copeland snorted violently. “This is silly talk and silly doings. It doesn’t explain what that thing was.”

“That’s right,” Monk agreed. “Common sense says that there couldn’t be anything such as a genie or spook or devil resurrected by rubbing this charm.”

“Absolutely,” said Copeland.

“Therefore,” said Monk, “the thing had to be some kind of devilment you were pulling, Copeland.”

COPELAND did not react to this in the way Monk had expected, which was with another outburst of abuse. Instead, Copeland looked at them soberly—and somewhat cunningly, Monk thought—and rose to his feet. “Wait here a moment. I have something that will interest you gentlemen.” Copeland went out of the room.

“What do you suppose he’s gone to get?” Billy Riggs asked.

“A pet snake, probably,” Monk said.

But it was a shotgun; a repeating shotgun, twelve gauge, with a short barrel. Copeland came back into the room carrying this weapon in both hands.

While Monk, Ham, Riggs and Strong stared at the old man, Copeland went to the window. With the barrel of the shotgun he knocked the glass out of the window, making a great racket. Then he put his face to the hole he had made and bellowed.

“Help! Help!” he squalled. “They forced their way into my house! They’re attacking me!”

Monk and the others sprang to their feet in alarm.

Copeland faced them with the shotgun.

“I’ll give you fellows something to worry about!” Copeland said.

He began firing the shotgun. Monk’s first thought was: “Wow! He’s not fool enough to try to kill us! Or was that right?”

A charge of shot tore the rug under Monk’s feet and took off part of the sole of one shoe, which caused

Monk to endeavor unsuccessfully to jump through the ceiling.

Ezra Strong bolted for the door, which was locked, and took the door off its hinges bodily as he went through. He wasn't laughing.

Billy Riggs said, "Mr. Copeland, you idiot!"

Ham Brooks picked up a chair and threw it at Copeland, making a good throw, so that the chair struck the old man and hurt his arms, forcing him to drop the shotgun.

Copeland then whirled and leaped through the window which he had just smashed, taking out more of the glass, and fell sprawling into the shrubbery below the window.

"The old geezer has blown his cork!" Monk said.

"I was the only one with sense to throw a chair," Ham said.

"Yes, and I think it was your idea to come here in the first place," Monk said, although this was not true. "You almost got us killed."

"You going to let him go?"

Billy Riggs dashed for the window. "I'll catch him. It'll be a pleasure to turn him over to the police."

Monk and Ham went out of the window close on the heels of Billy Riggs. They stood in the darkness and listened and looked for Copeland.

Many windows in houses in the neighborhood were open, heads sticking out, and a few people were standing on porches, peering around porch pillars or around corners.

"Boo!" Monk yelled, and half a dozen of the heads hastily disappeared.

"That you?" Ezra Strong's voice called cautiously from near the front of the house.

"It's us."

"How many did he shoot?" Ezra asked.

"Nobody. But he sure fixed me up so I need a new shoe ration stamp," Monk said. "Which way did he go?"

"Over that way, I think."

"Which way is that way?"

Ezra Strong joined them and indicated that he meant the east, and they began to advance carefully.

"Was that door you broke down very hard?" Monk asked Ezra Strong.

"I didn't notice at the time," Ezra admitted. "Say, why did you fellows ring me in on this in the first place?"

"Well, you helped rub the charm and wish the spook onto old Copeland," Monk explained. "So we thought we would do you the favor of letting you help find out just how you did it."

"I would as soon you had passed up the favor."

THEY saw Harland Crown Copeland then. There was no doubt that they saw Copeland. This was an important point later—whether or not they actually saw Copeland at this time—and they were certain they glimpsed him.

Copeland was creeping through the shrubbery in the yard, and Monk put a flashlight beam squarely on him, so there was no doubt about it being Copeland, or that the old man could run like a fox, which was what he proceeded to do. Copeland ran away from them.

“Gone crazy as a June bug,” Ham said. “We’ll have to catch him.”

Ezra Strong said, “Yes, we had better.” And he did not sound mirthful, or even amused.

They lunged in pursuit of Harland Crown Copeland, keeping the flashlight glowing and pointing the beam at Copeland.

One of the neighbors who was observing the situation yelled—this yell proved to be quite important later—for the benefit of someone in the house behind him, “They’re chasing Mr. Copeland! A gang is after Mr. Copeland!” He shouted it so loud that the whole neighborhood—there was plenty of later testimony about the clarity with which everyone heard—got every word.

Copeland had turned off through the brushy backyard of the estate. The grass was not too well cut and the bushes were not well trimmed, because Monk and the others found out afterward, the caretaker was an old fellow who received the fruit from a scrawny orchard which was part of the estate back yard, as payment. He didn’t need to do too good a job.

The pursuers lost sight of Copeland, losing him in the thick shrubbery, and a moment later Ham Brooks, who was at the time leading the chase, gave a sound that was a combination of a “whoosh” and a moan and collapsed.

“What the devil!” gasped Ezra Strong.

Monk had an idea what was the matter, but not until he had dashed to Ham’s side and felt the dapper lawyer’s wrist—Ham was unconscious—and of his bruised face and forehead, not until he was sure did Monk say, “It’s that blamed spook again!”

“Spook! You’re nuts,” said Ezra Strong.

Monk got to his feet, exploring around in the darkness with his hands, until he had encountered what he expected to find, after which he turned his head and said, “Come here, you fool! Here it is. Come here and feel of it.”

Ezra Strong’s voice got hoarse. “Feel of what?”

“The spook. Come on.”

“It’s impossible!”

Monk said, “I know it’s impossible, but come here and feel of it.”

Ezra Strong was shaking—later Monk wished he’d realized the importance of this, too—with the most remarkable violence as he came close to Monk and tried to put out his hands to the spot where Monk told him to put them. Finally Monk had to grasp the man’s wrists and shove Ezra’s hands forward so that

he could feel what Monk wanted him to touch.

Monk expected Ezra Strong to be surprised, but he did not expect as much emotion as Strong showed, and certainly he wasn't ready for the man to scream, which was what Strong did. The screech was full of abject horror. Monk was so startled that he let go of Ezra Strong's wrists, thinking the man might have been stung or hurt by whatever was here in the empty air before them, yet invisible.

Now a shout came from young Billy Riggs. It was a strangled sort of a shout, with young Riggs' voice sounding as it had never sounded before.

"He's dead!" Riggs cried.

"Don't be silly," Monk called. "Ezra is just scared."

"I don't mean Ezra," Billy Riggs said in a low, ghastly voice. "It's Mr. Copeland. He's dead."

"Dead?"

"The whole top of his head bashed in," Billy Riggs said.

Chapter VI

DOC SAVAGE came out of the darkness now. He had arrived quietly and stood beside Monk and the others. The body of Harland Crown Copeland lay before them.

"Dead?" Doc asked.

"Yes," Monk said.

"Just where did you find this spook, as you call it?"

"Right there where Ham is lying. He ran into it and knocked himself out when he hit it."

Billy Riggs and Ezra Strong apparently knotted up with horror over the death, did not, until now, seem to fully realize that Doc Savage had joined them. They did not recognize Doc in the darkness. Strong, scared, bolted to his feet and yelled, "Who's this?"

"Doc Savage," Monk said.

"Oh—yes. Yes, we met at the filling station this afternoon," Strong said foolishly.

Billy Riggs said, "I didn't know he was going to be here with us."

"I didn't, either," Monk confessed.

Doc Savage, without speaking again, had moved over to the spot where Ham was sitting, dazed by the jolt he had received by running into the invisible solidarity which they had encountered in the darkness. Doc began exploring around with his hands, searching for the "thing."

Strong asked, "Was he hanging around here?"

"Who?"

"Doc Savage."

“Obviously.”

“But why?”

“I guess,” Monk admitted, “he was more interested in this business of Grandpa Eben's spook than he seemed to be this afternoon.”

Ezra Strong drew in a heavily shaking breath. “Is Copeland really dead?”

“Yes.”

“What . . . what do you think killed him?”

“I don't know. Maybe he ran into that 'thing' in the darkness, and hit it hard enough to smash in the top of his head.”

“I don't think that is possible.”

“The way he was running, it could be.”

Ezra Strong made a hoarse noise in his throat, a sound that was unadulterated mental and physical anguish. “In that case, whoever is responsible for the spook is guilty of murder.”

“Maybe.”

“Wait a minute,” Billy Riggs exclaimed. “When I put that spook on old Copeland, I didn't intend to kill anybody.”

Monk snorted. “Let's be sensible about this. Let's stop this crazy talk about a spook. There is no such thing as a spook, and we all know it.”

“Then what . . . what—” Ezra Strong's voice hit a snag and he couldn't finish.

“I don't know what the thing is,” Monk confessed. “But we are going to find out.”

The complete mental and physical nausea was still in Ezra Strong's voice when he asked, “And . . . it . . . it was murder?”

Monk did not answer him, although he soon wished he had, or rather wished that he had seized hold of Ezra Strong and kept him there.

BECAUSE Ezra Strong escaped. He said, “I'm going to feel around for that 'thing,' whatever it is,” and he said it calmly in order to fool Monk, who was upset anyway. In fact, Monk paid no attention to him, not until Doc Savage came back and asked where Strong had gone.

Doc had been exploring in the darkness also. He had given it up and approached Monk, asking, “Where is Strong? Riggs and Ham are here. But where is Strong?”

Monk was trying to find some sign of life in the body, although he knew the man was dead. He said, gesturing to the left, “He went over there to look around.”

Doc Savage glanced the way Monk had pointed, then asked sharply, “Toward the street? Where you left your car?”

The significance sank into Monk's consciousness, and he jumped to his feet. "He's getting away!"

But Doc Savage was already running toward the street. Monk followed, and both of them were too late. They heard the car engine start, and heard the car leave with a haste that was punishing on the tires. The machine was a block away by the time they gained the sidewalk.

Billy Riggs came running to see what the excitement was, and demanded, "Who was that? Where's Ezra?"

"He copped our car," Monk said.

"You mean he fled?"

"Yeah."

"But why?" Billy Riggs was startled.

Monk rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "You know something?"

"What?"

"After Copeland got killed," Monk said, "this 'thing' suddenly wasn't so funny to Ezra Strong."

"That took the fun out of it for everybody."

"Yeah, but it seemed to undermine Ezra Strong a little more explosively than you would suspect."

Billy Riggs started to say something, then jumped, and said, "Who's this?"

A man was coming.

"One of the neighbors, probably," Monk muttered.

THE newcomer was a short, wide, rounded man with a silhouette—they could only see his general form against a distant street light—which resembled that of a cub bear.

"What's going on here?" he demanded. "Is Mr. Copeland all right?"

"Were you expecting something to happen to him?" Monk asked.

The man turned the blinding beam of a flashlight on Monk. Instantly Doc Savage had the beam of a flashlight of his own on the newcomer. They were able, except for Monk, who was blinded, to see what the fellow looked like.

For a heavy man, he gave an unusual impression of being muscular instead of fat, and he was very dapper, wearing a snappy tweed suit which was just a little on the zoot side, but not sufficiently zoot to be ridiculous. It was a good suit, and all the accessories were expensive. He was not much more than thirty, with blue eyes, fine white teeth, a taffy-colored mustache, blond hair. He gave the general impression of a slicker.

"Why, hello, Mr. Overby," Billy Riggs said.

"Good evening, Riggs."

“Who is he?” Doc asked.

“Mr. Overby, Ansen Overby,” said Riggs. “He is a real-estate broker downtown.”

“Take that damned light out of my eyes,” said Ansen Overby. “What is going on here?”

“What are you doing here?” Doc Savage asked.

“I’m asking the questions!” Overby yelled. “Who the devil are you?”

Billy Riggs said, “This is Doc Savage, Ansen.”

Ansen Overby jumped visibly and gave other signs of astonishment; his sagging jaw gave him the expression of having been slapped by something he hadn’t expected. “Oh,” he said. “I—uh—the Doc Savage who bought an interest in the chemical plant some time ago?”

“Yes.”

“For the love of Mike!” Ansen Overby gestured vaguely. “When Copeland called me and mentioned the name Savage, I never got the connection at all.”

“Copeland called you?” Doc asked.

“By telephone.”

“How long have you been around here?”

“Why, I just arrived.”

“Why did you come?”

Ansen Overby was getting nervous. He shaded his eyes against the light. “Why, because of the telephone call. Mr. Copeland asked me to come out. He said his life was in danger.”

As if he wanted to get all the details straight, Doc Savage repeated, “Copeland said his life was in danger?”

“Yes. He said a man named Monk Mayfair, one named Ham Brooks, Billy Riggs, Ezra Strong and Savage had threatened him. Said he was afraid they would kill him.”

“Just why would Copeland call you about something like that?” Doc asked.

“I guess I am about the only friend the old fellow has,” Ansen Overby said.

“Had,” Monk said. “The word is had, when you refer to Copeland.”

“Had?”

“He’s dead.”

Billy Riggs interrupted hoarsely, “Isn’t that a police car that just pulled up. Isn’t that Police Chief Flannigan getting out and coming in?”

“Some of the neighbors have been helping things along,” Monk muttered.

BERTRAM FLANNIGAN, chief of police, was a large rangy man who gave the impression of having a body built for Commando tactics and a voice made for shaking rafters. He first saw and recognized Billy Riggs.

“Billy, I hope you're not back in trouble,” he said.

Ansen Overby said wildly, “I just got here! I didn't have anything to do with it!”

“With what?”

“Harland Crown Copeland is dead.”

Chief Flannigan thought for a moment, and seemed to be battling with an inner impulse which got the best of him, for he sighed. “I shouldn't say this, but I'm going to. I'll bet they roll out a new red plush carpet in hell for that old gaffer.”

“That's a horrible thing to say!” Ansen Overby gasped.

“Anyway, it's human.”

“The body is over here, Chief Flannigan,” Doc Savage said.

“Who're you?”

“My name is Savage. Clark Savage, Jr.”

“Doc Savage?”

“Yes.”

“Well, well, fame comes to our little village,” Chief Flannigan said. “I've heard of you. What this country needs is a few more men to scare crooks the way you do.”

“The body is over here.”

They walked through the darkness, lighting the way with flashlights, and encountered Ham Brooks, who had regained his senses after having been knocked out by bumping into whatever “thing” had been solid and invisible in the darkness. Ham joined them, betraying by his silence and the pop-eyed look he gave Chief Flannigan's uniform that he had seen the body of Harland Crown Copeland, and didn't like the way the pieces were fitting together.

“Well, well, well,” said the police chief. “Died out in the yard, did he? Heart trouble, eh?”

Then Chief Flannigan turned his flashlight on the dead man's head. The flash beam jumped a little just after it rested on the head, and after that was steady for quite a time.

“What hit him?” Flannigan asked.

“We don't know,” Monk said. “He must have run into something.”

He never ran into anything that made his head like that.”

“But— “

“He was slammed,” Flannigan said. “Slammed hard.” The police officer turned his flashlight beam, running the light over Doc Savage, Monk Mayfair, Billy Riggs, Ansen Overby and finally over Ham

Brooks. The light explored Ham's bruised head and face and the trickle of blood running down Ham's cheek.

"What happened to your face?"

"I ran into something," Ham said.

"Ran into a door, I suppose, like when you get a black eye?"

"I'm not lying."

"You know why I came out here?" Chief Flannigan asked.

"No."

"I got a telephone call. From old Copeland. He said some guys were going to kill him. He was afraid. He said their names were Billy Riggs, Doc Savage, Monk Mayfair, Ham Brooks and Ezra Strong."

Ansen Overby said wildly, "I got a call just like that from Copeland, chief!"

"Did, eh?"

"Yes. And when I got here, they had just finished killing him."

"You saw 'em?"

"I—no. No, I didn't see them, exactly."

"Hold your tongue, then," Flannigan said. "All of you stand still. I want to look around."

The police chief did not go far, only to the front walk where he began hailing the neighbors and getting their stories of what they had heard or seen. Because most of the eyewitnesses were excited, they spoke loud enough for Doc and the others to hear what was said. What they heard wasn't very favorable to themselves.

"I don't like this," Billy Riggs muttered. "They're telling him about old Copeland yelling out of the window that he was being attacked. Sure makes it sound bad for us. Makes us look guilty."

Chief Flannigan came striding back to them, a formidable object in the night. "Where's Ezra Strong?"

Doc Savage said, "Strong left hurriedly."

Flannigan sighed.

"Murder," he said. "So you are under arrest. Mr. Savage, Monk Mayfair, Ham Brooks, Billy Riggs—the four of you are under arrest. And Ezra Strong, when we catch him."

Chapter VII

EZRA STRONG had fled in terror, and the terror did not leave him, but grew worse. He drove wildly, with no aim except to get away from the vicinity. Finally it dawned on him that he was technically in a stolen car, and that he should get rid of it. "The police!" he muttered. "The police will have the license numbers of this car by now." He said this to himself, and it was the only time he spoke to himself. But his agitation kept increasing.

Strong parked the car three blocks from his apartment, then ran along alleys until he reached his apartment house, where he found the back door locked. Reluctantly, he ducked in the front, and scuttled up the stairs.

He poured himself a drink of liquor, drank only one swallow and spilled the rest on the floor in his agitation. He swore, kicked at the fallen glass, and fell to pacing nervously back and forth through the apartment.

Suddenly he made up his mind, and plunged into the bedroom, where he began packing clothes, socks, underclothes, razor and toothbrush in a small handbag. He took two hundred dollars from a hide-out where he kept the cash for emergencies; such emergencies as getting a chance to go out on a party when he was short of pocket money and the banks were closed. It was not getaway money, but it would serve—he grinned ruefully at the idea. Getaway! How far would two hundred dollars take him, and how long would it keep him out of sight?

A knock on the door made him jump wildly, then remember that he hadn't locked the door. He headed for the door with a series of long jumps to lock it, but the door opened before he got there. A girl came in.

“Oh, Lucybelle!” Ezra Strong said, his voice hoarse with relief. “Lucybelle.”

“Ezra, you're an old meanie,” Lucybelle said. Lucybelle was a mixture of cherub and slimness with enough curves to hint that in another ten years she would be needing fifteen-dollar girdles. Her blue-eyed, flaxen-haired looks were pretty rather than beautiful.

“Ezra, you're mean,” she said. “What happened to you?”

“Oh, gosh, we had a date, didn't we?” Ezra Strong said.

“Well, I'm surprised you remembered it,” Lucybelle said peevishly. “You didn't come, and I thought maybe something had happened to you, so I came to see.”

“I intended to call you, and couldn't get to a telephone,” Ezra said, which was only half a lie. He had intended to call her, all right, but he had forgotten it in the excitement of the evening.

Lucybelle fluffed her flaxen hair archly. “Ruth said I was a silly girl to be running after you. She didn't want me to come. But I thought maybe you were ill.”

“Did Ruth come along?”

“No, of course not,” Lucybelle said.

Ezra Strong found himself wishing that Ruth had come instead of Lucybelle. Ruth was Lucybelle's sister, and lately Ezra had been realizing that Ruth had a bushel of common sense for every spoonful that Lucybelle had, and that Ruth had several times as much genuine beauty. Ruth was a swell person. But Ezra was technically engaged to Lucybelle, and he'd thought he was very much in love with her. He'd thought he was in love with Lucybelle, he suddenly realized, until this moment. But now, very abruptly, she seemed silly and flitterbrained to him.

He looked at Lucybelle, and a rather terrible suspicion came into his mind.

“Lucybelle,” he said. “Sit down. I want to ask you a question or two.”

LUCYBELLE pouted and said, “Oh, don't start being serious, Ezra. We had a date tonight, and it isn't too late yet to have some fun. I'll forgive you. We can go out to the Corners and dance.”

“Sit down,” Ezra said.

“I don't want to talk, silly. I want to do things.” Lucybelle whirled away from a chair.

“Lucybelle!” Ezra Strong's voice was hard and jarring, loud.

“Oh, stop shouting.” Lucybelle made a mouth. “Actually, I think I'll get mad at you. What's wrong with you, anyway?”

Ezra Strong grasped her arm. “Lucybelle, listen! You remember what I told you about a week ago?”

Lucybelle simpered up at him. “That silly stuff? Oh, sure, I remember.”

“I asked you not to tell anybody.”

“Well, I promised I wouldn't, didn't I?” Lucybelle said archly.

“Have you?”

“Have I what?”

“Did you tell anyone what I asked you not to tell?”

There was just the barest hesitation before Lucybelle said, “Why, of course I didn't, silly.”

Ezra Strong looked at her in horror.

“You're lying!” he said.

Lucybelle was shaken. Then she jerked away from him. “I don't think I like you.”

Ezra continued to stare at her. “Who did you tell?”

“Nobody.”

“Lucybelle, you faithfully promised that—”

“I didn't tell anybody.”

“You're lying to me,” Ezra Strong said with a flat certainty.

Lucybelle's pouting turned to anger and she said, “I'm just going to give your old ring back to you, that's what!”

Ezra Strong breathed inward heavily and shakily.

“Listen, you little empty head!” he growled.

Then he told her how Harland Crown Copeland had died, told her of the man's death exactly as he and Monk and Ham had witnessed it. He described the condition of Copeland's head when they had found him, and he described the “thing” they had found in the darkness, the invisible, immovable, solid, alive-seeming thing that they had found.

Lucybelle was white-faced when he had finished. The significance of what he was telling her had soaked into her frothy little head, and she was scared. She had little real strength of character to sustain her, and now that she was frightened, she was very frightened.

“You got me into this!” she cried, and she whirled and ran out of the apartment.

LUCYBELLE ran down the stairs, and when she was on the street, she kept running. She was panting, because she was already inclined to be fat, and she took no exercise. She was so scared that she had no breath anyway.

She ran along the street, which was dark. The darkness terrified her more. She began to whimper, sob, and to stumble, and once she fell.

“Oh, a run in my stocking!” she sobbed, when she was on her feet. But she kept running.

And then she ran against something solid, a solidness in the darkness where there should have been nothing—for she could look straight ahead through the solidness and see the street light on the corner, shedding its cone of yellow light.

She put out her hands and felt of the “thing” she had encountered, after which she screamed, and, wheeling around wildly, fled back the way she had come.

But she hit the solidness again, and this time she did not whirl away, but beat at it with her small fists, sobbing in fear and anguish.

A man came out of the darkness. He was swathed in a dark raincoat and a dark hat was low over his eyes and he had black gloves.

“Lucybelle,” he said. “You haven't a lick of sense, and you know too much. You know much too much. You know enough to get us all hanged or electrocuted. So that's just too bad for you, Lucybelle.”

The man had an object in his hand, a short wrench wrapped in cloth, and he hit Lucybelle over the head with it, struck her until she became quite still on the sidewalk. Then he picked her up and carried her to a car and drove away with her.

Chapter VIII

DOC SAVAGE was in jail. Monk, Ham and Billy Riggs were with him. They had been, for a while, locked in a cell. But now they were back in the front room, listening to Police Chief Flannigan make a short speech which was intended to impress them with the seriousness of their predicament. Not that they needed much impressing.

“The man Copeland was murdered,” said Flannigan. “There are unmistakable marks of a blunt instrument, marks indicating he was clubbed to death.”

“We had nothing to do with it,” Billy Riggs said earnestly.

“Two telephone calls from Copeland indicated he feared for his life from you fellows,” Flannigan continued. “The neighbors heard him shout from the windows, immediately after they heard glass breaking, that you were menacing his life. At least we are forced to presume it was you, because you were the only ones there at the time. Then there were shots, admittedly fired at you, and Copeland was

seen to burst out of the window. You were seen to follow him. Copeland fled screaming. You pursued him. He was found dead on the grounds. It does not look good.”

“We didn't kill him,” Billy Riggs repeated.

“What were you doing there?”

Billy Riggs glanced at Doc Savage. “Mr. Savage, I wish you would do the talking. If I tell the story about that spook, they will think I'm crazy.”

Flannigan said, “I think you were crazy, anyway, to kill Copeland the way you did, practically in front of all them witnesses. What's this spook talk?”

“You want to hear a story?” Doc Savage asked him.

“Is it a sensible one?”

“It's true.”

“That would be a welcome change,” said Flannigan. “When I catch crooks, they generally lie to me.”

Doc talked for some time, speaking just fast enough to hold the other man's interest, devoting more time to the essential points that he wanted the other to understand, and hurrying over the parts which he did not consider important. He told the complete story of Grandfather Eben Riggs' “spook” and the Indian-head charm, up to, but not including, their visit to Harland Crown Copeland's home.

Chief Flannigan, listened patiently and without interrupting, punctuated the end of the story by letting out a long and amazed grunt.

He looked at Monk, Ham and Billy Riggs. “That your tale, too?”

All three nodded.

“We know it sounds fantastic,” Billy Riggs said.

“Fantastic, hell!” Flannigan looked at the ceiling and whistled. “If my poor old mother ever thought for a minute that her boy Flannigan would sit here with his bare face hanging out and listen to such a tale, and for a minute believe a word of it, she would have drowned him when he was a pup.”

No one said anything for a few moments, then finally Flannigan snorted again, but less emphatically, and looked curiously at Billy Riggs.

“You got that Indian-head charm, Billy?” he asked half sheepishly.

“Yes.”

“Mind me looking at it?” But examining the thing seemed to get his thoughts in no better shape than they had been, and he shook his head violently as he passed the charm back. “Billy, the story is so silly I'm not even going to take that charm for exhibit A. You better think of a better story than that before the trial.”

No one said anything for a while.

Chief Flannigan rapped his desk suddenly. “All right, what happened at Copeland's house?”

Still no one showed an inclination to answer. Finally Billy Riggs said, “That was more spook, chief.”

Flannigan started to darken with rage.

Doc Savage leaned forward. "What do you say we go out there and re-enact the thing. Maybe that would convince you of something or other."

The officer struck his desk. "That's a damned good idea!"

MONK MAYFAIR began to have uneasy thoughts as they rode in police cars to the late Harland Crown Copeland's home, for he remembered that Doc Savage had not been with them until after they had found Copeland dead.

Monk suddenly realized that Doc had not told them whether or not he had seen anything connected with the murder, nor had the bronze man said a word about how he happened to come to Copeland's place, or turn up there at such a critical time.

Suddenly Monk shivered. He wondered if some plan of Doc's had gone wrong and resulted in the unfortunate death of Copeland. Such a thing could happen. The whole thing was such a confounded mystery that one could believe that anything could happen. If Doc had had a plan which had gone wrong—Doc's plans had a way of cropping up in the most unusual places, so it wasn't hard to wonder if he'd had one—and the misfiring of the plan had resulted in Copeland's death, that would explain why Doc hadn't said why he had come to Copeland's place and just what he'd seen. Monk began to wonder mightily what Doc had seen out there.

The police car stopped. Flannigan threw open the door. "Here we are."

There was a policeman at the front door, two in the yard, and three more inside with a studious middle-aged man wearing spectacles who was introduced to them as the prosecuting attorney. His name was Winders.

"I thought Winders would want to see this re-enactment of the crime." Police Chief Flannigan then told Winders the story about the charm of Grandfather Eben which Doc Savage had told him, getting in all the details which Doc had entered in the story. "Now, what do you think of such a yarn, Winders?"

"Most improbable thing I ever heard," Winders said.

"Yeah, we agree there." Flannigan gestured. "All right, Savage. Do we start the act?"

Doc Savage nodded. "Early this evening, I telephoned the hotel where Monk and Ham are staying and was not able to get hold of them. I then telephoned Billy Riggs' place and Ezra Strong's apartment, and getting neither one of them, it was easy to guess that Monk and Ham had got them together and were taking my suggestion to do their spook hunting in their spare time. They would undoubtedly talk to Copeland."

"So you came out here?"

"Exactly."

"When did you get here?"

"Just as the shotgun was being fired in the house," Doc replied.

Monk, hearing that, suddenly felt a great deal better, for if Doc had arrived that late, it was not likely that

he was accidentally responsible for Copeland's death.

“Go ahead,” Flannigan said suspiciously.

DOC SAVAGE showed them the route by which he had come to the place—he had arrived following the sidewalk openly, but when he heard the shotgun discharges, he had ducked into the shrubbery near the sidewalk. He retraced the exact route he had taken, showing them a track here and there in the soft earth as evidence that he had gone that way before.

When he had come to a spot where the shrubbery was quite thick, a spot that was not at all near where Copeland's body had been found, he stopped.

“Here.” Flashlights were on the bronze man, and they could all see each move he made. Doc gestured for them to come closer. “Stand around me, right at this point.”

“What the hell?” Flannigan shoved out his jaw suspiciously.

“I have something to show you. Stand still and watch me.”

Doc now began to make gestures, feeling gestures directed at the empty air, that made Monk's hair want to stand on end.

What the dickens, Monk thought! Is that thing still around here?

Then Doc said a few words in a strange language. Monk almost gave it away then, he was so astonished—and relieved. Doc had spoken Mayan. Mayan was an almost unknown language. It was the tongue of ancient Maya, not the modern one spoken by Central American descendants of old Maya, and they had found it necessary to learn to speak the language during one of their earlier adventures.

It was Doc's habit to use Mayan when he had something to say which he did not wish understood by bystanders. As far as he and his aids knew, they were the only men outside a small lost valley in Central America who understood the tongue.

Doc had suggested that they hold their breath.

So Monk knew what was coming. He stopped watching Doc's hands and looked at the bronze man's feet, knowing that the anaesthetic gas must be in the ground, buried just under the surface. The gas would probably be in fragile little globules, because that was the way Doc usually carried it. Sure enough, Monk saw Doc's toe dig into the earth and bring up some glass globules and crush them. Monk realized he was forgetting to hold his breath, so he held it.

When you held your breath, the gas would not affect you. The stuff mingled with the air, and after about a minute, due to an intricate chemical reaction which took place when it mixed with oxygen in small quantities, would become ineffective. You just held your breath for a minute, then you could start breathing again.

The police and the prosecuting attorney did not hold their breath. Neither did Billy Riggs.

They soon began to fall, because the anaesthetic gas worked very quickly, although it was odorless, colorless and almost unnoticeable. You noticed a slight sweetish stinging in the nasal passages when you inhaled it, but by then it was too late, and as a usual thing the victims never remembered the sweetish stinging after they revived.

Chief Flannigan and everyone else fell.

Doc began breathing again. “We will take Billy Riggs along.”

THEY did not have to borrow one of the police cars, because Doc Savage had left his car parked two blocks away when he came earlier in the evening, and he had told no one about the machine, so it was still there. They took it.

Doc Savage did not get in the car. “Drive two blocks south, then turn east and drive slowly. After about five blocks, wait for me.”

The bronze man then went back to Copeland's house, following alleys and shadows to keep out of sight in the late night. When he was hidden in Copeland's shrubbery, he cleared his throat and used his best voice.

“Help, help, help!” he roared. “The spook! The spook! It's got us! It's making us disappear!”

The volume of his shout started the neighborhood, and windows went up and lights came on.

Doc gave everyone time to get awake and alert, then repeated his yell, arranging the words differently but saying about the same thing.

Then he faded away into the night.

HAM BROOKS chuckled grimly when Doc Savage joined them and climbed into the car.

“That should give Chief Flannigan something supernatural to think about,” Ham said.

“Providing it does not dawn on him that they were overcome by gas, and not something more fantastic,” Doc agreed.

“Where to?” Monk was behind the wheel.

“Ezra Strong's apartment. And be careful. There are probably police in the neighborhood, since the police are looking for Strong.”

Billy Riggs sighed. “Poor Ezra. I feel badly about his getting involved in this mess.”

Ham grunted skeptically. “He pushed his nose right into it himself, didn't he? Nobody invited him.”

“But Ezra was just being friendly. And maybe amusing himself, too, because he thought it was so funny.”

Doc Savage pointed out some facts in a quiet tone. “Ezra Strong was too Johnny-on-the-spot when he appeared at the filling station this morning when Monk, Ham and Copeland came from the factory to talk to you, Riggs. Apparently he followed the limousines from the factory. And there was nothing innocent about the way he skipped out tonight. Ezra Strong knows something about this.”

Billy Riggs was doubtful. “Maybe he ran tonight because getting involved in a murder so innocently scared him.”

Monk took the car around a corner. “He was scared, all right—but not by the murder.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was watching Strong,” Monk explained. “When we encountered that spook—or whatever it is—in Copeland’s yard was when Strong got scared.”

“How did he act?” Doc was interested.

“Before that, Strong thought it was as funny as a barrel of monkeys on Friday. When we found the spook, he was suddenly as scared as could be.”

“Finding that thing would scare anybody,” said Billy Riggs defensively.

“Not like it got Strong. We’d been telling him about the invisible, solid thing, and he just laughed his head off. But when we found it, he blew higher than a kite.”

Monk stopped the car. “It’s only about three blocks from here to where Ezra Strong lives.”

Doc Savage got out of the machine. “Wait here.”

Chapter IX

REACHING Ezra Strong’s apartment, and discovering the police were there, Doc Savage did something which he would not have done if Monk and the others had been along. Doc took a long chance at a bluff. Chief Flannigan and his men would not yet have had time to put out an alarm for Doc.

Doc Savage walked in boldly. “Good evening. Is Chief Flannigan here?”

There were two policemen, and they were surprised.

“No, the chief isn’t here.”

Doc looked surprised. “Do you mind if I ask some questions before he comes? He is very anxious to get this mystery solved.”

The bronze man’s matter-of-fact manner was confident enough to deceive the two officers.

Doc asked, “Any trace of Ezra Strong yet?”

“No.”

“I imagine you are covering the railroads, bus stations, airport and highways?”

“That’s right.”

“I would suggest,” Doc said, “that you check with Strong’s friends and acquaintances and find where he lived originally, where he has gone on his vacations the last few years, and any other localities with which he is familiar. A clever man, when hiding out, will usually head for some locality he knows.”

The policeman grinned. “By gosh, nobody thought of that.”

“Did he take any clothing with him?”

“Yeah. We got his cleaning woman. She says a suitcase, a tweed suit, some shirts, a pair of riding breeches and boots, a raincoat and his shaving stuff are missing.”

“That sounds like the country, possibly a cabin. The spots where he has gone on vacation, or a cabin out of town if he has one, would be worth watching.”

“Sure.” The officer started away. “I’ll get our men on that now.”

“Wait, you can tell Chief Flannigan,” Doc said. “He will probably have some even better ideas.”

“O. K.”

“What else have you learned?”

“Strong had a visitor. Girl.”

“When?”

“About the time he must have been packing up to leave, the way we make it out.”

“Have you any idea who she was?”

“His girl friend. Name is Lucybelle Nolan.”

“How did you learn that?”

“Oh, we got a break,” the officer explained. “First, this Lucybelle has a sister named Ruth, and Ruth knew she was coming to see what had happened to Ezra Strong. Seems Lucybelle and Ezra had a date tonight, and when Ezra didn’t show up, Lucybelle rushed off to see what was wrong. When Lucybelle didn’t come back, the sister, Ruth, got worried and telephoned the police.”

“Then Lucybelle did not get back home?”

“No.”

“Did she go with Ezra Strong?”

The policeman scratched his head. “Now, there is something that puzzles us. There was a kind of a commotion on the street, a woman screaming. A guy who lives down the street heard it, and looked out and says he saw a woman being blackjacked by a man. The man threw her in the car and drove off.”

“I would like to talk to the eyewitness.”

“Sure.”

THE eyewitness was a fat, sleepy man who was a little sour about being disturbed at this late hour. It was now well past three o’clock in the morning.

“Next time I hear a woman yell, I don’t put my head out any windows,” the witness said.

“A man slugged a woman and threw her in a car?” Doc asked.

“So it looked to me.”

Doc Savage described Ezra Strong, size, build and the clothing which Ezra had been wearing when he fled from Copeland’s place. “That sound like the man?”

“Shucks, no. This man was short and heavy-set. He had on different clothes, a dark raincoat and dark hat down over his eyes.”

That certainly did not sound like Ezra Strong.

“What kind of a car was it?”

“Coupé.”

One of the policemen said, “Ezra Strong drives a coach, and it is missing.”

Doc Savage was thoughtful. “Apparently the man who got Lucybelle was not Ezra Strong.”

“We're not positive.”

The eyewitness had been growing more friendly and less resentful under the pleasant persuasion of Doc Savage's personality. He cleared his throat sheepishly.

“Here's something else,” he said. “I don't want you guys to laugh at me.”

Doc Savage showed quick interest. “Yes?”

“I saw the girl,” the man said, “a little before this guy come out of the shadows and bopped her. And when I first saw her, she was behaving funny. Kind of beating at the air, as if she were fighting something that wasn't there.”

“As if she had run into, shall we say, a spook?”

“Well—yes.”

“Did this thing appear to be movable, or immovable?”

“The way she was pushing and beating—immovable.”

One of the policeman interrupted and said, “Wait a minute, you say there was nothing visible, but she was beating and pushing at something?”

“Yes, and I'm not crazy,” the man said. “I know it sounds funny, but that's what I saw.”

Doc Savage said, “Thank you very much. You have been a great help.” To the policeman, the bronze man said, “Will you tell Chief Flannigan what we have learned, in case I do not see him immediately?”

“Sure,” the cop said.

MONK, Ham and Billy Riggs heaved gusty sighs of relief when Doc joined them, and they were startled by the bronze man's description of what he had done and learned.

“Chief Flannigan,” Billy Riggs said, “is going to be disturbed about this. What was the idea of letting the cops hear what you found out?”

“It is just possible,” Doc said, “that it may dawn on Flannigan that we are trying as hard as he is to find out what is at the bottom of this.”

Billy Riggs nodded. “Well, Flannigan isn't a bad guy at that. He was police chief when I had my trouble,

and he gave me all the breaks.”

“Did you know this Lucybelle Nolan?”

“I’ve seen her with Ezra Strong.”

“Know her sister, Ruth?”

“No,” said Billy. “But, oh, boy, I’d like to!”

“Any idea where she lives?”

“Sure.”

The Nolan home was a pleasant ranch-type brick in a good residence section. There was a lighted window, and when Doc Savage rang, the door was opened almost immediately by Ruth herself.

“Oh.” She was disappointed when she saw the bronze man. “I thought that perhaps Lucybelle had returned.”

“We want to talk to you about Lucybelle,” Doc said.

“Who are you?”

Doc Savage identified himself, giving his name, explaining that two of his assistants, Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks, were waiting in the car with Billy Riggs.

“Do you know something about Lucybelle?” Ruth asked anxiously.

“A little. Enough to make us want to know more.”

Ruth hesitated. “Very good, I will talk to you. But first let me tell my mother that everything is all right, or at least that Lucybelle did not come home. Mother heard you ring, and she will be anxious. Excuse me, please.”

“Certainly.”

Ruth was gone about three minutes, then returned with an air of subdued excitement. “Mother isn’t very well.” She closed the door and stepped outside. “We had better talk here on the porch.”

SHE talked easily and rapidly.

“Lucybelle has known Ezra Strong some time, but she has only been going with him about six months. Mother and I were both glad when she started going with Strong, because she is inclined to be flighty and flutterbrained. We haven’t always particularly liked her associates, although the young man she was in love with before Ezra wasn’t so bad. His name was Ansen Overby.”

“What is Ezra Strong’s business?”

“He has a small machine shop. But he also has quite a bit of money, too. I have the impression that he made the money himself in some previous business, or business deal, but I don’t know what it was. I don’t think he ever told us. I understand he is now manufacturing torpedo driving mechanisms for the government in his machine shop.”

“Has Lucybelle behaved strangely lately?”

Ruth thought for a moment. “I don't think so. I've been wondering about that myself, but I haven't been able to remember anything unusual.”

“She hadn't quarreled with Ezra Strong?”

“Not that I heard. They were engaged.”

“Anything unusual that happened,” Doc said, “probably would have concerned Lucybelle and Ezra Strong.”

Ruth shook her head, then said, “Wait, the other evening . . . but that is silly.”

“What was it?”

“It was just a remark Lucybelle made. She said, 'Ezra is the silliest thing, or he is losing his mind.' Those were her exact words, as I remember them.”

Doc Savage had been aware of a feeling of animosity which Ruth held against him in the beginning. It was not an open emotion; it seemed to be something she was hiding. So the bronze man was exercising his pleasant personality as much as possible to draw the young woman out, to loosen her flow of information.

He suggested, “Perhaps there was nothing unusual in Lucybelle's remark that Ezra was a silly thing. Girls often say that about boys without meaning anything.”

“Oh, but Lucybelle had always complained because Ezra Strong was so sensible,” Ruth explained. “She kept grumbling about his being so sensible that he wasn't much fun.”

“Then, when she called Ezra silly, and said he was losing his mind, it was a noticeably different way of referring to him?”

“Yes indeed.”

“When did Lucybelle make this remark, do you recall?”

“About a week ago.”

The young woman seemed to be answering questions freely enough, but Doc Savage was puzzled. He sensed something vaguely wrong in the background.

“Ruth, have the police told you anything about what has happened tonight?” he asked.

“The police!” She became alarmed. “Is something really wrong? Has something terrible happened to Lucybelle?”

Doc Savage, in his friendliest voice, said, “Your sister seems involved in this, and you have a right to know all that has happened.”

The bronze man then summarized the whole thing from the time Billy Riggs had rubbed the Indian-head charm that had belonged to his Grandfather Eben, through the various appearances of the fantastic thing which they had taken to calling a “spook,” through the death of Copeland, finishing with what he knew of the disappearance of Lucybelle in the hands of a man in a dark raincoat and dark hat on the street near Ezra Strong's apartment.

“The police didn't tell me any of this,” Ruth said.

“Probably they should have.”

Ruth had a queer expression.

“Mr. Savage, I made a mistake,” she said. “I want to apologize.”

“Why?”

“You remember, just before we came out here to talk, I said I had to go reassure my mother.”

“Yes.”

“I didn't. I lied.”

“What did you do?”

“I had been listening to the police radio, and I heard an alarm being broadcast for you, and it said you were also wanted in connection with Lucybelle's disappearance.”

Doc made a guess. “So, instead of talking to your mother, you called the police and told them we were here?”

“Yes.”

Monk Mayfair said, “That must explain the guy who just came skulking into the yard. It's probably a policeman.”

“Why didn't you say you saw somebody!” Ham gasped. “They must be surrounding us.”

“I just saw him.” Monk got out the powerful flashlight which had been in Doc Savage's car and which he had brought along. “Get set, everybody! I'm going to turn this beam on him and blind him, and while he's blinded, we'll all make a few tracks.”

“Oh, I'm sorry!” Ruth said.

“S all right,” Monk told her. “You did the natural thing.”

Monk placed the flashlight on the porch floor, aiming it so that the beam would come to rest on the skulker. Monk planned to switch on the light and leave it lying there to keep the man blinded while he and the others ran for it.

“Switch it on, dope!” Ham whispered.

Monk hesitated, deliberately goading Ham Brooks, and when Ham snarled a soft question, Monk chuckled. He switched on the light.

“Why!” Monk gasped. “It's Ansen Overby!”

Ansen Overby, blinded by the beam of light, behaved in a way they did not expect. He shoved both arms above his head. “All right, officers, don't shoot! You've got me!”

He approached. He saw they were not police.

“Oh, my!” he gasped. “I'm glad to see you gentlemen!”

Chapter X

MONK examined Ansen Overby with no approval whatever and said, "You're the guy who helped get us in jail, so we're not happy to see you, if you'll just pardon us."

"I know," Overby said. "But now I'm in trouble, too."

"Yeah?"

"The police are looking for me for murder, along with you fellows."

Ham Brooks grunted suddenly. "There's a police siren. Hear it?"

They could hear the faint howl of the siren in the distance. It came closer, and shut off, probably a dozen blocks away.

Doc said, "They are coming in silently. We had best get out of here."

He started for their car.

"I'm going with you." Ruth Nolan clutched Doc's arm. "This is my fault, because I notified the police."

"It being your fault does not mean you have to go along."

"But I want to. I want to talk to you some more."

"You have additional information?"

"No. I want to ask you something."

"Well, we can argue about it in the car." Doc hurried on.

They piled into the sedan—Ruth Nolan and Ansen Overby with them—and got rolling. They headed north, drove sedately, and kept off the main streets.

"Have you a place to go?" Ansen Overby sounded frightened.

"No."

"I am in the real estate business, as you may know. I have a country home listed for sale. It is unoccupied, and I have the key with my bunch of keys. The place is rather isolated. We can go there."

"Good enough."

Overby gave directions, and they got out of town safely, taking a country road which was black-topped and overhung with pleasant trees.

Doc Savage spoke to Ruth Nolan. "What do you have to ask us?"

"I've heard of you," Ruth said. "You have the name of being a man who helps people out of trouble. Isn't that your business?"

"In a way," Doc admitted. "It would be hard to clearly define our business."

Well, I want you to help me find Lucybelle."

“That is what you wanted to ask?”

“Yes.”

“We will do what we can.”

She was genuinely grateful. “Oh, thank you! And will you let me go along?”

Doc Savage considered the point. “For the time being.”

THE car had a slight knock on the low hills and one of the front tires was worn in a single spot so that it kept slapping the road monotonously.

“The police,” said Ansen Overby, “are after me.”

“That’s no novelty for us,” Monk grumbled. “They want us on a murder charge.”

“But they want me for the same thing.”

“How come?”

“You remember that telephone call I got from Harland Crown Copeland, the one where he said he was being menaced by you fellows and Ezra Strong?”

“We have a faint recollection.” Monk’s voice was bitter.

“Well, it was a phony. Copeland didn’t make it.”

“Who found that out?”

“The police.”

“How?”

“The time. They checked the time of the call, and they found Copeland had a visitor at the time, the proprietor of a grocery store who was quarreling with Copeland over a grocery bill the old miser didn’t want to pay—and Copeland didn’t make the call. The grocer was darn positive.”

“And so?”

“Somebody else made the call,” Ansen Overby said miserably. “Somebody who fooled me into thinking he was Copeland.”

“That,” said Monk amiably, “might make the police think you were trying to frame us to protect yourself.”

“That’s exactly what they think, and the letter made them sure.”

“What letter?”

“A letter they found in old Copeland’s desk at his home. It was on my stationery, and signed with a reasonable imitation of my signature, saying that I would kill old Copeland if he dared raise a fuss about the shortage in my accounting for the real estate I had sold for him last month.”

Ham, interested by the slight legal aspect of this last, asked, "Was there a shortage?"

"I . . . ah . . . a slight one. Nothing serious. I had made arrangements to handle it with Copeland, but unfortunately our arrangement was verbal, so I can't prove it."

"So the cops are after you, too?"

"Yes."

The man sounded sincere, and the others were willing to accept his story. Doc Savage, however, put a question. "Overby, how did you find the police were after you?"

"They sent an officer to arrest me. He told me what I have just told you—the evidence against me—and I became terrified and, I fear, a little foolish. At any rate, I slugged the man, stunning him momentarily, and fled."

"That," Doc said, "leaves only the point of how you found us?"

"Oh, that was a lucky accident. I had heard, of course, that something had happened to Lucybelle Nolan and I thought I would talk to her sister, Ruth, about it. I thought there might be some connection which would help me clear myself."

"Lucybelle," said Ruth Nolan sharply, "isn't a crook."

"I'm sure she's not," Overby said hastily.

"Lucybelle may be a thoughtless, but she's not a bad girl."

"Oh, I'm sure that's true."

"Overby, how much was that shortage?" Monk asked suddenly.

"I . . . very slight."

"How much?"

"Eleven hundred and thirty dollars, but—"

"To old Copeland, that wouldn't have meant any more than eleven hundred and thirty of his arms and legs," Monk said dryly.

"I'm not a murderer!" Overby yelled, alarmed.

THE country home was not well kept. It belonged to a man who had gone to Washington on a government job and decided to stay there permanently, Ansen Overby explained uneasily. The interior of the house proved to be comfortable enough, for the place was furnished. Overby had some trouble locating the proper key on his ring of a considerable number of keys, but he was successful, and he invited them inside as if he owned the place.

"Eleven hundred thirty bucks," Monk remarked, and Overby glared at him.

They went over the place, heeding Doc's warning to be careful that flashlights could not be seen through the windows by the neighbors.

“The nearest neighbor is half a mile away,” Overby assured them.

Monk noted that Overby was recovering his spirits rapidly. Doc Savage said, “Regardless of the fact that we all want to be up and doing something to solve this mystery, we will have to have sleep. Monk and Ham came by train last night and had to stand because of the crowded cars, so they did not get much sleep. The rest of us will have to have a few hours. So we had better get them now.”

The bronze man divided them up so that they would stand three watches—Monk and Ruth, Doc and Overby, Ham and Billy Riggs—during the rest of the night. Everyone was satisfied with the arrangement except Ham, who was irritated at the idea of Monk's keeping lookout with the attractive Ruth.

“That Monk,” Ham warned Ruth, “has a wife and thirteen baboonlike children in New York.”

Monk became red-faced with rage. “That's a blasted lie he always tells.”

But Ham could see enough startled doubt on Ruth's face to show him that he had fixed Monk's clock for the time being, so he went to sleep and slept the sleep of the blessed.

Ham slept very soundly indeed, and when he was awakened to stand his turn at watch, he got up drowsily—he had lain down fully dressed—and started to walk. Then he grabbed at his waistline, looked down, considered for a moment, then went over and kicked Monk in the ribs, not very gently.

“Ow!” Monk yelled. “What you trying to do?”

“Where's my belt?” Ham demanded.

“Your belt?”

“Yes, you heard me!”

“How would you lose your belt? What do you do with your head, nail that on so you won't lose it, too?”

Ham kicked Monk again, less softly. “Where's my belt, you silly mess?”

“I didn't touch it, you overdressed shyster.”

Ham was pretty grim about it. “You know darned well I prize that belt because it was a gift from the law class I teach evenings during the winters. The buckle was solid gold and it was engraved with my name and some pleasant sentiment. I think a lot of it. Now, you dig it up!”

“I haven't got it.”

“Dig it up, you goon!”

“I'll dig you a grave, you keep messin' with me!” Monk shouted. “If you lost your belt, don't blame me!”

Chapter XI

A BELT was an interesting item that turned up during the course of the mess in the State National Bank.

The State National had been founded over a hundred years ago by a Scotchman whose descendants still operated the institution. Today the State National occupied a fourteen-story building, had a trust division, a home owners loan division, a securities division and all the other divisions that went with a financial firm of size and importance.

On Fridays, the State National made up the pay roll for the Copeland Chemical Co., and this was Friday. The pay roll amounted to about fifty thousand dollars in bills of rather small denomination, which were placed in the envelopes at the bank, and these envelopes were then hauled to the plant in an armored truck and doled out to the employees.

The actual making up of the pay roll was done at odd times by the bank employees during the week, and on Friday was placed in the paybags for the trucks to transport. It was customary for the truck to call for the pay roll about ten thirty Friday mornings.

The pay roll was in the pay bags and these were standing on a table in the rear of the bank waiting for the truck guards. The truck had not yet appeared.

That was the situation when the first spook walked in.

“Hey, look!” said one of the tellers. “A spook!”

He laughed when he said it.

There was nothing supernatural about the figure which had walked into the bank, and which was shortly followed by three more figures almost identical in appearance. At first glance the figure was so obviously an ordinary human being wrapped in an ordinary bed sheet. Or perhaps swathed in a couple of bed sheets, since one sheet would hardly cover a human figure so completely.

“They've got the sheets over their faces!” exclaimed another teller, “Maybe they're bank robbers!”

“Bank robbers went out of fashion with Dillinger.”

By now everyone in the main lobby of the bank had stopped work to stare at the apparition.

“Must be an advertising stunt,” somebody said.

The guard who always stood in the lobby of the bank did not think so. He put a hand on his gun and started forward, but almost at once brought up sharp, emitting a small barking noise of pain and clutching at his bruised nose.

Then the bank guard felt of the air—it looked like nothing but the air, but he encountered a solid substance he could feel but not see—in front of him. A ghostly unbelieving expression overspread his face.

There were now four of the sheet-wrapped spooks in the bank. No more appeared. The four were enough, it developed.

The guard jumped back, drew his gun, and shouted, “Put your hands up!”

The four spooks did not obey, although they glanced toward the angry, frightened, amazed guard in a rather unspooklike fashion.

So the guard cut loose with a shot, firing over the heads of the four figures, which was the sensible thing to do, since he did not know whether they were really criminals. Or rather, he aimed over their heads. The bullet did not go there.

The bullet, the guard swore afterward—and his statement was true—flattened out in midair and remained embedded there, or suspended.

ONE of the sheet-wrapped “spooks” then did some clowning. He lifted his arms, and made the kind of a gesture—in the direction of the bullet—which a magician sometimes makes before taking a rabbit out of a hat.

“Abracadabra, hocus-pocus,” he said. “Stop, bullet. Stop, all ye bullets.”

His voice sounded distant and hollow to the others in the bank, as if he were deep in a box.

The four sheet-wrapped figures calmly climbed over the walnut counter, and began helping themselves to the money that was in sight.

Most of the State National tellers kept revolvers in their cages. There was a pistol range in the basement, and bank rules required a certain amount of practice, so they were good marksmen. But none of them hit a spook, although all of them did plenty of shooting.

The bullets stuck in the air at various points, and hung there.

A thoughtful bank employee set off the tear gas, which ordinarily would have been a good move, but in this case was a bad one, since it accomplished nothing but the gassing of the bank employees.

The spooks were human enough to be wearing gas masks, because they could be seen hastily adjusting the mouthpieces under their sheets.

They got the chemical company pay roll. Fifty-one thousand three hundred eighty dollars and forty-one cents.

In odd cash lying around they got another eleven thousand and some odd dollars. The thirty thousand dollars in War Bonds which they collected were registered and hence not negotiable; not by thieves at any rate.

The situation was now quite spectacular. Everyone but the spooks was more or less blinded by the tear gas. There was plenty of shooting, well over a hundred rounds of ammunition being fired by the bank employees during the sensational affair. Not all of these hundred bullets stuck in the air, although most of them did. All but four, in fact.

The four bullets which did not stick in the air were fired at the ceiling by a teller who kept his head and did some experimenting. The bullets he shot at the ceiling behaved as bullets should, hitting overhead and knocking loose fistfuls of plaster.

So there was not a ceiling of anything invisible that stopped bullets.

The bank interior was so laid out that there was a cage around some of the tellers, and the others merely worked behind a walnut counter.

The spooks finished their harvest and left by leaping over the counter or climbing over the cage grille.

In climbing over the grille, one of them got hung. The sheets were clumsy affairs. The man who got caught did some very unspooky cursing. He fought around trying to free himself, and finally succeeded, falling to the floor. But he had left his belt hanging to the cage, and did not seem to notice.

This spook, it was now, of course, evident, was a man dressed in ordinary civilian clothes under the sheet.

The four spooks ran to the door, where one of them turned and laughed. This one was the joke-lover

who had made the magician's gesture earlier. He made another one now.

"Hocus-pocus, fall bullets," he said.

The bullets did not fall immediately, but a few seconds later they did, clattering to the floor. They did not all fall at once, but dropped by groups.

It was believed, although there was no certainty about this, that the men escaped in a cream-colored sedan.

THE police had already been called, when the tear gas was released, the function performed by part of the automatic apparatus. The officers arrived shortly.

Police Chief Flannigan himself soon appeared. The chief looked weary, showing the signs of a night's loss of sleep. He did not do much talking. There was an assistant prosecuting attorney with him who did most of the questioning, giving the impression that he thought everyone in the bank was completely insane.

"Here," a detective said, "is a belt which was torn off one of the robbers when he climbed over the cage."

"A belt may not help us much," said Chief Flannigan.

"This one will. It has an elaborate gold buckle, with a lot of engraving. Look."

"Let's see."

Chief Flannigan inspected the belt.

It was good engraving, easily read, and it showed that the belt had been given to Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks by a class of law students.

"Who is Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks?" demanded the assistant prosecuting attorney. "Wait a minute! Say, is that Ham Brooks?"

"Ham Brooks," agreed Chief Flannigan grimly.

"That means Doc Savage pulled this."

"Looks so."

"We already had enough evidence to convict them of the murder of Copeland."

"Well, this stacks a bank robbery on top of it," Flannigan said. "Some War Bonds were stolen. That probably makes it a Federal offense. Notify the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

The assistant prosecuting attorney was a little too proud of the local police department, and he said, "Why ring in the Federals? They always grab all the credit. We can handle this."

"This thing is utterly fantastic," Flannigan told him angrily. "I have a hunch this is just the beginning. It is going to take more than us to stop it."

Chapter XII

THE four spooks left their cream sedan on the south side, and got into another car which they had previously parked there. They had removed their sheets, of course.

They were four ordinary-looking crooks, fellows who had obviously been rejected by the army for one reason or another, probably most of them on moral grounds. One of them was rather old and none of them were under twenty.

The amount of money they had collected impressed them.

"I'll bet," said the youngest, "there's half a million dollars here."

The old man said, "Oh, hell! We're lucky if there's sixty grand."

"But there's a lot of it."

"Small bills. The bonds are registered. Whoever picked them up was a damned fool. We can't pass them, and it will be the cause of getting the F. B. I. down on our necks."

The thought of the F. B. I. sobered them for a while. They drove north, following the main streets. Then they changed to two more cars, on the theory that the police might by now be looking for four men riding together.

In the course of time, they rejoined in an office building in the midtown section north of the bank which they had just looted, but not many blocks distant. The building was a shabby one and the office which they entered was entirely unfurnished. It consisted of a suite of rooms, and it had just been rented as a temporary headquarters.

They waited about twenty minutes. They did not realize there was a back entrance to the suite of offices, so a sound coming from the rear room caused much alarm. They had guns out when a door opened and a figure appeared.

The newcomer was swathed in a sheet.

"Oh, put down those guns!" he snapped.

They lowered the weapons sheepishly.

"Better still, throw those damned guns away," the sheet-wrapped individual commanded. "You won't need them, and they'll just get you in trouble. You're liable to shoot somebody."

The four were reluctant to give up their weapons, however, and the other did not press the point.

"Count the money," he said.

They spent nearly half an hour tearing open the pay envelopes and counting out the proceeds. The only one adept at figuring was the older man.

The person who had arrived last did not remove the sheet, and did not speak during the counting. But when the sum total was announced, it drew a whistle of pleasure.

"Good."

The older man said, "Chicken feed. With what we've got, we should have walked in and taken a million somewhere."

“We will,” said the sheet-wrapped form.

“Then why fool around with peewee stuff?”

“Working capital.”

“Oh.” The older man comprehended. “Yeah, that’s right, too. We can’t get very far without money to go on. The only thing is, now the police and everybody else is going to be looking for spooks.”

“What do we care? What can they do to stop us?”

“They might think of something.”

The sheet-wrapped figure, who wore white gloves, began pushing piles of money toward each of the four men. “Here is two thousand apiece. You will get another eight later. But two thousand is enough for you now. And do not go around spending it. Better not spend a cent more than you have to, and then only for necessities. And zoot suits and Scotch whiskey doesn’t come under the necessity heading.”

The older man was reassuring. “Don’t worry about us. We’re not going to mess up a prospect like we’ve got.”

THE wearer of the sheet appropriated the remainder of the proceeds from the bank adventure.

“What about the belt?”

“I left it there,” said the man who had pretended to get hung on the cage in the bank.

“Did you do it the way I said, by climbing over a cage on your way out, getting hung and tearing off the belt when you got loose?”

“Sure.”

“It looked natural?”

“As natural as I could make it look.”

The old man said, “It looked natural all right. He did a good job. Hell, I thought he was really hung for a while. It was good.”

“That’s swell. Now the police will look for Savage harder than ever.”

“I’m not happy about this Doc Savage angle,” the old man said.

“Don’t worry about him.”

The old one snorted. “You might as well tell a guy to ignore the law of gravity. I tell you, I had a cousin who got mixed up with Savage once, and something happened to him. We never did find out what. But he just disappeared.”

The sheet-wrapped figure asked harshly, “You want to quit?”

“I would have liked to quit before I began,” the old man said with feeling. “But it was too late when I found out Savage was mixed up in it. It’s still too late.”

“Then shut up!”

“Sure.”

“You wait here, the four of you. In about an hour, I will be back. If it's more than an hour, stick around anyway, because I'll want to outline the general nature of the next job.”

The old man frowned doubtfully. “Will this one be another little seventy thousand nubbin? Or is it going to be worth while?”

“Worth while.”

“How worth?”

Angrily, the other asked, “How much would it take to satisfy you, old man?”

“Plenty.”

“I'll guarantee you it won't be less than a million apiece. Will that satisfy you?”

The old man grunted with pleasure. “It might even make me happy.”

Chapter XIII

DOC SAVAGE'S party was still at the country home which was for sale with Ansen Overby's real estate agency. They weren't there because they particularly wanted to be. It was the fault of the man with the mowing machine.

The man was using a brand-new power mower, the sickle-bar type. He was mowing the grounds below the house, along the lane that led to the highway, where he would certainly see Doc and the others if they left in their car.

“We can't leave while the fellow is there,” Ansen Overby pointed out uneasily. “He knows the place is unoccupied, and he would be suspicious, and investigate to see if we had entered. Probably report it to the police, even if he didn't see anything wrong in the house. He's a neighbor, probably.”

So they had stayed in the house, except for Monk, who had disappeared.

Doc Savage was curious. “Where is Monk?”

Ham had an opinion. “He's probably off somewhere getting the sleep he should have gotten last night, instead of being up rascaling around and stealing my belt.”

“You have not found the belt?”

“No.”

“You think Monk got it?”

“Who else could have?”

“Why would Monk do that?”

“So he could rib me about holding up my pants with a string, maybe. For an ordinary man you would say

that was childish, but with Monk you expect such things.”

Doc Savage abandoned the conversation, and devoted himself to sitting at a window, behind lowered Venetian blinds, watching the man who was doing the mowing. The man was not making much progress.

“They must be paying him by the hour,” Billy Riggs said.

About an hour later, Monk appeared in triumph. He had not been anywhere asleep. The two pets, Habeas Corpus and Chemistry, had been left at the hotel in town the day before, but now Monk had them in tow.

“I thought they might be getting hungry,” Monk explained. “So I slipped into town and got them.”

“But the police!” Ruth Nolan exclaimed.

“The police—*pf-f-t!*” Monk snapped his fingers. “Those boys have other worries.”

Ham, pleased at getting his chimp, Chemistry, was moved to give Monk an almost civil word. “Sometimes you’re not too dumb.” Then he suddenly scowled at the pig, Habeas, realizing why Monk had probably gone to so much trouble to get the pets. Monk hadn’t been having much luck with Ruth Nolan, and Monk’s pig seemed to have a softening effect on feminine hearts, so the connection was suddenly fairly obvious to Ham. “You homely schemer!” Ham said angrily to Monk.

“Is that nice?” Monk asked in a hurt voice.

“You got the pig to soften up the girl?”

“Why, dang your shyster hide,” Monk said. “If that was the case, I wouldn’t have brought your Chemistry. I wish I hadn’t, now.”

Ham sneered. “You’re not fooling me.”

“Remember your belt?” Monk asked.

“Do I! You sneak thief!”

“I got it located for you.”

“That should be easy for you, since you stole it.”

Monk produced a folded newspaper. “Hot off the press.” He extended the paper. “Read it.”

The headlines were big, and they made Ham’s eyes pop:

LAWYER’S BELT IS CLUE

IN FANTASTIC ROBBERY

Ham misunderstood the implication of the headlines and screamed, “Monk, what have you done to me? That isn’t a joke!”

NOT until he had read the newspaper story twice was Ham convinced that Monk was not at the bottom of the spook robbery of the State National, and then Ham was too contrary to admit that he was wrong. He stalked around, using indignation to hide his astonishment at the fantastic yarn in the newspaper.

Monk looked at Doc Savage uneasily. “Doc, this mystery is beginning to come out into the open. That thing we’ve been calling a spook is in the hands of crooks. At first, it looked as though it was just the work of some practical joker. But now it’s no longer funny.”

Doc made no comment.

“We’ve got to do something,” Monk said. “Don’t you think so?”

“It might be advisable,” Doc admitted.

“O. K. What will we do?”

“Stay here.”

Monk was startled. “But where is that going to get us? We’re in a heck of a mess, accused of Copeland’s murder, accused of being responsible for that spook thing—that’s a bitter laugh, when we haven’t any idea what it is—and accused of robbing a bank.”

“There is no sense in moving until we have a plan.”

“But where are we gonna get a plan?”

“Out of our heads,” the bronze man said wearily.

Ham said, “We’re going to be out of luck if we depend on anything coming out of that head of Monk’s.”

“Oh, shut up,” Monk said. “I’m getting kind of scared.”

Ansen Overby waved his arms and shouted, “If you fellows are scared, think how I feel! After all, you are accustomed to danger, while I’m just a peace-loving real-estate man.”

“Mr. Overby, shouting won’t help us,” Ruth Nolan said.

Billy Riggs grinned at Ruth and said, “Ruth, you have the kind of courage I like to see.”

Monk looked around hastily, asked, “Where did Doc go?”

The bronze man was no longer with them.

DOC SAVAGE left the house by way of a side window so situated that he could drop into a clump of bushes without being observed. From this bush, he reached another, then a small drainage ditch, and into the woods, where it was possible to approach the man who was mowing the grass, without being seen.

The grass mower was making long trips back and forth, the end of each swath now bringing him close to the thick undergrowth of the woods.

It was not until the last few minutes that he had been cutting near the woods, which was the thing for which Doc Savage had been waiting.

The mower reached the end of his cut nearest the woods and started to turn.

“Act naturally!” Doc did not show himself. “Don’t let anyone notice I am talking to you.”

The man did a fair job of acting—he was good enough to show that he was not just an innocent neighbor

mowing the grass.

“Who're you?” he demanded.

“I'm supposed to check up on you and see how things are going,” Doc said.

“Oh.”

“How are they going?”

“O. K., I guess. I haven't seen any sign of anybody around the house, but I guess they are still there. They haven't taken their car away, anyhow. Do you know who is supposed to be in the house?”

“Sure. A guy named Doc Savage and some others.”

Doc said, “Take out your handkerchief, wipe your forehead and pretend to be tired. Then come over here and sit in the shade.”

“Sure,” the man said with alacrity. “By gosh, it ain't no lie about me being tired.”

He came over and sat down in the shade, at a spot which was out of sight of the house.

Doc Savage pounced on the man and dragged him back in the brush.

THE man was scared. “You're not the guy who hired me!”

“No.” Doc studied the man grimly. The fellow was slovenly, with at least a two-day beard, and he had the general air of a small-time tough guy.

The best quick way of softening up such a man was by giving him a treatment he understood, which Doc proceeded to do, seizing the man's throat and choking him enough to give him the idea he was going to be throttled on the spot. Finally, Doc pretended to let his hands slip off the fellow's neck. Before Doc could get a fresh grip, the man croaked, “Don't! Don't! I don't know nothin'!”

“Why, blast you! You are working with them!” Doc sounded fierce.

“No, I didn't know—please!”

“What was your job here?”

“Just to mow the grass, and take all day doing it.”

“Where did you get the mower?”

“I bought it a week ago. I mow lawns around town for a living. It's my mower, honest, it is. At home I got a bill of sale.”

“What is your name?”

“Morand. Bud Morand. Honest, mister, I didn't know—”

“You knew I was in the house.”

“Are you Doc Savage?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I didn't know you. That feller just hired me to mow the grass. He said that if I did that, you would be afraid of being seen if you left the house in the car.”

Doc Savage was silent for a while, rather impressed by the novelty of encountering someone who was totally unfamiliar with his name or reputation. The ignorance indicated that the man was not a professional crook.

“Who hired you?”

“Fellow name of Ezra Strong.”

Doc Savage immediately described Ezra Strong, giving a photographic word picture of the man, and also imitating Strong's rather distinctively drawling mannerisms of speech. “That the man?”

“Heck, no. That ain't Ezra Strong,” said Bud Morand emphatically.

“You mean it isn't the man who hired you?”

“Well, yeah, I guess that's what I mean.”

“Exactly how did he go about hiring you?”

“Well, it was last night late, and I was in Tony's beer place, and this fellow came up to me and asked did I want to make fifty dollars for a day's work mowing grass, and I said—”

“He knew your profession was mowing grass?”

“Sure. Everybody around town knows—”

“What did you say?”

“I said sure, fifty bucks was too much, and what was the worm. So he said the worm wasn't very big and wouldn't bite nobody, and he said you fellows were hiding out from the cops, and he wanted to keep you holed up in the house all during the day, and if I would mow the grass, that would do it. So we made a deal.”

“And what else?”

“That's all.”

“This man who hired you knew I would be in the house?”

“Yes.”

“And who else did he say would be there?”

“He said there would be six of you, one of them a girl. He named you and a fellow named Billy Riggs, who went to the pen a year or so ago for robbing old Copeland. He mentioned the other names, but I forgot them.”

Doc Savage, in a voice that was not pleasant, said, “You are in serious trouble, fellow.”

The man eyed Doc Savage and was impressed. “Yeah, I guess I am, at that.”

“There might be a way out.”

“Gosh, thanks.”

“Are you an actor?”

The man considered, then said cunningly, “I ain't no stage actor, but I've had some practice lying in my time. Would that help?”

Doc Savage nodded. “It certainly will. Because I want you to do a job of lying for me.”

“In that case, I'm your liar.”

Chapter XIV

MONK and Ham were reviewing the murder of Harland Crown Copeland, their review taking the form of an argument, when Doc Savage returned to the house with his new prisoner, Bud Morand.

Monk was saying, “I tell you, it was possible for Ezra Strong to have murdered Copeland. You remember how Strong dashed out the front door like a scared kangaroo when old Copeland cut loose with the shotgun. Then Copeland jumped out of the window, and there was a minute or two before we saw what we thought was his figure dashing through the shrubbery. But the running figure might not have been Copeland. It might have been Strong, who had just finished bludgeoning Copeland, and was running to get back in the front of the house where he could pretend he'd been all the time.”

“That's a fine rattlebrained piece of logic, and quite typical of you,” Ham said. “You know darned well it was Copeland we saw running, not Ezra Strong.”

“Maybe it just looked like Copeland.”

Ruth Nolan said, “Ezra Strong isn't the type to commit a murder.”

“Then why did he flee later?”

“Maybe he was just scared and lost his head.”

Monk grunted doubtfully. “He was scared all right, but he had his head on his shoulders. He had a darn good reason for beating it, and I'll bet when we find out the reason Ezra Strong took to his heels, we'll have the answer to this mystery.”

Doc Savage, from the door, said, “Here is part of the answer to the mystery.”

Ansen Overby, discovering the grass cutter standing behind Doc, bolted to his feet and screamed, “You fool! Why did you bring him in here! Now he'll tell the police!”

“He won't tell the police.”

“Why?”

Doc turned to Bud Morand. “Explain the situation to them, Morand.” Bud Morand had evidently spoken a mouthful of the truth when he said he had had plenty of experience lying, because he went through his story without being too glib, and without overdoing any of the hesitation or uncertainty.

First, he addressed Doc. “If I tell, you'll let me go?”

“That was the agreement.”

Bud Morand faced the others. “You heard him. He promised to let me go.”

“Get going on this story of yours, brother,” Monk advised.

THE grass cutter began, as good liars generally begin, with the truth. He told how Doc Savage had decoyed him into the brush and grabbed him and choked him, exhibiting the bruises on his throat as substantial proof that everything he said was gospel, and explaining most convincingly that he had decided to tell everything if he would be allowed to get out of the mess unscathed.

Here, any resemblance to the truth ended. But Bud Morand went on just as glibly and just as convincingly.

“Now, when this Ezra Strong hired me last night in the beer place, I could see the thing wasn't on the up. It didn't take any crystal gazer to see that. And fifty bucks for a day's mowing meant there was money mixed up in it.”

He winked at them cunningly at this point.

“Old Bud wasn't never a guy to pick an apple without shaking the tree to see if any more would fall. I'm a fellow who thinks what's good for the gander is good for the goose. So I trailed along behind this Ezra Strong, as he said his name was. I followed him. I wanted to know what his game was.”

He poked his own chest. “I'm no fool.”

“You're long-winded as a March in Kansas,” Monk said. “Get along with the story, minus the self-approval.”

“All right, but I wanted you to know why I followed this Ezra Strong, as he called himself. I trailed him to a place where he met some other guys, and they hatched the damnedest scheme. They've got some kind of a thing that I don't quite understand, but it sounded crazy, and they kept talking about the spooks, and laughing.”

He paused dramatically, said, “But they were going to rob the State National Bank today, dressing up as spooks, and using this thing they were talking about.”

“Dang your hide!” Monk said. “If you had gone to the police with this, that State National robbery wouldn't have been pulled off.”

But Morand waved an impatient arm. “Wait until I tell you the rest of it. These guys weren't happy because they figured the money from the bank would be going to the head man. They wouldn't get much of a share, they figured. So they were going to do a little business on the side for themselves.”

“Side business? How you mean?” Monk was curious.

“Five million dollars!”

“What are you talking about?”

“That's what they are gonna knock down for themselves.”

“You,” said Monk, “are getting close to being a liar. Five million dollars in one place is too much money.”

There are darn few places, even big banks, where you would find that much dough in one spot.”

“They've got some located.”

“Where?”

BUD MORAND became coy at this point, to Monk's unbounded disgust, and demanded, “You fellows going to let me go? You promised.”

Monk shook a fist under his nose. “Keep talking, you! Or I'll drive you into the ground like I would a stake!”

Morand was frightened. “Now, now, take it easy. I'm getting to it. This money is on a train. It's a bank shipment of currency on its way to a Chicago bank which needs paper money.”

Ansen Overby entered the conference by snorting skeptically and saying, “How would those crooks have learned about such a shipment of money?”

“It seems one of them had a hobby of keeping track of big shipments of money.”

“I've known crooks with such hobbies before,” Monk said. “This fellow had been planning such a robbery for a long time, that the idea?”

“That seemed to be the idea.”

“They were going to do this on their own hook?”

“Yes.”

“Not telling their boss about it?”

“No. This was something they were going to knock down on the side without the boss knowing about it.”

Ham Brooks said, “What makes them think the boss wouldn't hear about it after they pulled it?” Ham rapped the newspaper which Monk had brought, indicating the robbery headlines. “Can't their boss read? Or don't they think the news of a five-million robbery would get in the newspapers?”

Bud Morand shrugged. “They didn't seem to give a hoot what the boss found out, once they had their hands on five million.”

Monk grunted. “They might have something there.”

“Want to know where they were to meet and pull this robbery?”

Monk started. “You know?”

“Sure, I overheard.”

“Where?”

“They will meet at five o'clock this afternoon at the west end of the park at the foot of Central Street in town,” Bud Morand said.

Ruth Nolan was excited. “Now we've got something!”

Monk and Ham and Billy Riggs nodded, agreeing that they had. Ansen Overby said, "The man is probably lying!"

Bud Morand gave Overby an injured stare and said, "Brother, why should I lie about this? The seat of my pants are in the frying pan, and now would be a darn poor time for me to do any lying."

Doc Savage said, "Morand, what is the rest of the story?"

"That is all of it. Every word, just as I heard it. There was nothing else to it except that I came out here with my mowing machine and started cutting grass."

"All right."

"I can go, you mean?"

"Yes," Doc said. "Come on."

DOC SAVAGE conducted Bud Morand as far as the woods, which were out of earshot of the house, and out of sight of the windows in case anyone was a lip reader.

"You did very well," Doc said.

"That Ansen Overby was the only one who called me a liar," Morand said. "I was kind of disappointed. I thought I was fooling everybody."

"You probably did. Overby was just making a random accusation because the thing was so unexpected."

Morand was relieved. "You really going to let me go?"

"Yes—with one condition."

"Wait a minute, there wasn't nothing said about conditions!"

"Which did not mean there would not be any."

"I . . . uh . . . well, that's one way of looking at it," Bud Morand admitted. "What've I got to do now?"

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-eight."

"That is not too old for the army."

"Well, it is for the draft."

"You have twenty-four hours," Doc said, "to join the army."

"That's kind of sudden."

"Your way of life may not be particularly enjoyable to society, but it is yours at least, of your own choosing, so you had better fight for it."

The man considered this. Finally he grinned. "You might be right. I been thinking about it, anyway. What else?"

“That is all.” Doc looked at him thoughtfully. The man was not a particularly bad fellow apparently, and the expertness with which he had put on the act in the house showed that he had considerable ability in the way of wits.

Doc added, “And if you find a way of persuading the war department to let my associates and myself get into active service, let us know.”

Bud Morand laughed. “O. K.,” he said. “You know, it wouldn't surprise me if I turned out to be kinda glad you caught me out there.”

EVERYONE had on their coats and hats when Doc Savage went back into the house. “We thought we'd get organized,” Monk explained. “We've got to stop that robbery, and collar the thieves.”

Doc was agreeable. “You have a plan?”

“Yes. Notify the bank not to send any cash, and notify the police—”

“The notice you give the bank will arouse a lot of interest,” Doc said. “And bank detectives may investigate and add to our troubles. The police certainly are not in a mood to fall in and co-operate with us.”

Monk scratched his head. “Maybe I was too optimistic.”

“We will have to handle this ourselves.”

Monk grinned. “You mean grab these guys ourselves?”

“Yes.”

“Lead me to it,” Monk said with pleasure. “I've done enough messing around with spooks. It'll be a pleasure to tie into something I can see and pound.”

Doc turned to the others. “The rest of you feel up to tackling them?”

Ham nodded.

Ruth Nolan asked, “Mr. Savage, do you think this will lead to our finding Lucybelle?”

“Ezra Strong and Lucybelle are obviously tied in with the affair, and when we solve one, we will clear up the other.”

Ruth said, “Then I'm for it.”

Ansen Overby compressed his lips grimly, said, “No one is more anxious than I to find Lucybelle.”

“You knew her?” Ham asked Overby.

“Quite well.”

Ruth said, “Lucybelle and Mr. Overby were engaged at one time.”

Ansen Overby glanced at Ruth and colored—either with discomfort or anger, it was hard to tell which—and said, “Yes, and if you had not disapproved of me, we would probably have been engaged still.”

“How long ago was this engagement?” Monk asked curiously.

“Nearly two years ago.”

“A long engagement, eh?” Monk said.

Doc Savage said, “We will separate and each of us will go alone to this park at the foot of Central Street, where these men were to meet. The park is wooded, is it not?” He glanced at Ruth Nolan.

“It is very wooded.”

“We will meet at the west end, then go together to the east end, where this gang was to meet, according to Bud Morand.”

Billy Riggs asked uneasily, “What’s the idea of our splitting up?”

“So that if the police get one, they will not get all.”

“Oh.”

Doc Savage looked at each of them in succession, thoughtfully. “Be as careful as you can that the police do not recognize you. With halfway decent luck, we can all get to the park without being caught.”

Billy Riggs wet his lips. “If we are caught, what do we tell the police?”

“For twenty-four hours—nothing.”

“The police won’t like that.”

“But we will have twenty-four hours in which to work,” Doc pointed out.

“You think that’s enough time to get at the bottom of the thing?”

“It should be.”

Chapter XV

CENTRAL STREET had once been the town’s fashionable residence thoroughfare which began on the hill and wound down lazily to the river, where it ended against a long narrow park. Today the street was too old and decrepit to be fashionable, and the park was not popular nor very well kept. But because it was close to the river, and the soil was rich, the shrubbery had grown thick and luxuriant.

Bud Morand had said the time of the meeting of the plotters was to be five o’clock, but long before that, before four o’clock, Doc Savage was in the vicinity and had gone over the park carefully searching for anything that might be wrong. He found nothing to alarm him.

Monk was the first to arrive in the park, for Monk was always eager to show up on a scene where there might be a fight. He was carrying an innocent-looking package under his arm, and this proved to be his pet pig. Ham came a bit later, then Billy Riggs, Ruth and Ansen Overby.

“We all made it,” Ruth said with relief.

“I saw a policeman.” Ansen Overby wiped sweat off his forehead. “The officer walked right past me, and even looked at me. I nearly died. I’m afraid I’d never make a very good crook.”

“Any of the rest of you have any trouble?” Doc asked.

Billy Riggs grinned sheepishly. “A funny thing happened to me. I met a friend of mine, a fellow I bowl with now and then. And you know what he did? He offered to let me hide out in his apartment and said he could let me have some money if I needed it.” Billy Riggs sounded as if tears were near his eyes. “I’ll never forget him for standing by me.”

Ruth Nolan looked at him kindly. “Billy, no one ever thought you really stole anything from Copeland.”

Billy smiled at her. “Thanks. I guess it was Copeland’s violence that scared the jury into convicting me. But that’s water under the bridge.”

“Yes, it is water under the bridge.”

“When I got out of prison,” Billy said thoughtfully, “I felt pretty rotten about facing my old friends. But they’ve been fine to me. It makes you feel like a man again.”

“You didn’t tell this friend anything?” Ham demanded suspiciously.

“Oh, no. Nothing about us.”

Doc Savage consulted his watch.

“Four thirty,” the bronze man said. “That means we had better get organized. Ham, you will come with me. Monk, you and Riggs and Overby and Ruth remain here. Stay together. Keep each other in sight. In case something happens, I want you all right here together where I can get hold of you in a hurry.”

Monk said hopefully, “Maybe I’d better go with you instead of Ham, in case you run into a fight. Ham’s pretty near useless in a fight.”

Ham was indignant. “Why, you homely oaf, all you do in a fight is jump around and make a noise. On the other hand, I’m cool and efficient.”

Doc, to stop an argument, said, “Ham, come with me. Monk, you see that everyone else remains together here. I want no straying off on lone wolf expeditions.”

Monk winced, remembering a time or two when he had gone long-wolfing on his own, as Doc expressed it, and gotten into more trouble than he could handle alone. “O. K.,” he said.

HAM BROOKS had sensed that something was not as it should be, but he waited until he and Doc were alone before he expressed his suspicion. “Doc, this isn’t fitting together just right.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” said Ham, “that I think you are pulling something.”

The bronze man nodded. “What would you say if I told you that the whole Bud Morand story was a pack of lies which I asked Morand to tell for me.”

“Blazes! Wasn’t Morand a plant—wasn’t he there mowing the grass to keep us from leaving the house in the car?”

“That,” said Doc, “was the only truth in his story.”

Ham whistled. "Then there is no meeting of crooks in the park here at five o'clock?"

"At the time," Doc said, "none was planned that I knew about. But I imagine one has been arranged now, and will convene shortly."

Ham whistled again, then he laughed.

"You had Bud Morand tell that story to give us an excuse to be here?"

"A little more than that."

"Eh?"

"Suppose," Doc said, "that the story that Bud Morand told should have reached, by one way or another, the ear of the person behind this mess. It is probable the story would accomplish the purpose for which it was designed, which was to make the individual think that the underlings were cutting a piece of pie for themselves, suggest the idea of catching the double-crossers red-handed, and also the idea of catching us or possibly disposing of us as well."

"Man, man! You think it'll do that?"

"Keep your fingers crossed."

Ham took a couple more steps, then stopped suddenly. "Blazes! Who relayed the dope?"

"We do not know that anyone did."

"But if—well, it has to be the girl, Billy Riggs or Ansen Overby." Ham thought for a moment, scowling. "Billy Riggs! That's the one! He said he talked to a friend, and I should have known that was a sign of guilt and he was just telling that in case anybody saw him talking to someone."

Doc Savage said, "Come on. We are going to look around and see what we find."

"Billy Riggs!" Ham said. "He was in this right from the first. He sprung that story about Grandfather Eben's charm, and the story was crazy enough that it should have tipped us off by itself."

Doc Savage turned left, and from a bush lifted an equipment case. Ham stared. "One of our supply cases! Where did you collect that?"

"Went past the railway station and got it out of the checkroom on the way here," Doc explained. "I had checked it there two weeks ago, when I was working as Copeland's chauffeur."

"Billy Riggs," Ham said. "What will he do now?"

"Monk will watch him."

"Monk doesn't know."

"Monk will watch anyway."

Ham nodded. That was right. Monk would know something was wrong. The way Doc was doing this thing would tell Monk that something was wrong, and Monk would watch. He had better watch, or Monk—the rest of them, too—might die there in the park in the afternoon sunlight.

Seven men came in two cars. They looked like a bunch of fellows, not too well-dressed and not too

shabby, out fooling away the afternoon, to talk and get the sun. But they had golf bags; there was no golf course near.

Doc used a powerful telescope from the equipment case, and watched their lips. He was a good lip reader, but they were very far away. However he got a few words.

“Those are the men, Ham.”

“You able to tell what they are going to do?”

“They will split. I did not get the rest of it, but we can guess that one group will serve as decoys, pretending to be the men we think are to meet here. The others will close in on us when we close in on the first group.”

Ham watched the men grimly. “You going to use radio direction-finding apparatus on them?”

“Seems appropriate.”

“All right, they're leaving their cars. I'll place one transmitter while you place the other.”

“Good.”

The radio transmitters were simple gadgets which Doc Savage often used. They were very compact, not much larger than a kitchen match box, and they would put out a regular signal for several hours, a signal which would be spotted without much difficulty by a radio direction-finder. The little transmitters had a thumb-screw-operated clamp attached, and there was even a powerful permanent magnet embedded in one side so that they could be tossed against a moving car and would cling there.

The seven men left their two cars and ambled into the park with an elaborate pretense of innocence.

Doc Savage and Ham placed their radio transmitters, clamping them under the cars where they would not be noticed.

They went back to Monk, who was waiting with Billy Riggs, Ruth and Ansen Overby. Young Riggs was perspiring freely, and seemed to get white when Ham looked at him narrowly.

Doc said, “Our quarry is here. They have separated in two groups. Ham and I have placed radio transmitters on their cars so that we can trace them with direction-finders. There remains nothing to do but frighten them into flight, then follow them.”

Ham smiled thinly at the bronze man's statement. Doc had given the facts necessary, but given them so that Billy Riggs'—and Ham was sure it was Billy Riggs—suspicions would not be aroused.

Doc Savage was moving away. “I will flush the game.”

He started away. Then he stopped, wheeled and came back. He opened the equipment case, and took out a box.

“Ham, maybe you had better come with me,” he said.

Ham and Doc Savage went away together.

MONK MAYFAIR, Ruth, Billy Riggs, and Ansen Overby had waited for a long time, it seemed, when

the action started. They had crawled to a spot where they could watch their quarry, and they could tell that the men were getting nervous. The small group, those who were serving as decoys, kept in plain view and did not move about. The others, who were to do the pouncing, had hidden themselves, but from time to time they changed position, one crawling over to another to discuss—it was obvious—the delay and what they had better do.

“What the heck's keeping Doc and Ham,” Monk complained.

Then, almost immediately, there was an explosion.

“Grenade!” Monk said.

They heard a voice, loud and menacing, shout, “Over this way, Chief Flannigan!”

Ruth and Riggs bolted up in alarm, but Monk grabbed them, saying, “Keep your skins on. That's Doc. He's throwing a scare into them.”

It was quite a scare, too. There were two more explosions, made by the small but noisy grenades which Doc Savage habitually carried in the equipment case.

“Look at 'em go!” Monk chortled.

The men, who had arrived in the two cars, had bolted. There was not a police uniform in sight, but the noise and Doc's yelling had given them plenty of alarm. They were not staying around there.

But Monk's first elation became chagrin. “Great grief!” He sprang up in horror. “They're not goin' back to their cars!”

This was true. It was a long run to the spot where the men had left their cars, and a good deal of it across the open part of the park. The men were not going to attempt that. They were too scared.

They fled—the seven of them—in the opposite direction, toward the shabby boulevard on the other, and nearer, side of the park.

Monk had a ghastly expression on his homely face as he watched the men run to the street, then turn toward a taxicab which appeared to just happen to be passing, and climb into the cab.

The cab left in great haste.

“That's great,” Monk said. “That's simply great!”

ALL seven of the men had piled into the cab. But in spite of the jam, they managed to get at least four revolver muzzles jammed into the hack driver's body.

“Give this thing wings, friend,” one of them advised.

The hack driver did that for a couple of blocks, then abruptly slowed down.

The driver then looked them over sourly.

“You blamed fools, sit back and act like men,” he said.

They stared at him in astonishment. He should have been angry, but he wasn't. He laughed at them.

“How the hell you think a cab happened to come along just then?” he asked. “Think it was an accident?”

One of the men swore softly. “No accident, eh?”

“No accident.”

“We haven't seen you before.”

The driver laughed again. “That's your loss. I'm Bill Peters. You don't need to introduce yourselves until you feel safe about it.”

The men settled back. They were still surprised, and most of them were puzzled.

“Where you want me to take you?” the hack driver asked.

“Haven't you got an idea?”

The driver became indignant. “The hell with you, you bunch of dopes! I was hired in a hurry and told to be driving around that end of the park and get there in a heck of a hurry if anything that looked like excitement developed. Well, it developed, all right. And I got there. And you got in. And now I'm ready to follow out the rest of my orders, which was to take you to headquarters, wherever that is. If you know where that is, O. K. I don't. And I don't want a lot of lip off you either way.”

He sounded angry, authentic, genuine.

“Take Highway 6,” one of the men told him. “You follow it up toward Mountain Lake.”

Chapter XVI

IT was very dark in the shadows, but the moonlight was silver bright where it fell unobstructed by tree branches. The trees were thick. They covered the mountainside like green fur, and the highway made a little canyon through them that was quite as black as the trees, for it was an asphalt highway, pitted, rough. The only other break in the forest was at the mountain ridge on the north—it was not a very high mountain ridge—where a ledge of rock showed naked and gray in the moonlight, looking somewhat like the wall of a fortification.

A few minutes ago, they had been able to see the water of the lake, a surface that shimmered in the moonlight, but now that they were following the black road down toward the shore, the lake itself was no longer in sight. But as they drove along in the car—Doc Savage, Monk, Ruth, Billy Riggs, and Ansen Overby—they could tell they were getting close to the lake by the difference in the odor of the air, possibly from the smell of the water. And, too, there was a little fog on the road now, surface mist drifting from the lake.

For a long time no one had spoken. Then Monk Mayfair said, “So old Ham played the part of a taxi driver and picked them up.”

Doc, by way of agreeing, said, “It was a risky job.”

“Ham isn't afraid of his weight in wild cats,” Monk said. “But don't anybody ever tell him I gave him a word of praise.”

Ruth Nolan leaned forward. “Mr. Savage, won't they recognize Mr. Brooks and make trouble for him?”

“You remember that box I took from the equipment case?”

“Yes.”

“It was a make-up box. I changed Ham's appearance somewhat. They probably will not recognize him.”

The car headlights had been turned off for the last two miles, and Doc Savage was driving. Because they were going downgrade, he had also shut off the motor, and was letting the machine coast.

Ruth pulled in a shaky breath. “I'm positive.”

“About the cabin?” Monk asked.

“Yes. It almost has to be Ezra Strong's cabin.”

Monk said, “The police didn't seem to know Ezra Strong had a cabin up here.”

“No, I don't think anyone knew it.” Ruth's voice was low with excitement. “Ezra told us that no one knew he had it. He said that when he came up here, he wanted to be alone. He acted as though it were a little joke, and I didn't think much about it at the time.”

“How did Strong happen to tell you about the cabin?” Monk asked.

“Why, he told Lucybelle, right after they became engaged. And I just happened to hear. He said he would take us up here on a picnic sometime.”

“Did you ever go?”

“No.”

Monk picked up a little radio receiver-transmitter set, and said, “Hello, Ham,” into the microphone. “Hello, Ham. We are getting close.”

From the radio, Ham's voice said, “You bet you are. I can hear your car.”

“Shall we stop?”

“No, come on until you meet me,” Ham instructed them.

Ruth asked curiously, “How does Mr. Brooks happen to have a radio outfit?”

“Oh, it's one of our small outfits,” Monk told her. “Ham could hide it under the seats or in the tool box or almost anywhere.”

Within a few moments, Ham stepped out of the darkness and jumped on the running board of their car. “There's a place to pull off the road right ahead,” he said. “And the cabin isn't much farther.”

“How'd you get away from them, Ham?” Monk asked.

“Oh, they think I'm one of the boys. I'm supposed to be out looking at the moonlight.”

“Have we got anything here?” Monk demanded.

“At the cabin?”

“Sure.”

“What have we got?”

“The whole thing,” Ham said. “The answer to everything. Lucybelle is there, and Ezra Strong, and all the gang but the boss. And the boss is—”

Ansen Overby said, in hard voice, as he got to his feet, “Time for me to leave, it would seem.”

Ansen Overby jumped out of the car and ran.

AT the first movement, Ham had made a slight mistake by grabbing for Billy Riggs. Realizing his mistake, he raced around the car after Overby. Riggs said, “So you thought it was me! Fine thing!” Ham, embarrassed, bellowed, “Come on! Help me catch him!”

Ham and Billy Riggs charged after Overby, who obviously knew where he was going.

“The cabin!” Ham yelled. “If he gets to the cabin first, we'll have a mess!”

Doc Savage had gotten out of the car on the other side, the side opposite the one from which Overby had leaped, and instead of chasing Overby directly, the bronze man asked Ruth, “Where is the cabin?”

“That direction.” She pointed. “I'll show you.”

Doc did not wait for her. A light appeared through the trees, coming from a door which someone had opened. The cabin was there. Doc headed for it.

Overby started the yelling, by howling for help, bawling that Doc Savage was present. Billy Riggs was swearing. Monk Mayfair howled once, then saw the lighted cabin door, too, and made for it.

The cabin was not far. Doc Savage, running as fast as he could, was far out ahead of the others when he reached the building.

In the cabin, the lights went out.

The door, however, was still open.

Doc Savage, taking a chance that the darkness would hide his identity, kept going for the door.

He imitated Ansen Overby's voice. He shouted, “Keep that door open! Let me in!”

It worked. At least they didn't slam the door. Doc got inside.

With Overby's voice again, Doc yelled, “Where are the prisoners?”

“Back room!” somebody said. “What is—”

Overby himself was suddenly in the door. “What the hell?” he screamed. “Do something! Savage is here! There's only four of them and a girl—Savage, Monk, Ham, Billy Riggs and the Nolan girl. Get busy!”

Doc Savage, up on tiptoes, made for the rear of the cabin. He found a door. Beyond seemed to be a corridor. He went down it in silence.

Behind, a man asked foolishly, “Wasn't that you just came in, Overby?”

“No.”

The man cursed.

Overby said, “Damn! It must have been Savage! Get a light on!”

At this point, Doc's search for the prisoners—supposed to be Ezra Strong and Lucybelle Nolan—was made easier. Ezra Strong himself let out a howl. Ezra had heard Monk bellowing around outdoors.

“Monk!” Ezra roared. “We're in here! But be careful! Try to stop them from using the apparatus.”

The door from behind which Strong shouted was close at hand. But there was a guard at the door. The guard swore like a pirate. “Shut up, or I'll kill you both!” the guard said.

Doc Savage closed with the guard.

THE guard was a long, wide man who had a cocked rifle. At the very beginning of their struggle, the rifle exploded, stabbing flame and deafening with its noise, but harming no one. The guard was a trained close-combat fighter, and he went to work with knees, thumbs, hard part of his head, in a succession of Commando tricks, every one of them aimed to maim or kill. Doc Savage finally got behind him and wrapped both arms around him and ran against the door, which burst inward. They fell into the room with Ezra Strong and Lucybelle.

Lucybelle began to cry and scream at the top of her voice.

The guard had gone limp in Doc's arms. Doc got to his feet. “Strong?”

In the darkness, Ezra Strong said, “Jove, I'm glad to see you! Did you bring the police?”

“No.”

“How many of you?”

“Four, and Ruth Nolan.”

“It should be four dozen,” Ezra said, “and a couple of cannons. Because they are going to use my apparatus as sure as shooting.”

“Where is it?”

“They've got it.”

Outdoors, Ham yelled excitedly, “Monk! Monk! Get to their car and fix it so it won't run!”

And Monk, answering from an unexpected direction, asked, “What do you think I've been doing for half an hour.” There was a clanking metallic sound. Then there was increasing light outdoors.

“You didn't need to set it on fire!” Ham said.

“My hand slipped,” said Monk, in a lying tone. “It was an old jellopy, anyway.” Then, in a much louder and alarmed voice: “Watch that guy!”

A gun went *bang, bang, bang*, and the echoes back from the mountains which formed the lake basin.

“Hit you, Ham?” Monk demanded.

“No,” Ham said. “Bless this tree!”

Ansen Overby, in a loud voice that was less frightened and more angry than his other voices had been, said, “Get out of the cabin, men! Don't let them get us cornered in here! And bring the gadgets!”

“What about Ezra Strong and the girl?”

“Set the cabin on fire,” Overby said.

Somewhere outside, Monk could be heard remarking, “A nice guy! He'll look good with a knot under his left ear!”

Doc Savage picked up the unconscious guard. He told Ezra Strong, “We will have to get out of here. Bring Lucybelle!”

Ezra Strong muttered something under his breath, said, “Now cut out crying, Lucybelle. You're going to be all right. Just come on out of here with us.”

Lucybelle stopped her hysterical sobbing long enough to say, “I won't! Go away!” and went right on blubbing.

Ezra took her arm. “Please come, Lucybelle!”

Lucybelle screamed a scream which, if it didn't, should have lifted the roof a couple of inches.

Sounding distracted, Ezra said, “What'll I do, Mr. Savage? She won't come?”

“Can you knock a young woman unconscious in a gentlemanly way?”

Ezra thought about that for a moment. “I don't know about the gentlemanly part,” he said. “But I can do it with considerable enthusiasm.”

And there was a brief scuffle during which Lucybelle shrieked for him to keep away from her, after which she was silent. The blow had not been very loud.

“Most bubbling female I ever saw,” said Ezra disgustedly. He shouldered Lucybelle. “Lead on.”

“I take it the engagement is at an end?” Doc said.

“Put an exclamation point after that!” said Ezra.

THE cabin had a back door which was fortunately not on the side which was lighted by the burning car. They got through it, and into the cover of a bush.

Ezra Strong, lowering Lucybelle, said, “Gosh, I'm sorry I hit her. Even if she did tell Ansen Overby about my invention.”

“Ansen Overby found out about the thing through Lucybelle?”

“Yes. They used to be engaged. I didn't know they were still seeing each other.”

Doc asked, “When did she tell him?”

“More than two weeks ago, right after I told her about it myself.”

“Why did *you* tell her?”

Ezra was uncomfortable. “Oh, I was nuts about her at the time.” He grunted angrily. “Boy, was I a sucker!”

“And she told Ansen Overby immediately?”

“That's right.”

“And Overby saw the possibilities in the thing for a crook?”

“Yes.”

“When,” asked Doc, “did Ansen Overby steal the thing?”

“Not until yesterday—last night. He had been prowling around my place before that, though, and had found out how the thing operates. It's really simple to operate. And then, last night when we started out to talk to Copeland, Overby stole the thing. And he murdered Copeland.”

Around in front of the cabin, someone fired twice. And there was more firelight, coming from the windows of the cabin. They had fired the interior.

Doc said, “The motive for murdering Copeland—there were two of them. First, Overby was short in his real estate account with Copeland and was afraid Copeland would jail him. And second, he wanted us all in trouble and locked up in prison where we could not interfere with his plan to use the apparatus to commit a few robberies. That right?”

“That's why he killed Copeland,” Ezra Strong admitted. “But it wasn't just a few robberies, he planned. It was plenty. He had big ideas, fantastic ideas.”

Doc said, “Get Lucybelle away from here. Back in the woods somewhere.”

DOC SAVAGE himself moved from bush to bush, cautiously, until he came near the front of the house. Ansen Overby's men were scattered now, and Overby was bellowing orders to them.

Doc Savage listened to Overby's shouting for a while, and then, discovering a man moving cautiously carrying a case of some kind, Doc imitated Overby's voice, shouting, “Come here with that! Quick!”

“Who the hell was that?” demanded the real Overby from some distance away.

Instantly, Doc Savage made his imitation of Overby loud, excited, angry, howling, “Watch out! That guy over among you is a fake! Be careful! Grab him! Watch out!”

This piece of chicanery was convincing enough that the man with the case came to Doc Savage, who was only a lump in the shadows. “You want us to use it now?” he asked.

Doc Savage stepped out, traveling with a fist blow, and dropped the man in his tracks. With considerable agility, he caught the case before the man let it fall.

Someone saw it happen, and fired. The bullet, from a rifle, cut close.

In Mayan, Doc shouted, “Around to the back of the cabin! Get Billy Riggs and Ruth and bring them. I have one of the machines, I think!”

The bronze man ran, as silently as he could, carrying the case, and had the good fortune to overtake Ezra Strong, who was shuffling cautiously from shadow to shadow with Lucybelle.

“Strong! Is this one of them?”

Strong pounced on the box, felt over it. “Oh, glory be! Yes, yes, this is one.”

“Is it all there?”

“Yes, yes, probably. If they haven't tampered with it.”

He fooled with the case, turning knobs and clicking switches and watching faintly illuminated meters. He said, “It's going to work!”

Then there was a loud grunt nearby. It was Monk. He followed up the grunt with a howl: “Blazes! Another spook!”

“That's Monk,” Doc told Ezra Strong. “He must have run into your beam. Shut it off.”

Strong clicked a switch. “Tell them to come on.” His voice was shaking with horror.

“You're scared,” Doc said. “Would the beam kill them if it had hit them?”

“That's what I'm afraid of. Oh, mother, we've got to be careful! I wish I'd never stumbled on this damned thing!”

Monk and the others—Ham, Ruth, Billy Riggs—arrived. Ruth cried out and gathered the hysterical Lucybelle in her arms.

Monk squinted to look at the case. “So that's the spook!”

IN a low voice that was generally and completely scared, but at the same time coherent, Ezra Strong said, “We've got to be careful with this thing. I don't know all I should know about it.”

“What is it, anyway?” Monk demanded. “Let's find that out before we start messing with it.”

Doc Savage said, “Explain it to them, Strong, while I see if I can spot the distribution of Overby's men.”

“Spot the other machine if you can. There's only one other.”

“Right.” Doc Savage faded away into the darkness.

Monk punched Strong. “All right,” he whispered. “What is that thing?”

“It's an accident,” Ezra Strong said. “I've been fooling around with electronics for years, trying to work out things in the way of death screens for germs and transmission of power without wires. This is something I hit by chance, and I haven't been able to work it out yet.”

“Electronic, eh?” Monk muttered. “Yeah, that would be it. You worked out a field of some kind which upsets the normal behavior of electrons?”

Strong said, “That's it. All matter is composed of molecules, and these, in turn, are composed of atoms, and the atoms are made up of electrons—”

“We haven't got time for a science lecture,” Monk said. “Give us the gist of it.”

“Well, I can create a field with this apparatus. In the field, something I don't understand happens to electrons. I don't know whether they stop dead, or whether their behavior is just changed. I know the nature of matter isn't affected. After I shut off the field, everything is just as it was before. But during the field existence, everything in the beam seems to become solid and immovable. It only seems that way. I've experimented enough to know that the phenomena is actually caused by the electronic field resisting the intrusion of any foreign object. That is why, when you touch the field with your bare hand, it feels like something alive. This resistance causes that.”

Monk chuckled. “Brother, don't tell me how it feels. I found out. How long is this field?”

“Not over fifty feet.”

“How high?”

“About ten or twelve feet.”

“Thick?”

“Four or five feet.”

“Shucks,” Monk said. “The thing doesn't cover much area. Not enough to make it much use as a military weapon.”

“I'm afraid not.”

“It's sure a hair-raiser, though, when you don't know what it is.”

Ezra Strong said grimly, “That's what got us into the trouble—that and my damned silly idea of a joke.”

“Joke?”

“In the beginning,” Ezra explained sheepishly. “You see, I didn't like old Copeland, and I thought I'd play a practical joke on him with my gadget. I just happened to drive into that filling station, and hear Billy Riggs make the remark about his Grandfather Eben's magic charm, and that gave me the idea. I thought it was very funny. I followed old Copeland to his plant, hid behind an outbuilding, and put the electronic field in front of him. It was very funny to me at the time. Later in the day, I tried it out on Copeland again, when you were with him. You see, I still thought it was funny as could be. And when you went to talk to Billy Riggs about Grandfather Eben's charm, I turned up to listen to the fun.”

“I remember how hilarious you thought it was,” Monk said dryly. “That should have tipped me off.”

Ham Brooks said, “Ansen Overby stole the machines from you?”

“Yes. I had told Lucybelle, who thought I was crazy, and she had told Overby, whom she was dating on the sly. And Overby watched me and found out I really had such a thing. So he grabbed my only two machines. He tried to get us all in jail where we wouldn't bother him by murdering Copeland. He also had swindled Copeland out of some money and was about to be found out, another reason for killing Copeland.”

Ezra Strong sighed. “When I realized what had happened—when Copeland was murdered—I became panicky and fled. I came here. I didn't know Overby was the crook until he turned up here and grabbed me. He had Lucybelle a prisoner, because he knew it wouldn't do for her to tell that she had told him

about my machines. He'd grabbed her, knocked her unconscious and brought her along."

Monk and Ham were silent, thinking it over.

Rather disappointed, Billy Riggs said, "So Grandfather Eben didn't have an obedient spook, after all."

Ham exploded, "Who stole my belt?"

"Great grief, have you lost another belt?" Monk demanded.

"I mean last night."

"Overby, of course," Monk said.

Ham chuckled. "All right, so you didn't swipe it. And Doc suspected Overby when the belt disappeared, and he rigged that phony story the grass mower told and set the trap which eventually lead us here."

WHEN Doc Savage returned, he entered silently. He said, "Is this the other machine?" He had a leatherette case larger than a suitcase.

"Glory be!" Ezra Strong fell upon the case also. "That's it!"

Doc said, "Switch on one of them, Strong. We will advance behind the beam as if it were a wall."

"But they have guns!" Ruth cried.

"The field is bulletproof," Strong said confidently. "That is one of the first things I discovered."

Doc said, "As we approach them, we will fire a few bullets close to them. As soon as they discover we can shoot at them but they cannot shoot back at us with effect, they will probably give up."

"How we going to shoot through the beam?"

"I will call out words," Doc said. "Whenever I call a word which begins with the last letter of the word which preceded it, Strong will shut off the machine for a count of three seconds. For example: "Suppose I call out the words *man*, *wild cat*, *tough*, *heavens*, *stars*, *sleepy*, and so on. Strong will switch off the machine immediately after the words *tough* and *sleepy*, which begin with the last letter of the word that was shouted before."

"That's simple enough," Strong said.

"Here we go."

Strong warmed up his apparatus, said, "All right."

They began to advance. Monk was a little dubious about the whole thing. Becoming alarmed lest there would be no beam, and they would be plain targets with no protection. He rushed forward until he bumped into the beam. He was relieved.

"Nice spook," he said, patting the thing.

"That's not funny," Ham assured him.

Suddenly there was a flash of gun-flame ahead, the whooping sound of a shot. The sound was made a

little unnatural by the wall.

“Blazes!” Monk said. “You see that bullet flatten out! Right in front of our noses!”

There was more shooting. A frantic flurry of it. And Doc Savage began calling out his words.

Monk completely missed the first word that began with the letter of the word that preceded it, although Ham and Billy Riggs both fired.

And, to Monk's disgust, that ended it. Ansen Overby appeared, hands in the air, bawling in fear, in stark terror.

“Why, blast his hide!” Monk said. “So scared he can't even run for it.”

THE State police were a little more inclined to believe the whole story than was Police Chief Flannigan.

Flannigan stood in front of the smoldering cabin, just before dawn, and said, “But I wish I had a sensible story to give the newspapers. Nobody is going to believe this thing the way it was.”

“Suppose,” Doc Savage said, “that you just announce that the murderer of Copeland, Ansen Overby, has been captured and has confessed. Let it go at that.”

Flannigan grasped the idea hopefully. “Could do. Overby has confessed, and that would help. And we got the State National loot, most of it. They had divided it up and were carrying it around with them.”

The State policeman said, “But what about the gadget?”

Ezra Strong shuddered. “The thing isn't funny to me any more. I'm getting rid of it.”

“But the thing might have some value?”

“That's what I mean,” said Strong. “I'm turning it over to Mr. Savage for experimental work. I've seen the first and last of it that I want to see. I'm going to reform, and stick to making parts for torpedoes.”

“I don't blame you,” the State policeman said. “I guess that'll fix it up all right.”

MONK MAYFAIR bought Ham Brooks a new belt. Monk carefully equipped the belt with a buckle off a large dog collar—the type of buckle which had a tongue with a small loop in which one inserted a little padlock. He supplied a lock, then made the formal presentation.

“You can lock that one on,” Monk explained. “It might save us a lot of trouble sometime.”

Ham looked at him bitterly. “I know you; you want a fight,” he said. “But this time, I don't feel like accommodating you.”

Monk peered at him anxiously. “You violently ill, or something?”

Ham spread his hands. “I just asked Ruth for a date. She turned me down. She has one with Ezra Strong. I think she's in love with the guy.”

Monk became stricken also. “That's a hell of a note. While you burn midnight oil straightening up the books at the chemical company, I'll see what can be done about it.”

Ham replied, bitterly and at length, that this was what was really bothering him more than anything else.

THE END

According to Plan of a One-eyed Mystic, Kenneth Robeson's newest chapter in the thrilling adventures of Doc Savage will appear in the January issue.

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