



THE MAN WHO WAS SCARED

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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*Scanned and Proofed
by Tom Stephens*

Chapter I

HE was about forty years old and looked something like the fellow the insurance companies always put in their advertisements—the fellow who is supposed to be a fairly prosperous businessman with a family that needs providing for. He wore a blue suit, a blue shirt, a blue-and-gray regimental tie, rimless spectacles, black shoes, and earlier he had been wearing a conservative gray bowler hat with a darker gray hatband, but he had lost that.

Three times in the last hour, efforts had been made to kill him. It was this last time, the third time, that he had lost the hat. It had spilled in the street where he had dodged the cab. The hat lay there in the street now, mashed where the wheels of the murder-bent cab had charged over it.

He looked dazed, standing there thinking how nearly death had missed him. Absently, he rubbed a hand over one cheek, for both cheeks felt blazing hot, the way cheeks get to feeling on a devilishly cold day.

A pedestrian stopped and asked, “Are you all right?”

The pedestrian had no interest in proceedings other than that he was amazed at the agility of the jump by which the other man had saved himself from the oncharging cab.

The man seemed to have no words.

The pedestrian said, “The guy in that cab must've been blind!”

The other man kept rubbing his hot cheek.

“Have you got a gun?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“Where can I get a gun?” the man demanded.

The pedestrian looked more disgusted with himself than startled. He was a native New Yorker. When you are a New Yorker for a few months, you learn to adopt an attitude toward strange incidents and unusual people. You ignore them. Usually it is a gag, and never is it any of your business. So you walk away with dignity, but you don't lose any time. The pedestrian left hurriedly.

The man who looked like the ideal insurance policy holder stood there. His nervousness crawled out of his nerves into his muscles, and he trembled uncontrollably.

New York sidewalk traffic flowed about him. Across the street were forty-odd stories of an office building. Twenty yards away was a street corner and a lamp post carrying a Fifth Avenue and Forty-Third Street sign. The Fifth Avenue shop windows were gay, even if the merchandise displayed was sparse and dated and a little wartime-shoddy.

The man thought: Everything looks the same, so like a normal June afternoon on Fifth Avenue. The idea made his mouth strangely dry. Death was so horribly close to him.

A policeman came by. A big cop in blue with a shining shield on his left breast and another shining shield on his uniform cap, with the telltale thickness around the hips where he carried his handcuffs and gun and sap under his coat.

“Oh, officer!”

“Yes?”

“How many blocks to that building yonder?”

The officer glanced in the direction of the building at which the man was pointing. His glance was brief. The building was a famous one, with its picture in all the encyclopedias and all the books about New York, simply because it was one of the tallest in the city.

“About eleven blocks,” the cop said.

“Would you—would you—” The words seemed to dry to dust in the man's throat. He wanted to ask the officer to walk that far with him.

“Would I what?”

“Walk that far with me!” The man got it out.

THE policeman was reasonably surprised, and his next emotion was suspicion. It was part of his business to be suspicious.

“Why?” he demanded.

“I'm afraid.” The word seemed to crawl around like snakes in the man's throat before he got them to

come out as sounds.

“Yeah?” The policeman was very suspicious now. “What’re you afraid of?”

“Did you see that taxi a minute ago?”

“Which one?”

“It almost ran me down.” The man pointed. “Right there, at the corner.”

The officer shook his head. “I didn’t hear any brakes squealing, or anything.”

“They didn’t use the brakes. They were trying to run over me.”

“Who? Who done that?” The officer was interested. “Say, what’s going on here, anyway?”

The man looked worried as he said, almost pleadingly, “Officer, please walk as far as that building with me. That’s all you need to do. Just walk—”

A young man is not a policeman in downtown New York very long before he loses his diplomacy.

The cop gripped the man’s arm. “Buddy, I asked you what gives here!” he said ominously. “Answer the question!”

The man was not accustomed to having anyone grab his arm and demand answers to questions. His manner now, the tone of his voice, the way he disengaged himself, showed that.

“Take it easy, officer,” he said. “This whole thing is a little extraordinary. A man named Clark Savage, Jr., has headquarters in that building yonder. I am trying to reach him. Attempts are being made to prevent me doing so. I want your help, your protection. I could give you a full explanation, but believe me, it would not be wise to stand here on the street and talk. Once I safely reach Clark Savage, I assure you there will be a full explanation.”

The cop said, “Clark Savage? You mean Doc Savage?”

“Yes.”

The officer was impressed. “You know Savage? Can he vouch for you?”

“Of course. I work for him.”

The cop frowned. “Doc Savage has five assistants. You’re not one of them.”

“Naturally not. I’m the president of a company which Doc Savage owns.”

“You are. Well, that’s different. Come on, then.”

They set out together, moving with the crowd. The policeman was very self-conscious, very much the watchdog, for a block or two.

THEN the officer began to talk. At first his conversation was designed to ease the obvious near-screaming nervousness of the man who was so obviously the average-businessman type. But then the cop got around to something that was on his mind. He had never met Doc Savage, the officer explained casually, although he had heard a great deal about him, and had studied, when he was in rookie

school, a short pamphlet on practical criminal psychology which Doc Savage had written. Good stuff, mighty good stuff.

And of course everyone knew about Doc Savage, and his strange profession—a little like the stuff you read in the books about the days when guys went around wearing armor—of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers who were outside the reach of the law. The officer chuckled self-consciously here and said, of course, it had a goofy sound when you came right out and said that a man had such a profession, but then he understood that was what it amounted to. And anyway, Doc Savage sure wasn't a crackpot, or he wouldn't have become as well-known as he had, and he wouldn't have a special commission of high rank on the New York police force, which he did have. And he wouldn't be able to afford the kind of a headquarters he maintained, the whole eighty-sixth floor of that skyscraper yonder, and planes and speedboats and all the equipment he used. And he wouldn't be known everywhere in scientific circles, and medical and surgical ones, for the specialized research work he had done, unless he was a normal fellow, but on the extraordinary side, too.

What the cop was driving at finally came out. He wanted to be introduced to Doc Savage. He wanted to meet the Man of Bronze, as Doc Savage was now and then called in the newspaper headlines.

He wanted to meet Doc for about the same reasons any ordinary guy would have liked to have met MacArthur, or Bing Crosby, or Churchill, or Henry Kaiser, or Stalin.

Why sure, it could be arranged, said the scared man.

The cop was grinning his pleasure when a blackjack smashed down on his head.

THE blackjack was a monkey wrench wrapped in a pullover sweater. The long-faced man who swung it put everything into the blow. He wanted to get that cop down, no matter how, and he did. When the blow hit, there was a sound as if a coconut had cracked, and the young cop just spread out on the sidewalk.

Now two other men had the scared man. One got a bouncer's grip, coat collar and seat of the pants. With that hold, a man can get another man up on tiptoes and make him run helplessly, if he knows how to do it. This one knew how. The other assailant grabbed a handful of the scared man's nose and mouth and held it, held him practically silent.

They ran the man headlong into an automobile, a sedan, which drove up conveniently.

The car got moving. The whole thing actually took no more than five seconds. The cop was hardly spread motionless on the walk before the scared man was in the car, and the car was leaving.

The fellow who had slugged the cop was last in the car. He pulled the door shut.

“You kill the cop?” asked the driver.

“I don't know. Maybe.”

The driver was a heavy man with a green necktie and a green hat. He became the color of dried putty, and terror was a hoarse thing in his voice as he said, “Lord, I wish we could've got around that.”

“What the hell else was there?” growled the long-faced man. “The cop was walking along with him. What else could we do.”

“Maybe the cop won't die.”

“Maybe. But I heard something crack in his head.”

The driver, his voice even worse, said, “You better get rid of that wrench. The sweater you wrapped around it, too.”

“You let me worry about that,” the long-faced man muttered. He was worried.

They drove rapidly for about twenty blocks, turning often. Then they changed to another machine, another sedan, but of different color. In this car they traveled at a more leisurely pace, going uptown.

The long-faced man fell to scowling at their victim. The latter lay on the floorboards, adhesive tape over his mouth. Whenever he would try to yell, the long-faced man would reach down and hold his nostrils pinched shut until the victim's face turned purple.

“You're a damned nuisance!” said the long-faced man, his voice bitter, hateful. “You sure give us a chase!” He began to kick the victim.

“Here! Here! Cut that out,” said the driver.

Why?”

“We don't want no bruises on him.”

“Oh.”

The ride ended at a brownstone house in a once fairly swanky section of the east Thirties, a house which had a basement garage into which they drove. The door was quickly closed behind the car.

“You sure it's safe here?” demanded the long-faced man.

The driver got out. “Be funny as hell if it wasn't, wouldn't it?” He sounded relieved. “Get old run-and-tattle out of there, and we'll take him upstairs.”

The house had an unlivd-in smell of rats and spiderwebs and dust and deteriorating plaster. The wallpaper hung in unsightly scabs and the steps grunted and whined under their feet as they carried their victim. The latter did what struggling he could, but he was hopelessly outnumbered, and his captors knew where to hold him and how to make it hurt.

“Don't mark him up, dammit!” the driver kept warning. “It's got to look like a natural death.”

THEY stripped every stitch of clothing off the victim, doing it on a blanket which they spread on the dusty floor so that his naked body would not get dirty. When his body was found, the driver warned, there had to be no sense of any suspicious dirt smears on it to start anybody wondering.

They pried open the victim's mouth, using a flashlight to examine his teeth.

“A perfect set of choppers,” said the driver.

“Is that good?” asked the long-faced man.

“It's not likely a dentist has ever done anything but clean his teeth. That means no X-rays. With X-rays,

they can identify a body sometimes. With fingerprints and dental X-rays, you got to be careful.”

“What about his fingerprints?”

“We’ll take care of that. When he dies, he will fall over a stove or into a fire and his hands will get nice and burned.”

They made no attempt to question the victim. They made no offers of life or liberty. He seemed to have nothing whatever that they wanted, except his own life, which they were grimly preparing to take from him.

“Get the syringe,” the driver said. “And fill it full of that juice.”

The hypodermic needle was not large. The “juice” was syrupy looking stuff.

The long-faced man shot the stuff into the victim, selecting the inside of the mouth, an inner cheek which could have been accidentally bitten by the man, as the spot.

“They’ll never think of looking there for any mark,” he said. “And there shouldn’t be any mark anyway.”

“You sure the thing will work out?” the driver demanded.

“Stop worryin’ about it.”

“But—”

“Look,” said the long-faced man patiently. “We know this guy has a heart ailment. We know he has been taking medicine for it for years. All right, the autopsy will show the heart ailment and it will show his system having traces of the medicine, and nobody is going to be suspicious about that. So we give him an overdose of the medicine administered intravascularly, and when they make the autopsy, if they do, they won’t be able to tell for sure whether there is an overdosage or a normal dosage of the medicine in his system, because they won’t know what the normal dosage was. They can’t prove murder.”

“I wish I was as sure as you are,” the driver said.

“Listen pal, I didn’t go three years to medical school for nothing in my younger and more sensible days,” the long-faced man said.

“Can they prove it’s murder?”

“They can suspect, at the worst. I don’t think the best damned lawyers and the best doctors could get on the witness stand and actually prove the man was murdered, going only by the autopsy signs.”

“How long will it take?”

“About three hours, and he oughta be dead.”

SLIGHTLY more than two hours later, one of the men decided he wanted some hot coffee, and went into the ragged kitchen to light the gas stove, unaware there was a leak in the stove somewhere. The stove blew up.

The explosion had not much violence. Mostly it was *whoosh!* and outrush of flame. The noise was contributed by the stove-lighter falling over a chair and howling in alarm.

Everyone dashed for the kitchen.

The drugged prisoner was left lying on the bed. He lurched off the bed, staggered to the window—he was tied hand and foot—and fell through the window headfirst. His luck was good; he was not cut.

A shed roof, sloping gently, lay immediately below the window. The bound man hit that, slid down it, along with some of the glass from the broken window, and fell about eight feet to a brick court. He lit, still with excellent good fortune, on his feet, so that he was not injured at all.

He shuffled around on the bricks, got a pane of glass between his fingers, and with one slice, cut through his leg bindings.

He got up and ran. He ran through an entry, out into the street, and down the street until he found a cab, into which he piled.

“Cut my hands loose,” he told the driver.

The astonished driver complied.

The man sagged back on the cab cushions. He told the driver to take him to Doc Savage's headquarters, and the driver, a rare fellow who knew urgency when he saw it, did so without delay.

The cab driver, however did linger in the vicinity after he unloaded the man at the skyscraper. He took a second thought, remembered you usually got in plenty of trouble when you put your nose in something that didn't concern you, and realized further that he was going to be inducted into the army early in the morning. He drove away, the one man who could have given a slight idea of where the victim had come from—at least he could have told where he had picked up the fare with his hands tied, which would have been a great help. The driver left, to disappear immediately into the hungry impersonal machinery of the United States Army. In justice to him, he did not know how important it was.

The victim staggered into the building.

His face was getting blue. In other ways, too, he was beginning to look the way heart cases look.

Chapter II

LIEUTENANT COLONEL ANDREW BLODGETT MAYFAIR was known as “Monk” Mayfair. He was short and wide, homely, with a remarkable growth of rusty hair practically everywhere, and he was admittedly one of the great living industrial chemists, although judging from his appearance his intellectual level would be about the same as that of an amiable ape jumping around in a cage.

Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks was called “Ham” Brooks by his friends. Lean and dapper, a man with the wide mobile mouth of an orator, he invariably made the lists of best-dressed men back in the days when people didn't have anything more important to do than to make up lists of best-dressed men. He was a lawyer. An eminent lawyer, as a matter of fact. The Harvard Law School was very emphatic about this, pointing to him as its most accomplished product.

Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks were aids of Doc Savage.

Each had a pet.

Monk's pet was an astounding pig with long jackrabbit legs and a set of ears like the wings on a ramshackle bat. This pig was actually some peculiar breed of Arabian hog, it seemed, because he was

quite old for a pig, a Methuselah among pigs indeed, and he showed no signs of being any older than when Monk had acquired him quite a while ago in Arabia. The pig's name was Habeas Corpus. Monk had named him Habeas Corpus to irritate Ham Brooks, who didn't like pigs, hogs, pork, shotes, swine, boars, sows, bacon, pork chops or even pigskin gloves.

Ham's pet was a what-is-it chimpanzee from South America which bore a disgusting—disgusting to Monk—resemblance to Monk Mayfair. This chimp was named Chemistry, because Monk was a chemist, for the same purpose of irritation that the pig was named Habeas Corpus. Monk didn't like Chemistry. Chemistry didn't like Monk.

Monk and Ham, Habeas Corpus and Chemistry, all spent their surplus time quarreling with each other.

The result generally was discouraging to anyone who happened to know that Monk was a world-known chemist and Ham was an equally famous lawyer. One expected more dignity from such notables.

Dignity was a commodity Monk and Ham had the least of when they got together. For years they had been carrying on a rousing fuss, which ranged from pulling snide tricks on each other to coming to actual blows a few times.

They enjoyed their quarrel thoroughly. No one had ever been able to put a stop to the perpetual row. Quite a few people had tried, including Doc Savage, and Doc had had no better luck than anyone else, which meant the quarrel would probably last through the ages like the Rock of Gibraltar and Santa Claus.

Monk and Ham, Habeas Corpus and Chemistry, were in Doc Savage's headquarters on the eighty-sixth floor of the midtown building when the dying stranger walked in and talked about his breakfast food.

THE man didn't knock on the door. He hit it, or rather fell against it, and his unnerved fingers trying to make sounds on the door made scratchings. When Monk Mayfair opened the door, the man could stand, and came shuffling into the room in a vague way, looking straight ahead as if sightless.

“Here, here, you don't belong in here,” Monk said.

Monk thought he was a drunk.

The man kept walking, but acted as if he was trying to stop and couldn't, then finally he did stop, swaying wildly, his hands out and feeling.

“My breakfast food,” he said in a thick dying voice.

They had no doubt but that was what he said. Their uncertainty about it later just came from the strangeness of the words, such an unusual thing for the man to say.

He said exactly the same thing again, but thicker, with more of eternity crawling loosely in his vocal cords.

“My breakfast food,” he said.

Then he began turning slowly, as if he was going to pivot around and around, but going down slowly as the strength went out of his knees. And probably the life left his body at about the same time.

Monk caught him. Monk was still under a misunderstanding which led him to think the man was intoxicated.

“Drunk as an owl,” Monk said.

Ham said sharply, “I don't think so!”

They put him on a large leather chair, and Ham stood holding his wrist.

The pig, Habeas Corpus, lowered his ears until they were hanging like rags, then sidled under a table. The chimp, Chemistry, suddenly put his hands over his eyes. Monk, who was watching the animals, had an extremely creepy sensation.

“Whew!” Ham said.

Ham went to the telephone.

HAM called three numbers, each time being told that Doc Savage was not there. At the fourth number he called, there was a great deal of background noise made by a crowd and he was advised that Doc Savage was present, but at the moment was addressing the conference—it was the Eastern Conference of Surgical Research, and Ham had forgotten that Doc was to appear there tonight—from the platform. Was it important enough to interrupt Mr. Savage's speech? Ham said no, not to do that, but to give Doc a note saying, “*Unidentified man just dropped dead at headquarters. Sending him to hospital.*”

Monk grunted, and said, “You're a little mixed up. Do they send dead men to hospitals?”

Ham said, “I'm no doctor. He looks dead to me, but there might be some life left in him. I'm not taking any chances.”

He put in an emergency call to the nearest hospital.

“You should have called the hospital first,” Monk said.

Ham muttered that he knew that; he guessed he was a little confused.

“There's nothing in his pocket,” Monk said.

“You mean nothing to identify him?”

“I mean nothing at all.”

“Isn't that sort of queer? Did you ever hear of a man going around without at least something or other in his pockets?”

They stood there looking at each other, puzzled. It was queer, all right.

Monk looked inside the dead man's inner coat pocket, then inside the other pockets, the trouser waistband, the shoes.

“The labels very carefully cut out,” he said. “That don't look right.”

Ham went outside to question the elevator operators, immediately finding the one who had brought the man up. The man had merely walked into the elevator and said, “Eighty-sixth floor.” That was all the operator knew. And that was as far, it developed, as they were able to trace the man's back-trail.

An ambulance arrived downstairs. Because the call had come from Doc Savage's establishment, one of

the chief surgeons of the hospital had accompanied it in addition to the usual intern.

“Heart case,” the specialist said immediately.

“You mean it was a natural death?” Ham demanded.

“I wouldn't go that far with a snap judgment,” said the physician.

“But he is dead?”

“Yes. You want us to drop the body off at the morgue?”

Monk said he did, but added he had better check with the police, so there would be no mixup. Monk got on the telephone, and received an okay on the transferring of the body. The procedure was not irregular, because both Monk and Ham, as well as Doc, had special police commissions which justified what otherwise would have been a legal irregularity in moving the body.

The body was transferred to the ambulance.

Chapter III

DOC SAVAGE was unusual, but this did not mean that he was a superman. Now and then a tabloid newspaper would label him as the man who was a remarkable combination of physical giant, mental wizard and scientific marvel. But they did this for the same reason that a corny movie publicity man now and then used the words stupendous and marvelous and unparalleled in describing some medium-grade flicker opera. It was stretching the facts somewhat.

The screwball fact about Doc's life was seldom mentioned, because not many knew it. This was his strange childhood. He had been taken literally from the cradle and placed in the hands of scientists for training for the career which he now followed. This in itself was not particularly unique—scientists frequently get it into their heads to take some baby and raise him and make a wonder-man out of him. Usually they have a flop on their hands at the end.

Doc Savage's father, about the time Doc was born, evidently received some kind of shock which completely warped his outlook on life—made him devote the rest of his days to raising a son who would follow the career of righting wrongs and punishing criminals who seemed to be outside the law. Doc never knew what happened to his father to give him such an idea.

Heritage had given Doc a big frame and good health, and to this the years of scientific development had naturally added a great deal. He was a phenomenal physical specimen, but so would anyone else have been who had received the same interminable training.

His mental abilities and the superior efficiency of his senses were genuine, but only the result of a fellow who hadn't had anything like a normal boyhood.

The training had been endless. Some of it was tortuous, some of it interesting, some of it silly, and a normal kid would not have stuck with any of it long enough for it to mold him as it was intended. But Doc, because they had caught him young, had taken the works. Not always willingly, but he had taken it.

He still endeavored to devote two hours a day to exercises intended to develop every muscle and sense. Sometimes, as any other guy would, he let it slide. But not too often.

His five assistants, who were with him most of the time, had never ceased being amazed at Doc, although

they had been connected with him for some years now. So the training had evidently done a great deal for Doc.

Because the meeting he had been addressing, the Eastern Conference of Surgical Research, had been an ultra-formal affair, and because Doc Savage had been principal speaker, he was wearing full dress when he turned up at his downtown headquarters.

Riding up in the elevator, he frowned at himself in a mirror. He didn't care for himself in a monkey suit.

He entered the big reception room, where Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks were waiting. He listened to them tell him about the dead man.

MONK and Ham were full of details. They had a long and exact word picture of how the stranger had come into the place acting strangely, had gasped out the words about his "breakfast-food," then had died. They concluded with the hospital doctor saying it was probably heart trouble, and named the morgue to which the body had been taken. The body had gone, they finished, not more than ten minutes ago.

Doc had one question.

"Did you take any pictures?" he asked.

"Blazes!" Monk said.

He and Ham swapped disgusted looks. It hadn't dawned on them until now that they had overlooked what was a very common procedure, not only in Doc's group, but by the police as well—photographing the scene of the crime before the body was removed.

"I never thought of that until this minute," Ham said.

"No identification whatever?"

"None."

"That means the labels ripped off the clothing?"

"Yes."

Doc said, "We had better go take another look at that body."

Monk and Ham followed sheepishly. Doc Savage maintained a private garage in the basement of the skyscraper, served by an elevator leading directly to their eighty-sixth floor headquarters.

"Did we do something wrong?" Monk demanded as they rode south and east.

"Only in not photographing the body," Doc said. "That was an oversight."

Three blocks from the morgue, they began to get the idea that something was wrong.

The morgue was a city one, assigned to serve a designated section of the city, and it was located in about the kind of a neighborhood where you would expect to find a morgue. A neighborhood of rattletrap warehouses and low-grade tenements.

On Second Avenue, they met a hose truck careening around a corner. A policeman standing in the middle of the street started to herd them back, but recognized Doc Savage, probably by the special license number on his car, and waved him on.

“There's something doing around the Morgue,” Monk said.

They pulled up in the jam of fire apparatus, a police prowler car, hose, ladders, and the other litter that always mushrooms in the vicinity of a fire.

“Hell of an uproar over nothing much,” a fireman told them. “They got it put out, and there wasn't nothing much burned but the corpse.”

Monk got a strange look.

“If it's the corpse I'm thinking about,” he said, “I wouldn't call it so nothing-much.”

It was.

THE fire had occurred in a room where a routine check-over was given unidentified bodies when they were brought to the morgue. The check-over consisted of taking the fingerprints, physical measurements, and stripping the garments from the cadaver preparatory to rolling it on to the little wheeled stretcher that went into the refrigerator drawers.

The attendant making the check had been called to the telephone—at least he had heard someone yell to him that he was wanted on the telephone, and he had stepped outside. There had been a kind of mushy explosion, almost at once, and the attendant forgot all about the phone call and dashed back, finding the room on fire.

“I had two gallon-bottles of gasoline standing on the cabinet,” he explained. “We use the stuff to clean up the place.”

He did some pointing.

“You can see where the shelf came loose from the wall. The screws pulled out. That let both gasoline bottles fall on the stretcher where the corpse was lying, and they broke. They were just ordinary gallon glass jugs, so they'd break easy. The gasoline splashed around and vaporized.”

Monk asked, “What set it afire, though?”

“I was smoking a cigarette. I guess I put it in a tray. I guess that when the gasoline hit that, it went.”

“What about the dead man's fingerprints?” Doc Savage asked.

“Oh, I had already got those. They are in the file.”

Doc said, “Ham, would you go with him and get them?”

Ham went away with the attendant to get the fingerprints.

Doc looked over the fire. It was out. The chemical truck had extinguished it. There was a great deal of the extinguisher foam around, some of it on the body. But the body had been burned so that it was not recognizable. The skin was even charred off both of the hands.

In the meantime, the attendant and Ham went into an office, which had two parts, a reception part enclosed by a railing, and another part where there were filing cabinets and a few clerks. Three gloomy looking men were waiting in the reception part, and there were only two clerks in the other part.

The attendant went to a metal case.

"It's lucky I got the fingerprints first, if it's important, because the fire burned the hands," he said.

He pulled a card out of a case. "This is it," he said.

Ham put the card in the side pocket of his coat, saying, "That's fine."

"Wait a minute. We're supposed to have that in our files—"

"We'll make a photostat of it, and return the print card to you."

"You will? That'll be fine."

As they left, one of the gloomy looking men in the waiting-room part was fooling with the gate in the railing. He was trying to open the gate, and it wouldn't open. He shoved against it, and it opened, and he stumbled against Ham.

"Excuse me," he said. "Damn that gate!"

Ham said, "That's all right," and straightened his coat. He went on, with the attendant.

"Hey, wait!" called the gloomy looking man.

Ham halted. "Eh?"

"You dropped this, didn't you?"

The man was extending the fingerprint card, or a card which Ham naturally presumed was the same card.

"Say, thanks!" Ham exclaimed.

He took the card and went on. He hadn't noticed anything wrong.

THE gloomy looking man lost no time in getting out of there. He stopped in a rundown saloon in the next block, to be shortly joined by the other two gloomy looking fellows who had been in the reception part of the office.

"Smooth as cream," one of the newcomers said.

"He didn't notice the switch?"

"Nobody could have seen that switch. You did a slick job."

"Okay. You two lay low. I don't think anything went wrong, but it won't hurt for you to be laying low."

The two men nodded.

"Say," one of them said. "Which one of Doc Savage's men was that guy?"

“Ham Brooks. His full name is Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks. He's a lawyer, a big-time one.”

“He didn't look too tough.”

“Don't let his looks fool you. Just hope you never see him again.”

“He *is* tough, eh?”

“He works right with Savage, and that by itself takes him out of the pattycake class. Now beat it, you two.”

The pair went away.

THE gloomy man went to a hotel on Lexington Avenue, a place where there was nothing less than eight dollars. He was registered there. He got his key. His suite was eleven-one-seven. It faced east, and the shades were drawn.

He raised the shade—not the way a shade would normally be raised, just to the half- or two-thirds-way mark, but entirely to the top. To make the thing more effective, he put a floor lamp in front of the window and switched it on.

He had his hat off and was washing his hands when the telephone rang.

The voice on the telephone didn't waste any time identifying itself.

“Did you exchange the merchandise?” it said.

“I did better than that,” the gloomy man said. “I managed to—”

“You slop-faced fool!” the voice said. “You were told exactly what to do, and above everything you weren't to throw in any touches of your own! When I make a plan, I want it followed!”

“But I—”

“Shut up! Stay right where you are until you hear from me! Don't move!”

The gloomy man hung up and spent ten minutes walking around the room or sitting in chairs, looking disgusted. On the south side of the room, there was a connecting door, locked, to another suite. When there was a knocking on this, the man looked frightened.

“Who—who is it?”

“Come over here and sit down close to the door,” said the voice which had been on the telephone. “Are you alone?”

“I'm alone.”

“All right, what kind of a fool trick did you pull?”

“Listen,” said the gloomy man. He was indignant. “All I did was save our necks. That's all. Me and the other two guys got that fire started all right, and got out of the building. Then we circled around and came in the other door, but we didn't have time to get to the case where they put the fingerprint card. We were

in the reception part of the office, trying to figure out how to get to the file and take out the card and put in the phony card we had fixed up. That had us stumped. We didn't belong in the office, so we couldn't just walk in. We had about decided to say I was a newspaper reporter and wanted to see the card—we were talking about doing that—when in walks Doc Savage's man Ham Brooks, and he gets the card out of the file.”

The man on the other side of the door swore bitterly. “That was something nobody could figure on.”

“It came out all right,” the gloomy man said. “I picked his pocket. I got the real card. Then I says to this Brooks, ‘You dropped this didn't you?’ and I handed him my fake. He took it and went on. Me and the other two beat it, and I told them to hide out.”

“Oh! Oh, it came out all right?”

“Sure it did.”

“That's fine.”

“Well, for a slop-faced fool, I didn't think I did so bad.”

“I spoke too quickly when I called you names. Would a hundred-dollar bonus make you feel any better?”

“Considerable.”

NOW there was a silence. The gloomy man could bear the traffic on Lexington, and could hear elevated trains slamming south on the nearby L. “Don't go away,” said the voice on the other side of the door. “I'm thinking.”

The thinking went on for five minutes.

“Here,” said the voice on the other side of the door, “is what you are to do. There is a crazy man named Dub Champion. Or there was. He was accidentally drowned about two weeks ago. It just happens nobody knows he is dead yet. His body hasn't been found. So don't tell anybody he is dead. Start investigating him, and find out all you can about his relatives.”

“Where do I start investigating?” asked the gloomy man.

“The Plainview County Sanitarium.”

“What's that?”

“A place where they treated this Dub Champion for his mental ailment.”

The gloomy man was thoughtful. When he spoke, he was also suspicious. “When did this Dub Champion get out of this booby nest?”

“Two weeks ago.”

“Did he escape, or what? I mean, will they be suspicious if I—”

“They think he escaped. Tell them you read about it, and you think he might be your cousin or something.”

“Did this Dub Champion actually drown?” The gloomy man made some uneasy faces.

“You can be damned sure his body is at the bottom of the upper bay.”

“But maybe it's been found—”

“Not likely. It was in a concrete block when it sank.”

“Oh!”

“Find out about his relatives. Names and addresses.”

SEVEN and a fraction hours later, the gloomy man was back in his hotel suite. He signaled with the window shade, got a telephone call, and the information that the voice would be in the other room shortly.

The gloomy man was curious about the identity of whoever was giving him orders. So he held the door of his room open a crack, and watched the elevators and the hall, to see who would enter the adjoining suite.

No one did. Instead, he faintly heard the phone ring in the other suite, and a moment later, there was the knock on the connecting door.

The gloomy man scowled. Whomever he was going to talk to had been in the adjoining suite all the time. Someone else had taken the signal, and telephoned whomever was in the suite.

He went to the connecting door.

“Dub Champion just had one living relative,” he said.

“Who?”

“Elma Champion.”

“What address?”

“The Lazy-C Ranch, which gets its mail out of Buffalo, Wyoming.”

“What else did you find out about her?”

“Not much more than that. She runs this ranch. It's a ranch where they take paying guests, a dude ranch. On my way back, I stopped at a travel agency and looked the place up in a directory where they list such places as dude ranches. It said: 'A dude ranch in the picturesque Big Horn Mountains, with riding, actual cow herding, camping, trout fishing; big game hunting in season, elk, deer, bear, antelope. Miss Elma Champion, owner-manager.'”

“That all?”

“Yes.”

The man on the other side of the door had one of his thinking silences, apparently, because it was some time before he said, “You there?”

“Still here.”

“Have you any idea why I asked you to find out about the relatives of this Dub Champion?”

“Not the least idea.”

“All right, I don't believe in keeping an intelligent man in ignorance,” said the voice. “Something might come up where you would be able to help a great deal if you knew the situation. So I'm going to give it to you.”

“Thanks.”

“First, I want to impress on you again that it is very regrettable that we had to have the slightest personal contact with Doc Savage or any of his aids. Too bad we couldn't have taken on the Army, the Navy and the Marine Corps instead—because they probably would have been safer.”

The gloomy man, sounding even more gloomy, said, “You don't need to tell me about Savage. I've heard about him before.”

“We have to keep Savage from becoming more suspicious.”

“How will this Dub Champion—”

“Right now,” the voice explained, “Doc Savage is very suspicious. He isn't saying much, but he has his eyes open, and he isn't going to stop looking around. In a day or two, he will dig in real earnest on this thing. So we have got to stop that.”

THERE was a pause, and movement on the other side of the door, after which an envelope skidded under the door.

“There is money for plane reservations,” the voice said. “Buy one ticket going out to Wyoming, and two coming back, because you are going to bring this girl, Elma Champion, back with you.”

“What if she don't want to come?”

“You'll have a story that'll make her want to come.”

The gloomy man had another objection. “These days, you don't just go down to the airlines and say give me a ticket to Wyoming, and two coming back. There's such things as priorities and reservations and so on.”

“Yes, and there's such things as black markets, and guys who for ten or twenty dollars extra will see you get what you need.”

“Oh.”

“Bring this Elma Champion, of the Lazy-C Ranch, to New York. When she is here, we will fix it so she can't help identifying the burned body of the man who died in Doc Savage's office as her half-witted—what relation is he to her?”

“Uncle.”

“Right. She'll identify the man as her half-witted uncle. She'll explain that he was nuts, and had the habit of approaching famous people in a goofy way, and that he had heart-trouble and often collapsed when he was pulling one of his approaches—all of which is true. Then what will happen?”

“Savage will decide the dead man was just a poor half-witted guy and forget all about the incident.”

“Exactly. We hope.” The voice on the other side of the door swore sourly. “This is a lot of trouble to take. But we better do it. We can't take chances with this Savage.”

The man picked up the envelope. “Okay. I'm off.”

Suddenly the voice swore some more. In alarm, this time. “Wait, *you* can't go! I just happened to think!”

“Why can't I go?”

“Didn't you say Savage's assistant Ham Brooks saw you?”

“Yeah.”

“All right, you couldn't bring the girl back. Brooks would recognize you when you turned up with her. . . . You go ahead and get the airline tickets. We'll send another man to Wyoming.”

“Who'll you send?”

“Don't let that worry you,” the voice advised.

THERE was one other matter discussed. It didn't take long....

“How is the buying coming along?” the gloomy man asked.

“Fine.”

“Is all of it bought up yet?”

“As far as we know, there is just one supply left. That is at the Zeus-Stevens Chemical Company.”

“Want me to buy up that?”

“It's being taken care of already,” the voice explained.

Chapter IV

THE Zeus-Stevens Chemical Company had sales offices on Madison Avenue below Forty-Second Street, the warehouse being in New Jersey. Sales were made on Madison, deliveries in Jersey.

A slender and dapper man who bore at least a superficial resemblance to Ham Brooks appeared at the chemical concern's Madison Avenue office early in the afternoon.

He asked if his purchase of a certain drug was ready. He received assurance it was.

The drug was a rare one, provided the true meaning of the word rare was meant. Rare, meaning not frequently encountered.

It was not a new drug. It had been known for a long time, half a century probably, and was the result of a distillation process applied to an herb which happened to grow no place but in the oriental tropics.

The drug was practically never sold anymore, because no one could think of anything it was good for.

Certainly the Zeus-Stevens concern was glad to move their whole stock of the stuff. This purchaser had taken the entire lot on hand.

The sale, however, was not noted as being unusual. The drug was neither poisonous, nor on the critical list. Nobody had his suspicions aroused . . . yet.

It was not unusual for purchasers to pay the Zeus-Stevens Company cash; in fact they were required to do so when they did not have a firm credit rating or a Dun & Bradstreet rating. But usually it was a check, not full payment in greenbacks, the way this was paid.

The dapper man dug the money out of his billfold.

A bunch of business cards fell out on the counter in front of the cashier.

The cards said:

THEODORE MARLEY "HAM" BROOKS

Doc Savage Associate... Attorney

The purchaser pretended not to notice at first that he had dropped the cards. The cashier, as a gesture of politeness, picked them up.

The man gave a violent start. "Good God!" he said.

The cashier looked astonished. He was more astonished when the dapper man looked around mysteriously, then leaned forward and whispered, "You saw my name on those cards, didn't you?"

"I—yes."

"All right—what will you take to keep your mouth shut?"

"What?"

"Don't tell anybody who I am, or anything about me being here."

"Oh, I will keep the matter confidential, if you wish," said, the Zeus-Stevens employee.

"Okay. What'll it cost me?"

"Cost you? You mean you are offering to pay me for my silence? That won't be necessary, I assure you."

The dapper man didn't seem convinced. With an air of elaborate mystery, he slipped a bill across the counter. The cashier was astounded when he saw the denomination was fifty dollars.

"No, I couldn't do that," said the cashier, shoving the money back.

"I'm a Doc Savage assistant, and I want that kept under your hat," the man said. "I'm willing to pay for it, and pay plenty."

"I have my own ideas of what is honorable and dishonorable," said the cashier firmly. "Taking pay for such a thing would not be at all acceptable to my code. No, thank you."

"You better keep your blatt shut," said the dapper man with a noticeable threat in his voice.

"Good afternoon, sir," said the cashier coldly. "You may expect my silence as long as I consider I am

doing the right thing.”

“Okay, okay. Where do I pick up the stuff?”

“At our Jersey warehouse. Here is the address.”

THE dapper man called for the shipment of drug in a pickup truck, and brought it to a private dwelling in West New York, New Jersey, a suburb directly across the river from midtown Manhattan.

Here he met the gloomy-faced man. “It go all right?” the latter demanded.

“Fine! Fine!”

“You got all they had?”

“Every drop.”

“Did you manage to make them think that one of Doc Savage's men had bought it?”

“I sure did,” said the dapper man. He was pleased with his cleverness, and went into detail describing how he had dropped the cards, and made sure that the cashier had noticed the name of Ham Brooks on them, then fixed the incident in the cashier's memory by offering the fifty-dollar bribe.

“That prissy cashier,” said the dapper man, “won't forget that incident for years. He's that kind of a guy.”

The sour man asked, “Is he the kind of guy that will tell the law about it when things start breaking?”

“That's exactly the kind of a guy he is. Prissy. He's not going to do anything the least bit off-color, that guy isn't. He's just the kind of a fellow we needed for the purpose.”

“That's great. You did a good job.”

“What about the drug? It's loaded in the panel job outside.”

“You will deliver it to the same place the rest was taken,” the sour man directed.

“Oh, you mean up north?”

“Yes.”

The dapper man went over to a mirror and examined himself. He chuckled. “Say, I make a good Ham Brooks, don't I, now?”

“You won't need that disguise any longer,” the gloomy-faced man informed him. “Better get out of it before you leave with the panel truck.”

The other turned his head. “Oh, we've bought up all that drug, then?”

“Every drop of it. We've scoured the country from east to west and north to south, spending nearly three months at the job, and using about fifteen men. The bill for traveling expenses was something to make your eyes stick out. But if there's a drop of that drug in the United States that we haven't bought up, I don't know about it.”

“What about Mexico, South America, England, places like that?”

“We bought it up there before we started in on the U.S.A.”

“Oh. I didn't know about that.”

THE long-faced man ate dinner at a quiet but expensive restaurant in the midtown residential district. He had an appointment there, and his guest arrived on time.

The guest was a pale young man who licked his lips and jerked his eyes here and there as if he were afraid something might be creeping up behind him.

The guest had some sheets of paper which he spread in front of the long-faced man. The latter examined them. They were carbon copies of shipping orders from Goody-Prest Corporation.

The pale young man was a minor clerk in the packing department of the Goody-Prest Corporation.

“These show where the last shipments went,” he explained. “That's all there is. There won't be any more shipments.”

“Well, what we've shipped should be enough,” the gloomy-faced man said shortly.

“I'll say. We've covered the country with the stuff. It has gone everywhere. Big towns and little towns, from California to Maine, from Duluth to New Orleans.”

The sour man nodded.

“First shipment went to Tulsa, Oklahoma, didn't it?” he asked.

“Tulsa. That's right.”

“It should be going on sale in Tulsa before long.”

“It's probably on sale right now.”

“That means we'll start getting action any time.”

“That's right.”

The pale young man twisted his fork nervously in his fingers. Something was bothering him. He asked a question. “You think we're safe in this?” he demanded.

“What makes you think we're not?”

“Well, when the Old Man broke loose and started for Doc Savage with the whole story, it looked bad.”

“We stopped that, didn't we?”

“We did if Doc Savage doesn't find out who the Old Man was, I guess. Has Savage or any of his men identified the Old Man's body?”

“No. And they won't, because we've got a scheme fixed up where the body will be identified as an old crazy man from Wyoming, a guy name Dub Champion. The crazy guy has a niece named Elma Champion in Wyoming, and we're going to bring her back and trick her into identifying the dead man as her Uncle Dub. That'll throw Savage off the trail.”

Alarmed, the young man gasped, "Trail! Is Savage on our trail? Does he suspect anything?"

The other waved a hand impatiently.

"Quit worrying," he said. "Savage won't be able to get at us for a week or so, if we play our cards right, and after that he won't be able to harm us. He'll be out of luck. I'll bet you they try and hang him within twenty-four hours after the thing breaks." The idea pleased the gloomy-faced man. He leaned forward impressively and said, "I'll bet you that in thirty-six hours after the first person dies in Tulsa, Savage will be tried and hung. Either that, or mobbed."

THE pale young man could eat no dinner. He tried, but the food seemed to swell in his mouth. He resorted to consuming one cocktail after another in an effort to get hold of himself and crowd back whatever was bothering him.

The sour, older man finally warned him, "Bad idea to get tight. What the hell's wrong with you, anyway?"

The young man shook his head wordlessly. He sat very still for a while, looking somewhat as if he were bleeding to death in the way that color left his face. When he spoke, it was a moan, and almost explosive.

He said, "The idea of all those people having to die—it's getting me down."

Having said that, he put his hands on his arms and quietly fainted.

Chapter V

THE wordy, flashy gentleman who left the plane at Cheyenne, Wyoming, said his name was Daniel W. Lochaber. He told several people this, loudly and importantly, while he was trying to arrange for a car to haul him north across half the state to Buffalo. He gave the impression of being a second-rate Hollywood publicity man. He had to take a bus, though, finally.

He was a wide man, probably thirty or thirty-five, who tried to dress a collegiate twenty. He wasn't fat. He was sun-tanned, with a big grin, twinkling blue eyes and a loud traveling voice. The loud voice helped make him noticeable. He talked too much.

The bus passengers found him to be entertaining and fairly likeable, although their first idea had been that he was going to be an infernal bore. He wasn't; he knew a lot of words and he liked to use them. But he would stop now and then and let someone else talk.

He was also an inveterate petty gambler. He wanted to bet on anything and everything, from the number of antelope they would see from the bus, to the time of arrival in Buffalo.

He hired a car in Buffalo, and it took him up the canyon, then back into the mountains. He was much impressed by the mountains.

"Marvelous country!" he told Elma Champion at the Lazy-C Ranch. "Stupendous scenery. Glorious air. Why, it makes you feel like a songbird in the spring, yes it does!"

He examined Elma Champion approvingly.

"And you certainly touch off the scenery in fine shape!" he added.

There was nothing theatrical about Elma Champion. Nothing cheap. Not brassy nor artificial. She wasn't too tall and she wasn't too blonde and she wasn't too beautiful. She had a definite quality of loveliness, a thing that was quite real although a little hard to explain, something that would somehow cause a man to walk for a while in silence after he saw her, just thinking.

“Boy!” said Daniel W. Lochaber. “Boy! Boy! Shades of Powder River and Calamity Jane!”

“What can we do for you?” Elma Champion asked. “Riding, camping, fishing, mountain-climbing?”

Daniel W. Lochaber sighed. “I wish I could be a guest here,” he said ecstatically. “There is nothing I would like more, nothing whatever, I'll bet you on that.”

But it seemed the future of a dude ranch guest in such delightful surroundings as the Lazy-C offered was not to be his lot, he explained. Because he was a private detective. He had been approached by an insurance company. The insurance company had a policy on one Dub Champion.

“Uncle Dub!” Elma Champion exclaimed.

“Yes, your Uncle Dubbernell Champion.”

“But why on earth did an insurance company let Uncle Dub take out a policy?” the young woman demanded. “Uncle Dub has been cracked for years.”

“That is undoubtedly why they sent me out here,” said Daniel W. Lochaber.

“I don't get it.”

“They want you in New York.”

“Why?”

“You are the beneficiary of this insurance policy.”

“But why don't they just cancel the policy? . . . Wait, they don't think I'm a crook, do they? They don't think I had a hand in trying to cheat them? Why, I haven't even seen Uncle Dub in years—”

Daniel W. Lochaber put on an air of motherly sympathy, of a man weighted down with the sad tidings he had to impart.

“Dub Champion is dead—we think,” he said.

The news shocked Elma. The pain was quite genuine, with the first impact of the news, when she said, “Poor Uncle Dub. He was such a nice old fellow, and entirely harmless.” Then, as thoughts of the Uncle passed through her mind, tears came. She excused herself and went into the ranch house.

Daniel W. Lochaber seemed to be a sensitive man who was depressed by the girl's loss. He looked around at the mountains, one or two of which were snow-capped at this season of the year. The beauty of the place, the majesty of the forest, the happy rustling of a mountain stream nearby, restored his spirits.

He ambled over to the corral, where a cowhand was trying to dally his loop over the head of a skittish, mean-eyed sorrel bronc.

“Nice-looking horse,” Lochaber remarked.

“Yeah, nice like a stick of dynamite,” said the cowpuncher. “That's old Devil Ear, our rodeo

orangoutang. Miss Elma figures we'll have to sell him maybe."

"Bucking horse, eh?"

"He's a sunfishin' son of a gun."

"Bet you twenty dollars I can ride him," said Daniel W. Lochaber.

The cowhand was startled. He looked over his visitor narrowly, scratched his head, said, "You don't look like Westy Phillips."

"Who's he?"

"The only ranny who ever rode old Devil Ear," the cowhand said. "I'll just take you up on that twenty."

Elma Champion appeared at this point, in time to overhear what the bet was about. She told the cowboy, "Cut it out, Goober. I won't have any greenhorns riding Devil Ear."

Goober grinned and went on trying to catch the bronc.

AS she walked toward the house with Daniel W. Lochaber, Elma Champion said, "Goober was all set to fleece you like a lamb. Nobody has ridden Devil Ear except a fellow from Oregon by the name of Phillips."

"I got myself into it," Daniel W. Lochaber confessed. "You see, I have an irresistible inclination to bet on things. It just pops out of me. It is very embarrassing."

"It would have embarrassed you if you'd tried to ride old Devil," the girl said. "It would have embarrassed you all over the place, possibly in little pieces."

Daniel W. Lochaber glanced sidewise at the girl. "The cowboy said something about you having to sell the horse."

"So Goober said that." She shrugged. "Well, I suppose everybody else knows it."

"You need money?"

She grimaced. "Use your imagination. What do you think the war has done to the dude ranching business?"

"I imagine," said Lochaber judiciously, "that it has not improved it."

"Improved it to practically nothing."

Lochaber nodded.

"All the more reason for you to accompany me to New York. You should go there immediately by plane."

"Listen, a bus is a lot cheaper."

"Oh, but the insurance company is going to pay your expenses by plane."

Elma Champion halted. She faced him. She put her hands, fists, on her hips and eyed him intently. After

she had done that a moment, she shook her head, puzzled.

“Your horns,” she said, “aren't visible.”

“Eh?”

She explained, “Just my quaint way of saying that I don't know what devilment you are up to, but that I strongly suspect there is some.”

“If there is, you may rest assured I'm not a partner to it.” Lochaber added gallantly, “And if it should develop that there is something with—with horns, as you express it—you may rest assured that I shall look after your interests exclusively.”

“Since when,” Elma asked, “are insurance companies in the habit of paying plane fares to people to come and identify their clients?”

Daniel W. Lochaber frowned thoughtfully.

“To tell the truth,” he confessed, “I have done some wondering about that.”

“They're probably trying to flim-flam me out of the insurance.”

“In that case,” said Daniel W. Lochaber emphatically, “I will stand by you as your friend. You may depend on me.”

Elma Champion eyed him narrowly. “You befriend easily, don't you?”

“When they are as lovely as you, yes indeed,” said Daniel W. Lochaber, grinning and blushing.

“Glad to see you tell the truth, too,” Elma Champion said. “It'll take me about twenty minutes to pack.”

THEY arrived in New York, left the plane at La Guardia, and entered the waiting room, and Daniel W. Lochaber was looking around and complaining, “I wired ahead to the insurance company, and I thought they'd have a man to meet us,” when a tall, long-faced man came up and said, “Good morning, Lochaber. I presume this is Miss Champion?”

“Oh, Mr. Fleet!” exclaimed Lochaber. “I didn't see you! I was wondering if—yes. Yes indeed, this is Miss Elma Champion, of the Lazy-C Ranch, niece of the deceased Dub Champion. Miss Champion, this is Mr. R. W. Fleet, of the insurance company.”

R. W. Fleet was thin, bony, had a skin something like the hide on an old drum, and a pair of ears which would have looked more appropriate on a fox. He had a way of smiling as if he didn't mean it, showing pointed teeth in the process.

“Yes, I am Elma Champion,” Elma said, shaking Mr. Fleet's hand and not liking it a bit.

“I have your hotel room ready for you, Miss Champion,” said Fleet. “And my car is waiting.”

Elma Champion was suspicious. She sat in the corner of the rear seat, and clasped her large handbag in her lap. She hadn't told anybody, but her dad's old cowboy six-shooter was in the handbag.

The hotel was a good one. Elma had never been to New York City before, but she had heard of the hotel. She had listened to radio dance music programs originating from its roof garden.

“Mr. Fleet,” said Elma Champion. “What is the catch?”

“Catch?”

“You know, like in bear-trap. It just happens that I don't recall insurance companies putting out expense money this way.”

Mr. Fleet grinned sheepishly.

“The catch,” he said, “is that we hope you won't be able to identify the dead man as your Uncle Dub Champion, in which case we won't have to pay off the insurance policy.”

“Then I've got to identify this body as Uncle Dub's in order to get the insurance?”

“Yes.”

“How much insurance?”

“Five thousand dollars.”

Chapter VI

IT was the custom of Ham Brooks, the lawyer, to arise at what he called a gentleman's hour: about ten o'clock in the morning. Following habit, he usually spent an hour or more deciding what he should wear that day, after which he would arrive at Doc Savage's eighty-sixth-floor headquarters to pick up Monk Mayfair and enjoy a good breakfast flavored by a quarrel with Monk, who would be eating lunch about the same time, although Monk insisted on calling his midday meal a dinner.

This morning he was exactly on schedule, and in good spirits, except that he was wondering what he was going to fuss about with Monk when he arrived at headquarters.

“Hello, you missing link,” he said, for lack of a better incivility.

Monk, with an innocent expression, said, “There was a telephone call for you, Goldilocks. Some fellow who said his name was Van Willinger, and he had to leave for California in a hurry, and if you wanted to see him, you could catch him at the La Guardia airport at twelve-thirty.” Monk consulted his watch. “Not much time, if you're interested.”

Ham completely overlooked the sly look on Monk's face.

“Van Willinger!” Ham howled. “Lord, he owes me a whopping fee! He must be in the notion of paying it. If he gets to California, I'll never collect!”

And Ham charged out again.

But Ham was back—to Monk's open-mouthed disgust—in not more than ten minutes.

“You double-crossing baboon,” Ham said. “It's lucky I remembered by the time I got downstairs that you had that look on your face you get when you're lying. So I call Van Willinger's office, and not only is he not going to California, but he never telephoned, and he isn't in the notion of paying the fee.”

“If you would quit trying to rob all your clients,” Monk suggested, “you would have less trouble collecting.”

Ham always carried a commonplace black cane which all his associates knew was a sword cane. He pointed this at Monk threateningly.

“Why did you lie to me?” he yelled.

Monk was caught short for an answer. While he was fly-catching with his mouth, trying to think of something, the door to the library opened and Doc Savage, a man, and a girl came out.

Doc Savage made the introductions.

“Ham, this is Miss Elma Champion, who believes that the man who died here the other day was her uncle.”

Ham executed his best bow.

Doc added, “And this is Daniel W. Lochaber, a private detective employed by an insurance company to look after their interests.”

They went out.

Ham suddenly thought of something, and dashed after the party. He caught them in the reception room, and said breathlessly, “Miss Champion, my friend Monk Mayfair has a wife and thirteen children who are, I am sorry to say, not bright.”

Elma Champion looked startled.

“Why, Mr. Mayfair told me it was you who had the wife and thirteen gruesome offspring. He told me about it almost the moment we met,” she said.

Ham reddened and was speechless.

Doc and Lochaber and the girl departed.

Ham said bitterly to Monk, “So you got in ahead of me!”

ELMA CHAMPION didn't faint at the morgue, but she didn't enjoy herself either. The body they were inspecting was a sight to upset anyone other than a doctor or a surgeon or a morgue attendant who had spent years getting accustomed to such things.

“He is about the size of Uncle Dub,” she said. “And about the same weight and complexion, as nearly as I can tell. But the face is so—so—well, I couldn't swear this body was Uncle Dub.”

“So you can't identify him,” said Daniel W. Lochaber. “That will make the insurance company happy. They won't have to pay off.”

The girl nodded. “If we had his fingerprints, I think I know a way—could we get the fingerprints off the body Mr. Savage?”

Doc assured her that he already had a copy of the dead man's fingerprints.

“Uncle Dub was confined to a place called the Plainview County Sanitarium. Don't you suppose that sanitariums take the fingerprints of their feeble-minded patients? We could compare these prints with those of the dead man. . . .”

The Plainview County Sanitarium was situated outside a small town about eighty miles from the city. Doc Savage drove the girl and Lochaber to the place.

"It's a shame to put you to so much trouble, Mr. Savage," Elma said.

"I have a rather abnormal interest in the matter," Doc assured her.

The girl evidently misunderstood, because she colored a little, and didn't look exactly displeased. She had noted, as any unattached woman would, that Doc Savage was a big bronzed man who was handsome and famous. Naturally he was interesting. Daniel W. Lochaber scowled, because he had noticed the same things, and didn't like the idea of competition.

At the Sanitarium, a doctor unearthed the fingerprints, at the same time explaining that they were the second parties who had been interested in them.

"Who was the first one?"

The doctor described a gloomy-faced man who had said his name was Walter Rand, an insurance company investigator.

Detective Daniel W. Lochaber made a growling noise. "The insurance company already knew the dead man was Dub Champion! The crooks!"

The fingerprints proved to match those which Doc Savage had in his possession—the card of prints which Ham Brooks had secured at the morgue, under the impression that they were the dead man's.

"Poor Uncle Dub!" Elma said sorrowfully. "He was a harmless old fellow, even if he was queer about getting to see celebrities."

Doc asked thoughtfully, "Did your uncle have a habit of doing the sort of thing he was doing when he died?"

"Oh yes. Once they caught him trying to get into the White House, which got quite a bit of publicity and resulted in his being confined here for the first time."

Doc said, still thoughtfully, "According to Monk and Ham, he kept mumbling something about his breakfast food."

"That sounds like Uncle Dub."

"What did he mean by breakfast food?"

"Nothing, probably. It was just some figment of his disordered mind."

Doc seemed satisfied, except that he inquired about how Dub Champion had escaped from the Sanitarium. He was informed the escape had occurred a couple of weeks before the man had dropped dead in Doc's headquarters.

"At first," the physician said, "we sort of had the impression someone had helped Dub Champion escape. But finally we concluded we must have been wrong."

"Was Dub Champion the victim of heart trouble?" Doc named the type of heart trouble which it was believed had caused the death of the man.

"Oh, yes. He had that," said the doctor confidently.

DOC SAVAGE left Elma Champion and Detective Daniel W. Lochaber in downtown New York City.

In parting, Doc said, "There seems to be no evidence indicating the dead man was not Dub Champion."

"You are satisfied he was Champion?"

"The evidence indicates he was."

After Doc had gone, Daniel W. Lochaber did some gleeful hand rubbing and said, "I'll bet you twenty to nothing that the insurance company has to pay off."

"You don't think they'll put up an argument?"

"How can they?"

They went to see Mr. R. W. Fleet. Mr. Fleet occupied a rathole of an office on the thirtieth floor of a midtown building. The place looked as if it had been furnished in a hurry, and recently.

Mr. Fleet was remarkably cheerful for a man whose company was going to lose five thousand dollars on a policy.

"So you will take an oath that you are sure the dead man is your Uncle Dub Champion?" he asked Elma.

"What do you mean—take an oath?"

"We will have certain affidavits for you to sign testifying that the dead man is your Uncle Dub."

"Well, I'm sure. Why shouldn't I sign them?" Elma Champion demanded.

"Good. You will hear from us."

MR. R. W. FLEET smirked from ear to ear after Elma Champion and Daniel W. Lochaber had departed. His spirits were high. He did a little dance around the office, and delightedly jumped over a chair from a flat-footed start, a feat that proved he was not in bad physical condition. He got his hat and went to a midtown hotel, the one on Lexington Avenue.

There he visited the gloomy-looking man.

"Hello, Walter Rand," he said.

The gloomy man scowled through cigarette smoke and said, "That name is as good as several others I've used. Pick the canary feathers out of your teeth, and tell me the good news."

"We've got Savage fooled!"

"Well, it's about time! Of all the long-winded, complicated tricks! It's like scaring a rabbit out of a brush pile by kicking a guy on the shin in Boston, so he will have to take the train to the hospital, and the train will whistle at a crossing in Ohio making a team of mules stampede, which in turn will make the guy jump out of the wagon and land on the brush patch—and presto!—you've got your rabbit scared!"

"To trick Doc Savage, you don't pick the obvious, or even the remotely obvious."

“Yeah, I know.”

“Everything looks natural. The thing is too elaborate—there is too much that has absolutely nothing to do with what we don't want Doc Savage to find out—for him to become suspicious. He thinks the man who died in his office was just a poor nut named Dub Champion.”

“Maybe it was worth it.”

“You're damned right it was worth it,” said Mr. R. W. Fleet. “If Doc Savage had recognized the man who came to the office and died—”

He made a very expressive gesture out of drawing his finger across his throat.

“*Geek!*”

he said.

The gloomy man shuddered. “I don't like the way you do that *geek!* business.”

“Well, Savage would've got us quicker than that.”

“Oh, I don't know. From what I've seen, we're not entirely without brains.”

Mr. R. W. Fleet snorted, and proceeded to take up the matter next in hand.

“It would be awfully nice,” he said, “if Doc Savage and his men were out of town until the rest of this went through.”

Alarmed, the gloomy man stood up. He leveled an arm at the other and yelled, “Ixnay, in a pig's eye! Not me! No, sir! Not today or never. We've got Doc Savage pacified—I say let him alone, until the mountain falls on him.”

R. W. Fleet eyed his compatriot thoughtfully.

“Doc Savage is the key to the whole thing, as you know,” he said. “I like your description of it—mountain falling on him. But we want him there, completely unsuspecting, when it falls.”

“Well?”

“I think it would be an excellent idea if he was persuaded to visit Miss Champion's dude ranch in Wyoming.”

“Are you nuts?”

“Miss Champion is a very attractive girl. She should make excellent involuntary bait.”

“And after you got Savage out there in them Wyoming mountains, then what?”

“We would feel safe as we went about preparing the sliding mountain, as you call it.”

“I don't mean that. How would you keep him from finding out anything when we start to break this thing? Right when it begins breaking—the first three or four days—then is when Savage might stand a chance of escaping.”

“The radios on the ranch, and the telephone line to the place, could break down, couldn't they?”

“Oh.” The gloomy man began to approve of the scheme. “How do you go about it?”

“Oh, we'll approach Mr. Daniel W. Lochaber and have him arrange it. He has been a good arranger so far.”

“Maybe he won't buy off?”

“Maybe we won't have to buy him off.”

MR. DANIEL W. LOCHABER didn't need to be bought off. He took the bait hook, line, sinker and pole.

The subject was brought up after Mr. R. W. Fleet said, in the course of a visit he was paying Elma Champion and Lochaber, that the insurance company was going to pay off the five thousand face of the policy, but it would be two or three days before the check was ready.

Then Mr. Fleet did some buttering-up. “We like you, Miss Champion. Or rather I should say that I personally like you, because I am the only one of the insurance company you have met. But I like you very much. I hope you do very well in the dude ranch business in Wyoming. In fact, I wish I could think of something to help you along.”

“That's very kind of you,” said Elma Champion.

Elma still had the feeling that Mr. R. W. Fleet was next cousin to a rattlesnake which had lost his rattles and hence couldn't rattle a warning before he bit you. Or probably he wouldn't rattle if he did have them.

Mr. R. W. Fleet leaned back, blew the smoke of a good cigar at the ceiling, twiddled his thumbs, and got around to his dirty work.

“Why, I have an idea!” he exclaimed.

You look, thought Elma, as if you had just remembered a throat you could cut, a baby's throat.

“Wouldn't it be wonderful,” continued Mr. Fleet, “if you could persuade Doc Savage to come to the Circle-C dude ranch for a visit of a few weeks?”

“What,” asked Elma Champion suspiciously, “would be wonderful about that?”

Mr. Fleet winced. “He would make an admirable husband for some young woman.”

“Husband!” said Elma. “Well, I may fish for one. But I use a hook and line, not a seine. What are you getting at?”

“I was thinking,” Mr. R. W. Fleet said hastily, “of the publicity value of such a man as a guest on the Circle-C.”

“It's the Lazy-C,” Elma reminded him.

“Oh, excuse me. Well, if such a famous man were to reside at the establishment as a guest, the advertising value—”

Daniel W. Lochaber came off his chair as if a powder charge had exploded under him. He was excited.

“Boy, boy, boy, he's got something!” he yelled. “Elma, it would make you a fortune!”

Elma Champion frowned and said that the Lazy-C certainly needed some prestige, but she didn't know about that method of getting it.

But she was beginning to look thoughtful, and before long the thoughtfulness became enthusiasm. It was an excellent idea.

With the five thousand insurance money as fresh capital, she could make a big thing out of the Lazy-C outfit. It was true, as Daniel W. Lochaber kept telling her, that the place already had everything in the way of natural scenery and spectacular surroundings, climate, altitude, fishing, hiking, hunting. With the proper exploiting. . . .

"I'll do it!" Elma exclaimed.

"Take it easy, though," Daniel W. Lochaber warned her. "Don't make it too obvious. Use diplomacy."

"The kind of diplomacy," asked Elma, "where I roll my eyes and show my teeth?"

"That's the idea."

Mr. R. W. Fleet left them, well pleased with himself.

Chapter VII

HAM BROOKS was Monk Mayfair's best friend. So Ham Brooks was interested when he saw Monk Mayfair trying to hang his hat on the side of the locker where there was no hook.

"Got the blind staggers?" he asked.

Monk rolled his eyes and said, "My little heart goes pitty-pat."

"Huh?"

"Huh, yourself."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Tsk, ts," said Monk. "Go away and don't bother me, you overdressed disciple of Blackstone, you hatchet-faced shyster lawyer, you pain in my life."

Ham leaned back and looked thoughtfully at the sword cane he always carried. He sighted over the cane at Monk menacingly, as if aiming a gun.

"You have a date with Miss Champion!" he said angrily.

"Guilty," Monk agreed.

Ham, who didn't suppose anything of the sort had happened, bolted upright. "What? You haven't! Not really! By God, I don't believe it!"

Monk waved a hand airily and suggested, "Go back to your torts and your briefs, you shyster. You do not have the touch with women, and you are getting old enough to begin to find it out. Go away. Bury yourself somewhere."

"You're lying!" Ham screamed.

“Not this time, you courthouse Dracula. She invited me to her ranch.”

“Oh my God! She must be feeble-minded, like her uncle,” Ham said.

“Her resistance to wide, hairy-chested men is the only feeble thing about her.” Monk pounded his own wide, hairy chest to make the point plain.

“Whew!” Ham said.

Ham was much disturbed.

There had always been the spirit of good clean devilment in Ham's relation with Monk. Almost anything went between them, short of cutting a throat. Ham pondered possible ways of breaking it up. The last time Monk had gotten the jump on him, it had been with a Miss Dawn O'Day, of the chorus, beautiful and wealthy—a wealthy chorine was quite a novelty, but it didn't detract from her virtues. On this occasion, Ham had fixed Monk's wheel quite thoroughly by telling Miss O'Day that Monk was an undercover sleuth for the Income Tax department, who was trying to get the dirt on her. Miss O'Day had quickly dropped Monk. Monk was still trying to figure that one out—Ham hoped.

Ham tried to think up something along that vein to fit the present emergency.

It proved unnecessary.

Ham got an invitation himself to visit the Lazy-C.

MONK heard the news with a face that was practically on the floor.

“You shyster and sneak, you went around begging for an invitation,” Monk complained. “Of all the dirty, lowdown, chiseling, conniving, barrelhouse tricks—”

“I'm your friend—”

“Friend, nothing, you're the curse of my life,” Monk said wearily.

“Look, short-homely-and-stupid, the girl is far from being a bag, and I haven't seen any reservation signs of yours staked out that I would regard as such, therefore if she wished to invite me, in order to have a little intelligent conversation, decent manners, and—”

“Goose hair!” Monk said.

He walked off discouraged, but with an idea sprouting in his mind. He would go to Doc Savage, and without letting Doc know that he had any wish to get Ham Brooks sent to the upper jungles of the Onl-widdyl River in the nethermost corner of the Congo jungle, a trip which would take at least six months on foot because there was nowhere in the jungle for an airplane to land—if he could manage it surreptitiously, that was just where Monk hoped to have Ham sent.

He found Doc working in the big laboratory on the west side of the building. There were really three rooms in the headquarters layout: laboratory, library, and reception room.

Doc was wearing a sack-shaped thing made of cellophane or some similar plastic which enveloped him completely, and it was evidently hot inside this sack, because Doc was stripped to trunks.

Monk realized, a moment after he barged in, that the door had been taped on the inside to make it

airtight. And then his eyes began stinging. “Ow! What the heck?” he yelled, and got outside in a hurry.

Doc came out shortly, and removed the sack affair. He warned, “You should be more careful about barging in. Five minutes earlier, the place would have been full of gas that would have made your hair all fall out.”

“Hair fall out? What kind of gas is that?”

“It’s a failure,” Doc admitted. “It is supposed to be a nerve gas effective through the skin pores, but all it has done so far is make the hair fall out. What do you have on your mind?”

Monk got going on his dirty work.

“Long Tom and Johnny and Renny, our other assistants, are in China working out a new setup with the Chinese Army,” Monk reminded Doc. “They have not been getting along too well, and it just occurred to me that they could use some help. Now I couldn’t go, because I’ve got some chemical experiments to finish. I’d sure like to. Long Tom and Johnny and Renny sure need more help. And Ham is not doing anything. If you would suggest that Ham go to China and help them—”

“Immediately?” Doc asked with a straight face.

“Well, yes. The quicker the—” Monk went silent, catching the look in Doc’s eye.

“Girl trouble again, eh?” Doc said.

“Aw, dang it,” Monk grumbled. “Ham is getting in my hair with this little gal from Wyoming. I just figured it would be nice to ship Ham off to China.” He grinned at the idea. “Wouldn’t he burn! He’d smoke like something out of a rocket gun all the way to China.”

Doc said, “You know better than to expect me to accommodate you in your devilment. The boys in China do not need help, anyway. They are getting along fine.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Your plans,” Doc suggested, “are all made to go to Wyoming, I suppose.”

Monk jumped slightly. “Oh, you know she invited me and Ham?”

“Yes, she mentioned it when she invited me,” Doc said.

“Invited *you*?”

“Yes.”

“Great grief, are you going?”

“The matter is getting some very serious consideration,” Doc said.

MONK was alarmed. He hunted Ham Brooks up immediately and told Ham, “Stop gnashing your teeth at me long enough to listen to this: Doc’s got an invitation, too. He acts like he might be going!”

Ham sat down in a chair. He looked as if he had been kicked in the shin. “Listen, if this is some snide trick you have thought up to scare me—”

“Look at me,” Monk said. “Don’t I look scared myself?”

Ham admitted that Monk did. “Jove, if we’ve got Doc for competition, that’s bad!” he said.

“Bad! Heck, it couldn’t get worse.”

“But Doc doesn’t go for babes!”

“Looks as if he might go as far as Wyoming for one.”

“Dammit, we’ve got to do something about that!” Ham grumbled.

“Outfox Doc?”

“Yes.”

“Nix. You can have it. It’s your apple,” Monk said emphatically. “I would have better luck stealing one of my own teeth without me knowing it than I would outfoxing Doc. I know. I tried it once.”

“You’ve tried it several times,” Ham reminded him.

“All right, and I wound up in a barrel every time.”

Thereafter Monk and Ham moped around on the horns of the dilemma. That it was a predicament they didn’t doubt for a minute. Competing with each other for the lady was one thing, but with Doc Savage in the race, it would be something else. It wouldn’t be a race.

The predicament solved itself unexpectedly—and unpleasantly. Doc called them into the library the next day. The bronze man’s face was sober.

“There is something suspicious about this situation,” he said.

MONK and Ham, who saw nothing suspicious at all, stared at him in astonishment.

Doc told them something they had known—that he had not been entirely satisfied that the death of the man who had come to their office had been a natural one. Then he told them something they hadn’t known—that he had been continuing the investigation.

He enumerated the things he had found out.

“First, on the day the man came to the office and died, a peculiar thing happened on Fifth Avenue north of here,” he said. “A scared man accosted a policeman. The scared man wanted the policeman to walk with him, as a protector, as far as our headquarters. The officer did so, or started to, but within a couple of blocks he was knocked senseless. As he passed out, he remembers seeing the man being seized and thrown into an automobile.”

There was amazement from Monk and Ham, and Monk demanded, “When did you find that out?”

“Last night.”

“How come not before?”

“The bludgeoned policeman,” Doc explained, “was in the hospital with a fractured skull, unconscious. He was unable to talk until last night.”

“Oh.”

“The man who wanted protecting,” Doc said, “answers the description of the man who died in our office.”

Monk and Ham, staring at the bronze man, were not happy. They knew what he was getting at. He had not said so directly, but he did not want them to go to Wyoming.

“You think we'd better not go to Wyoming?” Monk asked.

“I think you had better get the love-dust out of your eyes.”

Monk and Ham both got strange fixed expressions on their faces. They were angry. They were very angry because a word had been said, or implied, against Elma Champion. The situation was difficult because Doc Savage had cast the doubt.

“That's ridiculous!” Ham said hoarsely.

“Guess it was a mistake to bring it up,” Doc said, and walked away. He was not a man for argument.

DOC SAVAGE as a matter of truth had not been very suspicious about anything until he got the report from the policeman who had been clubbed while escorting a scared man toward Doc's office, a few days before. Once he got that report, he knew positively something was wrong.

Having just sounded Monk and Ham out, he knew they were in no mental shape to do an unbiased job of investigating. Doc went ahead with it himself.

His long-distance telephone calls to Wyoming brought the news that Elma Champion had a ranch there, the Lazy-C, which she had operated for two years, since the death of her father. Her father had been killed when he was thrown and trampled by a Brahma steer in a Black Hills rodeo. There was also, Doc learned, a half-witted uncle named Dub Champion. The girl was highly thought of around Buffalo.

Nothing wrong there.

Still suspicious, Doc made another trip to the morgue. The dead man had not been buried yet; his funeral was to be tomorrow.

The idea of Doc's visit to the morgue was to make a more complete examination, take body measurements, and dig up anything else he could.

What he dug up was that the dead man's fingerprints weren't Dub Champion's fingerprints. They weren't the prints on the card in the print-file at the morgue.

Somebody had done some switching.

Doc checked on Daniel W. Lochaber, but found the man was what he claimed to be, a private detective. Or at least there was a private sleuth's license issued to someone of that name.

He telephoned Elma Champion at her hotel.

“Miss Champion,” he said, “what insurance company carried this policy on your uncle?”

“Why, the Congress State Life,” she said.

“Have you ever actually seen the policy?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Fleet showed a copy of it to me.”

“Thank you.”

R. W. FLEET and Daniel W. Lochaber happened to be present in Elma Champion's hotel suite, and were in the same room when she took the call. Fleet had called, he explained, to tell her that the check for the insurance would be ready tomorrow. Lochaber was there to make goo-goo eyes. He was worried about the competition Monk and Ham were giving him.

“Somebody say something nice about me?” asked R. W. Fleet. “I heard my name mentioned.”

Elma Champion smiled.

“Oh, that was Mr. Savage,” she said. “He wanted to know what company had Uncle Dub's policy, and if I had ever actually seen the policy, and I told him you had showed the policy to me.”

Mr. R. W. Fleet turned the rather blue color of a man who had been poisoned.

He got out of there with more haste than politeness. Twenty minutes later, he was in conference with the gloomy-faced man and several others; the rest of the men who were actually responsible for the death of the man they had tried to pass off as Dub Champion.

“I think Savage smells a rat,” Fleet said.

“How could he?” asked the gloomy-faced man.

“I don't know. You get down to the morgue. Find out if any more fingerprints have been taken of old—of the dead man.”

The gloomy-faced man was back in an hour with his features distorted by alarm.

“Savage himself was just down there and got fingerprints,” he reported. “He found the card was faked, too.”

For a while they looked as if a tiger was loose in the room. Someone dug a quart bottle out of a suitcase, but Fleet ordered, “Put it back! We need clear heads for this.”

“What I personally need,” a man muttered, “is a long ocean voyage, preferably to the moon.”

“Why? You've known all along that we were tampering with Savage,” said Fleet.

“Now he's tampering with us. That's different.”

Fleet snorted. “It would be, if we were done tampering.”

The others showed considerable relief. “You got an idea?”

“Sure.” Fleet nodded. “Get Savage to go to Wyoming.”

Someone swore in disgust. “What do you think we've been trying to do?”

R. W. Fleet got to his feet. “We're not the guys who make the final plans,” he said. “You fellows just sit

back and relax. We'll make out on this, all right.”

“You are going to talk to the boss about it, eh?”

“Yes.”

“Do you suppose we'll have to knock off Savage?”

“I wouldn't be surprised.”

Chapter VIII

THERE were about a dozen of them. It looked like a convention of rodeo performers, because they all wore high-heeled boots and western hats. They drifted into Grand Central Station more or less together, and collected in a corner of a bar.

Mr. R. W. Fleet, who wasn't wearing a cowboy outfit, appeared and made them a little speech.

“You all know exactly what you're to do,” he said.

Apparently they all knew.

Fleet said, “Now, we may not have to do a thing. If Doc Savage decides to go to Wyoming to visit the Lazy-C, that'll be fine. We stand back and let him.”

They understood that. Somebody muttered that standing back would suit him fine. He didn't sound as if he were joking.

“Monk Mayfair, Ham Brooks, Daniel W. Lochaber and Elma Champion have tickets and reservations on the train that leaves at two-twenty.” Fleet consulted a watch. “That's in half an hour. If Savage goes along, good.”

“Has Savage got a ticket and reservation?”

“Not that I've found out.”

“He may not even be at the station.”

“Oh, yes he will,” Fleet said emphatically. “Lochaber let it slip that Savage was coming down to see them off when I was talking to him, and so did the girl. So Savage will be down to the station to see them off. There's a chance he might change his mind and go along. Just a chance. We'll hope he does, because we want him out West on the Lazy-C ranch, out of touch with things.”

“That's fine,” said the man with the gloomy face. “But suppose you talk about the other side of it, the dark side.”

Fleet nodded. “If Savage isn't going, we make a fake attack, the purpose of which is to make them think we are trying to prevent them going to Wyoming. The object of doing that is obvious—if they think we don't want them to go, they'll go.”

Somebody said, “That's the Plan One we've memorized, huh?”

“Exactly.”

“What about Plan Two?”

“Plan Two is to be used only if things go wrong for us, if the unexpected happens.”

“That Plan Two is too darned violent,” the gloomy-faced man said.

“It'll need to be, to save our necks.” R. W. Fleet looked over the group. “Any questions?”

No one had any inquiries. A man broke the silence by muttering, “I hope I can run better than I think I can in these cowboy boots.” He got a few un-funny laughs and some opossum-like grins.

“Take your positions,” said Fleet.

They scattered.

THE two-twenty train was marked up as leaving from Track Thirty-one.

At eight minutes past two, the gloomy-faced man, standing near the wide Y of steps that led down from the balcony, craned his neck and discovered Monk Mayfair, Ham Brooks, Daniel W. Lochaber and Elma Champion. The four, loaded with their own luggage—porters were pretty scarce—moved toward the gate of Track Thirty-one.

Craning his neck, the gloomy-faced man could discover no sign of Doc Savage.

An entirely unexpected voice spoke behind the gloomy man.

“Look! Savage is about to grab one of the guys!” the voice said.

The gloomy man's nerves were in a knot anyway, and without stopping to think, he blurted out, “Which one? Holy cow, what went wrong?”

“Oh, so you *are* laying for us,” the voice said.

The gloomy-faced man whirled wildly at that, found himself confronting Doc Savage, and his face was instantly ghastly.

Doc Savage said quietly, “The cowboy outfits seemed a little suspicious. Being of a suspicious nature, I dropped around an hour early and noticed the phenomenon of about a dozen obviously phony westerners holding a strange conference.”

The gloomy man grabbed for both coat pockets simultaneously. Doc, a little ahead of him, seized the skirts of his coat, one with either hand, put a foot in the man's middle, shoved with the foot, pulled with both hands. The man's coat ripped off him in two halves that were heavy with the guns in the pockets.

The gloomy man sat down. He was terrified.

He screamed, “Plan Two! Plan Two!”

His howl, with the band-saw scream of terror in it, carried over the station crowd noise. It got quick action when a man in a cowboy hat leaned over the balcony railing with a pistol, looking for something to shoot at.

Doc lunged and slapped the coat-halves over his face and mouth and stepped on his ankles where it

would hurt worst, and walloped him on the jaw, locating the jaw through the coat.

Plan Two began to work. It included plenty of noise. The noise consisted of a banging of pistols, some extemporaneous yelling, and loud explosions. The explosions were caused by a man leaning over the balcony railing and throwing big firecrackers which were enclosed in tin cans to which broom handles had been tacked. These resembled foreign hand grenades, potato mashers.

“Hand grenades! Run!” the thrower bellowed, helping out the deceit.

Half a dozen men in high-heeled boots and sombreros were suddenly upon Monk, Ham, Lochaber and Elma Champion.

Monk, about this time, had a beautiful thought. He had heard the yell about Plan Two which had touched off proceedings.

“Plan One!” Monk roared. “Plan One! Plan One!”

It was just a guess and a hope on Monk's part, but it started confusion among the enemy, those of them who didn't happen to notice that Monk had yelled it.

The men who were rushing Monk and the others had guns in their hands. At his yell, they exchanged the guns for blackjacks.

“By golly, I wish I knew the number of the plan where they run!” Monk said.

Elma Champion had her large purse tucked under her arm. She wrenched it open, and brought out her father's old six-shooter, a weapon which was the grandpa of all hand arms.

The gun was knocked out of her hands. She was knocked down, blackjacked.

HAM BROOKS had his sword cane ready to unsheath. He stood there, pretending to be confused, until a victim was almost upon him, whereupon he whipped out the steel blade, and made a stab. The victim was trying to stop, and his feet skidded on the stone parquet floor and he went down, so that the sword missed pricking him. A prick would have been enough, the blade being tipped with a chemical which would anaesthetize a man in short order, making him sick in the process.

The fallen man slid, and accidentally kicked Ham's feet out from under him. Ham went to his knees.

Someone kicked Ham on the temple with unpleasant force. He rolled over, and was moaning a little when two men got him, one by either arm, and ran with him.

They ran out through an exit with Ham.

Two more men had Elma Champion and were running with her, following the pair who had Ham.

Daniel W. Lochaber seemed to be confused by the whole thing. He stood there without lifting a hand, and when the other two high-heeled men caught his arms, he at first did nothing but say indignantly, “Here! Here! I'll bet you can't do this sort of thing and—”

Then, as if it had just soaked in that the thing was in devilish earnest, he suddenly began to fight. He erupted—heaving, gasping, striking.

Monk had not accomplished much because he was under the impression the firecrackers were

hand-grenades. He had been fooled by the things, and had scooted behind a pillar which supported the balcony.

Panic was taking the crowd in the station. Enough soldiers who had seen enemy hand grenades were in the crowd to spread alarm. They thought the imitations were grenades at first, and knowing what grenades would do, headed for anything that would double as a foxhole.

Lochaber kicked shins and punched ribs until someone hit him over the head with a blackjack. He went limp.

Lochaber was then carried off after Ham and the girl.

Monk Mayfair suddenly realized the things exploding were not grenades.

He saw Elma's six-shooter lying where she had dropped it. He made a run, scooped up the gun—and a saucer-sized splatter of metal appeared mysteriously near his hand when he was getting the gun. Some of the lead splattered into his hand, together with stone chips.

With the gun, Monk cruised back under the balcony, which offered shelter.

A voice began shrieking, “Savage! Savage! Look! He's got Sweetface!”

DOC SAVAGE had been dragging the gloomy-faced man back farther under the cover of the balcony on the west side, intending to club him again to make sure the fellow remained senseless, then dump him temporarily into a shop.

There was considerable confusion in the arcade where the shops were located. Those who had fled from the west end of the main room had come here. Some of them had kept going. Others were milling.

Doc picked out a tobacco shop, headed for it.

Two men in western hats had been standing against one wall, taking no part in the uproar. When Doc appeared, one swore, and both went to work getting weapons out of their clothing.

Doc discovered them. They were too far away to reach in time. All he could do was try to reach cover. He made long jumps for the tobacco shop.

He got inside.

The two tricked out in big hats and high heels sent lead in after him. Both had Mausers with twenty-shot magazines, and pockets full of extra magazines.

They filled the tobacco shop full of lead.

Then they ran.

A moment later, Monk Mayfair came around the corner and into the shop arcade, alarm crowding him. But by now the crowd, including two policemen, had jammed the tobacco-shop door.

Monk, trying to get inside, was crowded back by an officer.

“There's a dead man in here. Stay back,” the cop said.

Somebody inside yelled, "It's Doc Savage! It's Savage!"

The second policeman, who had been in the shop, came out. He was getting green.

Monk yelled, "Doc! Is Doc Savage—"

The second cop, in a queer voice, said, "God! They shot his head to pieces! There's brains—all over the floor and walls." He became violently sick.

Chapter IX

MONK suddenly ill in body and soul, stumbled away. He was completely horrified; all his emotions, all capacity for feeling, thinking: all that was inside him seemed to be dying. It was a strange, weird feeling, for nothing seemed to have relative value—death and noise and his walking all seemed about equally important.

There was no more shooting in the station suddenly. Nothing but the excited barking of the crowd.

Monk walked out into the station, and did not know exactly what he was doing until someone made a grab at his hand, and he realized the fellow was trying to snatch the oversize six-shooter which Monk still carried.

That brought the horror back. Suddenly it was real. Every little incident about it was a separate twisting flame, a stinging agony.

Monk suddenly raced for an opening under the balcony.

Monk knew Grand Central Station thoroughly, because he had worked there as messenger boy at the time he was working his way through school. He suspected that the high-heeled big-hatted men who had made off with Ham, Elma Champion and Daniel W. Lochaber had taken a little-used tunnel which led to a side street.

Monk put his chin up and his chest out and ran. Grand Central Station was a place that looked large to anyone who went through it, but about all transients saw was either the big concourse, two hundred seventy-five feet long and a hundred and twenty feet wide, or the suburban concourse of the same size except for ceiling height, and a few pedestrian and rail tunnels. Actually, the place covered nearly eighty acres, had forty-two express tracks, twenty-five local tracks, not counting the subway lines—Lexington Avenue, Queens, shuttle, and so on.

Monk got a break. He came out on the street, into the crowd, crossed the sidewalk, and discovered two of the "cowboys" getting into a cab.

Monk wasn't noticed, apparently.

He ducked between two parked cars, where he had another stroke of luck, discovering a cab he could hire. He climbed into the machine.

"Get ready to follow that hack those cowhands just got into," he directed.

The cab driver turned, eyed Monk suspiciously, then said, "No, thanks, short and homely. I don't follow anybody. I don't like the looks of that gang in the cab yonder."

"Don't like their looks—why?"

“I dunno. Looked to me like the driver of the hack tried to get out. Seemed to me they made him climb back in.” He scowled. “I don’t want no trouble. I won’t follow them.”

“I’m the F.B.I.,” Monk lied.

“I don’t care if you’re the I.O.U.”

Monk was too desperate to fool around. He produced Elma Champion’s six-shooter. It was an elaborate early model Colt with gold inlay, pearl handles, and the size of a tommy gun....

“Know what this is?” Monk asked.

The driver popped his eyes at the hogleg. “The king-kong of six-shooters,” he muttered. He began getting pale.

“You want to follow that cab like I say, or try out your bulletproof qualities?” Monk asked grimly. Monk’s face, a remarkably homely thing to begin with, was now nothing to inspire calm.

The cab driver said he would trail the other car.

AFTER the cab Monk was following had left the city, it began following winding roads through Westchester County. The pursuit became tense, but somehow monotonous, too. Monk kept well back, and he did not believe they knew they were being trailed.

Now Monk was getting the reaction to what had happened in Grand Central. His thoughts and nerves had tied into tight knots at the shock of Doc’s death; at first there had been unreality, as if he was an empty building. His mouth had been dry. Now suddenly he looked at his hands, looked at the perspiration coming out on the back of them. His face became wet, and he felt loose, as if he had run a hard race, a race so terrible that it had taken everything out of him, leaving him about to collapse.

The thought was blackness all over his brain. Doc Savage dead? Now suddenly, with the dam breaking, thoughts of Doc and their group piled in on him. They were all mixed. Confused. The rush brought a dizziness and an awful pain.

Monk knew fiercely, sickeningly, that he couldn’t trail the men ahead any longer, without attacking. He had to attack.

The men he was following were armed. They were gunned like commandos, from what he had seen of them. He had one cannon-sized six-shooter and six—he flopped out the cylinder and looked—no, five shells.

That was why he had been following only. He wasn’t afraid. Afraid, possibly, but he would have tackled them, except that common sense had told him not to do so. He hadn’t seen a police prowler car at any time.

Monk’s machine rounded a corner.

“Hup!” his astonished driver said.

The cab they had been following was in the grader ditch, standing mostly on its radiator.

“Oh my God!” Monk’s driver croaked, and stamped on the accelerator to get speed and pass the wreck.

Monk saw what had frightened him—the driver of the other cab. He was leaning over the wheel, arms hanging down, dripping crimson from the nostrils.

“Slow up!” Monk yelled at his driver.

The driver either slammed on the brakes too hard, or the brakes grabbed. All four wheels suddenly slid. Monk had the door unlatched, intending to leap out as soon as the cab slowed enough. The brakes going on threw him against the door, the door popped open, and Monk pitched out of the car.

He wasn't much damaged by being thrown from the cab. He hit, balled, rolled. He lost the gun.

Monk's cab went on. It picked up speed. The engine howled. It rocketed on down the road and disappeared from sight and was not seen again.

Monk, getting himself together physically and mentally after the fall, realized men were coming out of the bushes beside the road and pointing guns at him.

THESE men aren't cowboys. That was what Monk thought, and he thought it in a detached way, using one half of his brain, while the other half kept warning him that he had better not move. Mustn't stir, or he would be shot.

They gathered around him. Their guns were black and small. The guns looked very small, except the place in each one where the bullet could come out,

“Shoot him now?” a man asked.

“Let's wait a minute,” another said.

“Who's going to search him?”

There was some hesitation. Then one muttered, “Watch him, you birds. Watch him.” He was the tallest of them.

There were four men, all told. Monk looked at them, seeing them in a way he seldom saw men—every detail burning itself into his memory. They were going to kill him, he knew, and he wouldn't forget their faces ever. Never, as long as he lived, which would probably be four or five minutes.

There was the tall one, two others not so tall, and the one with the beak nose. All of them wore high-heeled boots, although one had evidently recently removed a boot because it was hurting his foot, and in putting it back on had not been able to get it fully on; the man's foot was stuck in the ankle of the boot, and he was shuffling around with it that way. He cursed and kicked the boot off, while Monk was looking at him.

“Stand still!” one yelled at Monk.

Monk said, “I want to see into that car! Shoot if you are going to!”

He felt that they were not ready to shoot him, and he did not make any quick moves that would draw a nervous shot. He looked into the car.

Ham wasn't there. Nor was Elma Champion or Daniel W. Lochaber.

“Where are they?” Monk asked, sick with disappointment.

They stared at him. “You mean your friends?” The tall man asked this. He grinned. “Oh, they're in another car.”

Monk felt disappointment like a heavy weight. He had thrown away his life for nothing, nothing at all.

He rolled his lips inward. Nothing? Well, by the time they got him killed, they would know they had been through something! He began to watch for an opportunity to attack them, as he listened to them argue about who was to kill him.

“HARRY,” a man said.

Harry jumped. Harry was the tall one, and he knew what the other meant. He shook his head quickly. “Let Sid do it,” he said.

Sid was one of the not-so-tall ones, and he shook his head even quicker than Harry and said, “Let Syl do it.”

Syl, the other medium one, growled, “What the hell? What the hell? Why me?” He looked fierce, but he was losing color.

Sid spat and said, “Who was going around bragging last night he would like a chance of knocking off Savage or any of his men? Who was it?”

“Yeah!” said Harry, springing to the attack. “Who was it, Syl?”

Syl looked at them. He had to clear the terror out of his throat twice before he could make words. The words came out hoarse, vicious, filthy. In a procession of words which almost stank to the nostrils, he cursed Sid and Harry and the one with the beak nose, evidently named, or nicknamed Hooker.

The man's profanity finally dried up.

Then Monk asked, “What's behind this?”

They paid him no attention.

“Why do you have to kill me, any of you?” Monk demanded. “What's important enough for that?”

The man called Syl, frightened at the growing prospect that he was going to be the one who would have to shoot Monk, answered the question. He talked freely, as if he was somehow apologizing for having to shoot Monk.

“It was that old guy who died in your headquarters,” Syl said. “He had something to tell Savage. If we could have stopped him getting to Savage, none of this would have happened to you. Anyway, we wouldn't have had to do it to you ourselves. That would have been taken care of.”

“Taken care of—what do you mean?” Monk demanded.

Syl said, “It's a giant plan, all over the country. All over the country, and when people begin to die, Savage will get the blame, and they'll lynch him, or the government will electrocute or hang him, if the army can't shoot him first for doing it. After that, we can cash in because we've got the whole supply of the only thing in the world that will stop—”

A man—Sid—had finally reached Syl, and he kicked Syl. He kicked Syl's behind as hard as he could,

so hard that Syl was upset. Then Sid fell upon Syl, snarling. "You complete blabbing fool!" He pummeled Syl. "Tell everything you know, you stupe!" he snarled.

Syl seemed to realize for the first time that he had told something he should not have. He groaned and covered his head to protect it from Sid's drubbing fists.

"I forgot!" Syl wailed.

"I oughta kill you!" Sid screamed. "All the trouble we've took to keep it secret! And you blatt it right out. And to one of Savage's men, too!"

Syl got away from Sid. Someone grabbed Sid and restrained him. Syl sat on the ground, pale and shaking, taking fistfuls of blood from his leaking nose and throwing them on the road. "I can't shoot this guy!" he moaned. "That's what made me talk like that! I can't shoot him."

Sid said, "Nuts!" He took a knife out of his clothing.

Everything inside Monk went into a knot. This was it. This was the end of fooling around. But he wasn't going to stand there and let them cut his throat. Monk began to crouch a little.

Jump at them? That was all he could do. But they had guns in their hands. He knew that at least three bullets would be in him before he got his toes off the ground. But there was nothing else to do. Just jump, and do what damage he could.

Then a voice.

Like lightning out of sunlight, a voice.

"Easy!" the voice said. "Very easy does it!"

Monk, knotted, feeling as if death was already in his brain and his body, nearly blacked out. Doc Savage! This was Doc Savage!

"Very easy," Doc Savage said again. "Nobody move. You are caught, all of you."

Nobody moved. Sid, Syl, the other two, had frozen.

"Drop your guns," Doc said.

Chapter X

NOBODY dropped any guns.

It was Monk's fault. He didn't think, and he did something of which he was ashamed later. He dashed for the shelter of the brush behind the road.

Any other time, Monk would have known it was a bad psychological moment to do such a thing. The men had just been ordered to drop their guns. It was no time for anything to happen that would seem otherwise important to them. But Monk couldn't think. Death had just crawled inside him, and jumped out. Doc had been dead; now he was alive. The two things knocked Monk off his mental axle for the moment.

So he jumped for the brush.

And the four men started shooting.

Sid and another shot at where they thought Doc's voice came from. They picked a large clump of bushes, a prominent place, a likely one. Wrong, as it turned out.

Syl and the other shot at Monk. Monk changed his mind about the brush. He headlonged into the grader ditch. There were high weeds, six inches of water, in the ditch. Water splashed.

Sid yelled, "That's Savage! Beat it!"

He ran to the cab. He hauled the driver out. He piled behind the wheel, and the cab engine began to moan, the rear wheels to throw dust and dirt.

The cab wasn't in the ditch as badly as it looked. They had merely driven it in carefully, to make it look like a bad wreck. The cab moved, lurched, backed out of the ditch.

Syl and the other two got into the cab, or hung to it. The machine jumped ahead, swerved over with one wheel into the ditch, worried along that way a few yards, then got out on the highway and began gaining speed.

Monk realized now what he had done. He got up making bitter noises that were not profanity or words, but just misery.

"Get down," Doc's voice said, "or you may get shot yet."

Monk got down. The water in the ditch was chilly, and it had soaked him. He lay there, sickly ashamed of himself.

He said, "I ruined it. I ruined the whole thing."

Doc Savage knew what he meant.

"They might not have dropped their guns anyway."

"Yes, they would," Monk said. "I ruined the whole thing."

The cab sound went far away and became nothing.

Doc said, "Come out now."

Monk crawled out of the ditch, stringing water and bitter misery.

"My God, I must be getting old and weak," he complained. "I never did a thing like that before in my life."

Doc Savage came into sight, not from the prominent bush, but from a clump of grass which no one would have suspected of sheltering him.

"What you did was the natural thing," he said.

Monk stared at Doc Savage anxiously, looking for signs of damage. Doc's right shirt sleeve was slightly stained with scarlet, and the bulge under the shirt between elbow and shoulder was probably a bandage.

"They didn't hurt you bad back at the railway station?" Monk demanded.

"Not badly."

“But I thought—that cop was yelling that you were dead.”

Doc explained that. The two gunners outside the cigar shop had been intent on killing him. He didn't want them coming into the shop to complete the job. So he had started the yelling that Doc Savage was killed, started the rumor himself. He finished, “I probably lost my head myself. Anyway, I was very scared.”

Monk moistened his dry lips. Scared? “If anybody wants to know what getting scared is like, just send them to me,” Monk muttered.

Doc said, “Wait here.”

The bronze man ran down the road, taking the direction toward the city.

WHEN Doc came back, which was not much more than three minutes later, he was driving a sedan. The car was one of his special machines, an innocent-looking old vehicle which didn't look as if it had a four-hundred-horse motor and was practically as bulletproof as a light tank. It was a car which Doc had rigged up for his special needs, one which he'd had for a long time.

Monk, standing in the road, twisting water out of his clothing, thought he heard a squeaking noise somewhere nearby. He dismissed it, with the idea that it was the wet cloth making the noise as he wrung it out.

Doc brought the car to a stop.

“Get in,” he said. “Maybe we can catch them.”

Monk fumbled with the door. He was, he realized, as shaky as a man could get, almost.

Doc added, “Any sign of Miss Champion, Lochaber or Ham Brooks?”

“No, no sign—”

Monk paused with a foot in the car. “Listen!” he said. It was the squeaking sound again, long, more violent than before.

Monk took his foot out of the car. “Have you got a gun?” he asked. Doc shook his head. He never carried firearms, preferring to depend on gadgets and ingenuity, claiming they were more dependable in the kind of work which he did than guns, an argument with which Monk and his other aids did not at all agree.

“Somebody in the brush,” Monk muttered.

He moved cautiously, realizing that he was entering the shrubbery at the point from which the four men had earlier appeared to surprise him. Then his voice, elated, blared out of the tangle of undergrowth.

“It's Ham!” Monk howled. “Ham Brooks!”

He came dragging Ham out on to the road. Ham was tied with about three times as much heavy cotton clothesline as was necessary, and his face was mummified in adhesive tape.

“Throw him in the car,” Doc said. “We have to catch that car if we can.”

Monk hesitated long enough to dig the adhesive tape off Ham's mouth and demanded, “Where is Elma?”

Where's old bet-you-on-anything Lochaber?"

"What have you guys been doing?" Ham screamed "Haven't you rescued her? I thought she was with you!"

"She's not with us," Monk said.

"Why haven't you rescued her?" Ham howled.

"No."

"What've you been doing?" Ham screamed. "Walking around on your flat feet and admiring yourselves?"

"You ungrateful shyster!" Monk said. "Doc, shall I throw him out of the car?"

"If he keeps up his complaining in that vein—yes," Doc said, half-convincingly. "Hang on."

He meant hang on to the car. It was good advice. The old, innocent-looking car began to do everything but fly across country like a crow.

HAM was not happy. He shouted, "What kind of silly apes are you to let those guys steal Miss Champion right out from under your noses? Why didn't you follow the right car?"

"This was the only car we saw to follow."

"You're blind!" Ham said. "Stupid and blind! Of all the damned dumb behavior I ever saw! Turn me loose! Get these ropes off me! Get this tape loose—"

Monk reversed the procedure. He took off the tape before he untied Ham. To take off the tape, he got Ham down under his knee and yanked it off, heedless of Ham's piteous screams of agony.

"You did that on purpose!" he wailed. "You skinned me alive!"

Monk finished yanking off the tape with enthusiasm, taking hair and here and there a fragment of hide.

"What happened to you there in the station?" he demanded.

"They grabbed me while you stood around looking silly—"

Monk put out his jaw. "Cut that out! I did all I could!" He meant it.

Ham stared at him for a while. "All right, all right, I was kidding," he said miserably. "I was knocked out. When I woke up, I was in a taxi, bound and gagged. We drove a long time, and they eased the cab into that ditch, and dragged me into the brush." He shrugged. "You were in on the rest, you and Doc."

"Didn't they *say* anything?" Monk demanded.

"They thought Doc was dead. They thought that. One of them had lost fifty dollars in some kind of a lottery. He was mad about that."

"That's all?"

Ham asked, "What did you expect them to do, give me a blueprint?"

Monk eyed Ham thoughtfully.

He said nothing more.

DOC SAVAGE kept the car close to a hundred, which was supernatural considering the road was twisting and rough. There were places when they seemed to go a considerable distance without touching the ground at all.

“Oh, oh,” Doc said.

He meant that they were coming to a crossroads. But they got along all right. The car they were chasing had taken the turn to the left on two wheels, leaving a tire-smear.

Nothing was said for some time. The only sound was the excitement of the car.

“Doc?” Monk said.

“Yes?”

“Back yonder, did you get there in time to hear what they said—what that one they called Syl said about their plans?”

“No, I did not get that.”

“Well, Syl got upset over having to kill me,” Monk explained grimly. “And when I asked him what was going on, he started talking freely. What he said wasn't very definite, just generalities. But the generalities scared the pants off me.”

Monk looked at Doc uneasily. “It's a big plan. It is spread all over the country. It hasn't broken yet, but when it does break, you get the blame, Doc. It must be pretty bad, because they seemed convinced you couldn't get out of it. And after whatever they are making happen is happening, and you are out of the way, they've got some system for making a lot of money out of it.”

Ham said, “Just words.”

Monk scowled at him.

“That was a lot of malarkey, probably,” Ham told him. “There's nothing in it you can hang your hat on. Just generalities.”

“I'm not talking to you,” Monk said.

“Eh?”

“You got an I-didn't-pour-it-where-I-said-I-did look on your face that I don't like,” Monk said.

“You're nuts.”

The conversation ended on that.

Five minutes later they came to a trunk highway, the Hutchinson River Parkway, and there was no possible way of telling which direction their quarry had taken.

Doc said, “Nothing to do but notify the police.”

After they did that, they went back to headquarters.

Monk and Ham had not spoken, and Monk had not explained what he meant by an I-didn't-pour-it-where-I-said-I-did look which he claimed to have seen on Ham's face.

The silence was as real and natural as a pool of mud. It expressed their feelings, the general mood of the situation. It was a feeling of general disgust at being surrounded by something they couldn't quite get their hands on to.

“Like being in a roomful of spiders and somehow unable to swat a one of them,” was the way Monk expressed it.

The man had died in their office. Died gasping a charade about breakfast food. Then an elaborate hoax had been perpetrated to deceive them into thinking the dead man was a halfwit named Dub Champion. Then an effort had been made to get them to go off to a Wyoming dude ranch. Now things were in a mess. It was hard to tell what kind of a mess.

Chapter XI

DOC SAVAGE left the big, deceitful old car in the basement garage at headquarters.

He said he was going upstairs and do what could be done—get the police full information, get private detective agencies at work, and start a microscopic research into the past of everyone concerned. The western outfits, the boots and the hats, had all been new. It shouldn't be hard to find where they had been bought, and something might come of that.

“I'll be with you later,” Ham said unexpectedly. “I'm going to my club and get in some different clothes, and put off a couple of business deals which I'm beginning to think I'm going to be too busy to handle.”

Monk glanced at Ham sharply, but Ham was not looking at him.

Monk frowned. “Say, now that you mention it,” he said, “I'd better take off right now and get my own work lined out so it won't interfere with this mess we're getting into.”

Doc Savage, apparently totally unaware of the foxy expression on Monk's face, said, “That might be a good idea. Whatever is behind this is going to take some time.”

Ham left the basement garage, using the street exit directly, not the big radio-controlled door which closed the runway to the basement, but a smaller pedestrian door beside that one. Ham walked off whistling.

Monk, sticking his head out of the door behind Ham, listened to the whistling.

“That settles it,” Monk muttered. “He never whistles. He claims it's vulgar. Something is making him forget himself.”

Doc Savage had gone on upstairs. Monk eased out on the street, deciding to follow Ham. When he saw Ham look back at him, Monk sauntered elaborately in the other direction. He got a bright idea and dashed out into the street yelling, “Taxi! Taxi!” loud enough for Ham to hear. A cab halted. Monk didn't get in. He told the driver he had changed his mind. He ducked around behind the machine, crossed the street, and began following Ham.

Ham Brooks got a cab and rode uptown to his club, Monk trailing him in another cab.

When Ham went into the club, Monk was disgusted. He had his own cab parked down the street and sat in it, waiting and wondering if he could be wrong. Ham lived in the club, a place which Monk considered unnecessarily snooty and inhabited by stuffed shirts. But it looked as if Ham had, as he had said, gone home to change clothes and make a few phone calls.

But fifteen minutes later, Monk leaned forward and told his driver in a pleased voice, "You see that guy in the overalls? Follow him."

This driver did the trailing without an argument.

Monk was sure now that Ham was up to something. Ham wouldn't wear overalls for anything less than a matter of world-shaking importance.

Ham took a cab. He rode over into Long Island City, to a down-at-the-heels district. It was the kind of a place where a man wouldn't want to walk up an alley alone.

Monk watched Ham consult with his cab driver, watched Ham move into an alley, leaving the hack waiting.

Monk went to the cab. "That guy tell you to wait for him?"

"That's right." The cab driver considered a moment before he answered.

Monk headed into the alley.

HAM jumped so violently that he jarred his hat over one eye when Monk unexpectedly confronted him. The hat, a workman's battered headgear, was too large for him.

"I'll be a—" Ham fished for a word. He didn't like to cuss.

"Just keep your shirt-tail in, you double-crossing bundle of briefs, torts and negotiable instruments," Monk told him grimly. "What are you doing down here? And don't lie."

Ham scowled at him. "Who's lying?"

"You said you had to go home, change clothes, and call off some business. What's that, if it wasn't fibbing?"

"I did exactly that," Ham said righteously.

Monk sneered at him. "Oh, so you just forgot to tell us the rest of it. You didn't tell a lie. You just forgot to tell all the truth."

Ham tried to cover discomfort with bluster. The fact that he was so uncomfortable proved to Monk that he was right.

"All right, out with it. What are you doing here?" Monk demanded.

"I've got business here. Private business. Nothing to do with—anyway, nothing that I want any help out of you."

"You don't want help, eh?"

“No.”

“Want to do it all yourself?”

“I—oh, go on back to town, blast you!”

Monk suddenly grabbed a fistful of Ham's necktie and shirt. His voice was low and bitter as he said, “You have an idea about where Elma Champion was taken, and you're out to make a hero of yourself for her benefit, by staging a one-man rescue.”

“Let go of me, you ape!”

“Where is she?” Monk demanded.

Several emotions twisted Ham's face into different shapes. Mostly they were embarrassment and disappointment.

“She's supposed to be in a building about two blocks from here,” he confessed.

“How did you find it out?”

“Overheard it when those fellows had me prisoner. They gave me—or one of them did—a bang over the head, and he thought I was unconscious. They said something about the place, and I remembered the address.”

“You didn't tell Doc.”

Ham was painfully silent.

Monk added, “You didn't tell me, either. Of all the little half-inch tricks—”

“Lay off!”

“I oughta put my foot in your mouth, grab you by the ears and pull you on like a boot!” Monk yelled.

“The way you're bellowing,” Ham said, “they could use you for a foghorn. Two blocks isn't far. You give us away and it'll be worse than my trying to free-lance this thing myself. That gang'll overhear you, you fool.”

Monk got back on his subject, saying, “Coming off here without telling us was the dumbest, knot-headedest, crookedest trick—”

Ham did some necktie grabbing himself. He hauled Monk's face close to his. “Dumb and knot-headed—that would be a matter of opinion! I was going to send for help if I needed it!” he said violently. “But not crooked. Not a bit crooked. All of us free-lance, do things the way we want 'em done. We always have. When Doc's judgment is better, we use that. But we use our own. You know that.”

“So what?”

“So I was using my own ideas.”

“Why?”

Ham scowled. It hurt him to make the admission, but he finally got it out.

“I was going to be a hero in front of Elma,” he said.

NOW that Ham had admitted the chicanery, Monk found himself without anything to growl about. It was true, as Ham said, that they always worked to suit themselves. It was not often that one of them did something like this—went off on a tangent of his own without telling the others anything about it, but it was permissible. It might not be smart, but it wasn't too black, and wouldn't make Doc too unhappy, either.

Really, Monk wished he had thought of the trick himself. It was pretty slick. As a way to win the girl, it was sure-fire.

“I'm going along,” Monk announced.

Ham consented. “Come on. But I'd rather have a two-headed goat with me.”

The address, it developed, was a large and scabrous brick building on the edge of a dredged channel that led to the East River. Planks were nailed over every window in the building. “I always figured they stored caskets in places like that,” Monk muttered.

Ham frowned. “There seems to be a dock on the canal side. Better go in that way, one of us. I tell you what—you get in the water and swim to the dock and sneak in the back.”

Monk disapproved after he looked at the canal water.

“The water's dirty,” he pointed out. “Suppose you get in it yourself.”

Ten minutes later they were both in the filthy water, because there seemed no other way to approach the building unseen. The canal bank was high, walled with piling and timbers, so it concealed them.

Ham stepped on Monk's fingers when they were climbing onto the dock. It was probably an accident, although Monk whispered otherwise. His whispering sounded like an angry teakettle.

“Sh-h-h,” Ham warned. After that, they told each other what to do with signals.

They started across the dock, and a man opened a sliding door in the side of the building and came out on the dock. At the first rusty grumble of the opening door, Monk and Ham shot for cover behind a rotting pile of lumber. They made it.

The man who had come out of the building had a pair of cowboy boots weighted with a brickbat. He threw them out in the canal. Then he called over his shoulder, “Tubby, you going to throw away your boots now?”

Tubby said, “Hell, I'll keep 'em for souvenirs.” He was inside the building.

The man who had thrown away his boots went back inside.

Monk thought: If he closes the door! Monk looked at Ham and Ham nodded, and they came up and made for the door.

They had marvelous luck. Tubby and the boot-thrower were standing just inside the door. Tubby was holding a cigarette for the other to suck a light off it.

Monk and Ham were old hands at commando tactics. They had their neckties off and ready. The

neckties were special jobs, considerably tougher than leather.

Each man got a necktie noosed around a neck. There was not much sound, and none of that was from vocal cords. Monk made his man senseless by booting him expertly on the temple. Ham hammered his victim's jaw.

Monk laid the man he'd overpowered on the floor, then pointed at the other end of the room.

It was a taxicab.

Beside the cab lay the body of a man. They went over to the body. The man was dead, and his feet were buried in a pile of concrete which had not yet set.

The story was clear. The cab driver who had brought the men here had been killed, probably to silence him. And the concrete around the feet was to weight the body and hold it on the river bottom.

Ham made some signs on his fingers. Now they would look around, his hand-talk said.

THE room was upstairs on the north end. The big old building was deserted. The reason for its being unused was no mystery. Notices of condemnation, official printed notices of the municipal department responsible for such things, were tacked in different places. The notices were very old.

Monk and Ham advanced cautiously to the door, where they crouched listening to the voices inside.

First they heard Daniel W. Lochaber and Elma Champion talking.

Lochaber was telling Elma not to get scared, that he knew they were going to be all right because they hadn't been killed. Elma replied that she wasn't afraid. But she was, because the terror was in her voice like snakes.

Following this, Daniel W. Lochaber threatened someone. "I'll bet you don't get away with this!" Lochaber finished his threat.

The object of the threat was a man. He laughed.

Now there was some silence. The door was closed. Monk got down in front of it, looking for a crack through which he could see into the room in order to learn how many of the enemy they had to contend with.

A man, a different man, said, "I wonder what the hell happened to Harry and Sid and Syl and the other one."

"They must be all right," said the man who'd been threatened.

"If they're all right, why aren't they showing up?" The speaker was obviously much more than scared.

"You better get hold of yourself," the other told him. "What the hell—quiet down. Everything is going all right."

"It didn't go that way in the station. What went wrong?"

The other laughed. "Take it easy. The whole plan went into operation yesterday. That is, it began working yesterday. We've already heard from Tulsa."

“Tulsa?”

“In Oklahoma. Tulsa turned out to be the first town.”

“Oh.”

“The man we sent down there as observer reported by wire today. He just wired that Uncle John was better, which meant that the plan was working.” The speaker sounded quite satisfied. And bloodthirsty, too.

The other man, not a bit less uneasy, demanded, “How many will die?”

“How the hell do I know?” the other said wearily. “What’s the matter with you? If your nerves are getting you down, I wish you would take something—”

That was all Monk and Ham heard. Because now they had something else to think about.

They were surprised, completely surprised, by a man with a repeating shotgun. He had come—they never did find from exactly where—and was close before they discovered him.

In fact they didn’t discover him until he spoke to them.

“I’ll kill you if you move,” the man said, making his intentions quite clear.

He spoke loudly, so that he was heard inside. The door burst open, and the men who had been talking popped out with their guns in their hands.

Monk and Ham were disarmed. They couldn’t do a thing to prevent it, without losing their lives.

Their captors sidled around them, staring at them as if they were a hill of red ants.

The men identified Monk and Ham immediately. There was no mercy in any of their faces or their voices. They were scared men who had killed the taxi driver downstairs, and they would kill again.

Monk shuddered violently, and thought of the hardening cement on the dead man’s feet downstairs.

His mind must have been read. Because one of the men told another, “Go downstairs, Moxie, and begin mixing a fresh batch of concrete.”

Chapter XII

MELVIN BRANDENBURG had been the first victim to be brought into a hospital in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Actually his name was not important, because soon there were so many others that his identity was lost in the excitement.

About eleven in the morning, Melvin Brandenburg toppled over at his work in one of the plane plants. He was taken to the plant emergency, but after the company doctor got a look at him, he was transferred to the hospital downtown.

The victim had suffered a sudden attack of fever. He also complained of violent rheumatic pains in the joints and muscles with severe headaches. Within about five hours, a scattered eruption began appearing on his skin.

“Dengue fever,” a doctor said.

This proved to be premature. A guess that was too quick, and wrong.

As another doctor pointed out, "In dengue, the eruption doesn't appear for several days, usually not before two days after the crisis."

The fact was that they didn't know just what Melvin Brandenburg had.

By two o'clock that afternoon, two more people were in the hospital with the same ailment. One was a still-man in a West Tulsa refinery, the other was a housewife who lived in South Peoria.

By five o'clock, there were about twenty of them in different hospitals, plus some more that were sick at home. Excitement over the thing, and anxiety, spread like a fire in a match factory.

The first inflammation was among the doctors, because the malady was mysterious, and it was obviously an epidemic. Just about every doctor in town, whether he was treating one of the patients, or not, began beating his brains together trying to find out what it was.

The morning and afternoon newspapers naturally got it, the afternoon paper first. Both were members of wire news associations, so the story went out nationally.

By morning, there were reports of similar seizures from Tacoma, Kansas City, Louisville, Buffalo and Noank, Connecticut. The thing, anyone could see, was on a national scale.

A DOCTOR in Louisville, a Doctor Thomas Ivan Smith, was generally conceded to be the first to identify the malady. Doctor Smith had until lately been in the U.S. Army, assigned to Africa, where he had been injured in an accident in a jeep and honorably discharged. He had resumed his practice in Louisville.

It developed that Doctor Smith had done some research in Africa.

He named the fever.

"It's called *skoorsteen* fever," he explained. "That isn't the Latin name, and I don't know whether it has a Latin name. *Skoorsteen* is all I ever heard it called, which is an Afrikaans word meaning chimney. The name, incidentally, is very appropriate, because you get it and you go up the flue in a hurry unless something is done.

"Twenty years or so ago, they had epidemics of the stuff in equatorial Africa. But they discovered a very certain cure for it, and the epidemics were quickly stamped out."

Doctor Smith was giving his information to a group of local doctors, and a number of newspapermen had been called in.

Doctor Smith named the drug.

"It's more effective against this *skoorsteen* fever than quinine is against malaria," he said.

He turned to the newspapermen. "You fellows can do a great public service by putting wire stories out nationally over the press associations giving the identification of the fever, and the treatment."

"Then you think, Doctor, that this thing is not going to be so serious?" asked one of the newsmen.

"It will be cleared up in two days. Just treat with the drug I have mentioned."

“Then it's not serious?”

“No. Not with the treatment.”

HE was wrong.

He was correct about his identification of the fever. This was quickly confirmed.

But there was none of the drug available. None of the big drug houses had a drop of it in stock.

The source of the drug was not Africa. It was Malaya, and the north shore of Sumatra. There was no other source. It was worse than rubber.

The drug was a plant distillation product, and the plants simply did not grow anywhere but in the lower Malay peninsula and a little of Sumatra. It was impossible to obtain it on short notice from anywhere else.

The Japanese controlled these sections.

Overtures were immediately made, through Swiss humanitarian agencies, to the Japanese, in hopes of obtaining a supply of the drug.

The Japanese gave exactly the answer everybody expected. Nothing doing, except that the refusal was worded more villainously.

The government investigation agencies entered the picture, the F.B.I. among others, as well as the military intelligence services.

What they were interested in was why none of the drug for treatment was available. It looked a little suspicious.

It became as queer as all get-out when it immediately came to light that there had been a fairly considerable supply of the drug on the market until recently. Because the drug was something that was hardly ever called for, it had been selling at quite a low price.

Someone, or rather some organization, had bought up all the drug and removed it from the market. They went to work on that.

The result was a grim-faced gathering in a Washington office.

Everywhere they were running into evidence that the drug had been bought up and removed from the market by Doc Savage and the five men who were associated with him.

Chapter XIII

FOR hours now Monk and Ham had been more or less deviled in an effort to make them tell how they had escaped from the four—Sid, Syl and company—who had seized them at Grand Central Station. They had been kicked and slapped around a little, but mostly they had been deviled with words. The man Moxie unnerved them more than anybody else.

Moxie had mixed his concrete. Now he was complaining that it was going to be wasted if the stuff wasn't used soon.

Elma Champion and Daniel W. Lochaber were in the same room, on the floor, tied hand and foot. They had said, in alarmed voices, that something awful was beginning to happen. A big, fiendish plan, they called it. They didn't know what this big, fiendish plan was, they had to admit. Both had been slapped for talking.

For some time there had been sullen silence in the grimy room. The afternoon sun, slanting in through cracks between the planks which covered the window, formed slabs of light that looked as if they had been cut from an ice cake. Insects whirled around in the light in silly fashion, and whenever one of the men moved, clouds of dust appeared in the light.

One of the men had been tearing a cigarette slowly apart in his fingers.

Suddenly he jammed the tobacco in one of Monk's eyes. Monk yelled in pain, as loudly as he could yell around the gag.

"What became of Syl and Sid and the other two?" the man asked.

What Monk said wasn't very intelligible around the gag. It was his opinion of the man, so it was probably better no one could understand him.

"Let's pop their cork and get it over with," Moxie suggested. Moxie was the bloodthirstiest. He was getting impatient.

"Then how we going to find out what happened to Syl and the three with him?"

"They may be all right."

"They may not, either. Savage may have them, and may be trying to pump what they know out of them."

"Savage is dead."

"I don't think so. The newspapers and the radio would have had it by now. There hasn't been a word."

Moxie looked alarmed. "Say, you might be right."

"We'll keep these two birds alive and make them tell about Syl and the others. If they've caught Syl, we can make a deal, Monk and Ham here for Syl and the others."

Moxie spat. "I hate to say it, but I wouldn't trade 'em for Syl and twenty like him."

"Anyway, we'll work on these two guys some more."

The telephone began ringing.

DOC SAVAGE was doing the ringing. He was on the ground floor of the old building, where he had tapped the telephone wire. He rang by cranking the handset with which he had cut in on the wire.

For hours, since Monk and Ham had been caught, Doc had skulked around the building. Nothing had developed from his hope of overhearing something that would crack the mystery. No information had been spilled.

He had followed Monk and Ham to the building. When Ham had said, at headquarters, that he was going home to change clothes and postpone a couple of business deals, Doc had not been deceived.

Ham had been going to Wyoming when the excitement broke at Grand Central, so he would already have postponed his business deals. Ready for the Wyoming trip, he wouldn't have left anything hanging fire. Not something that needed postponing now.

So Doc had followed Monk and Ham out here. He hadn't been in the building in time to prevent the two being caught. Later, sure they were not going to be killed at once, Doc had taken a course of watchful waiting. But nothing had turned up.

So he had made a quick trip to the nearest telephone company office and borrowed a lineman's set.

He was going to try a trick.

He rang carefully, imitating the interval-ringing of the automatic ringer used in connection with the dial system.

"Yeah?" It was Moxie answering.

"Moxie, listen," Doc said. "You better get out of there, and come on up here."

Moxie was puzzled by the nondescript, muffled voice Doc was using. "Who's this?"

"You want names used over the phone, you fool?" Doc countered.

"Oh." Apparently Moxie decided in his own mind who was talking. "Oh, you—uh—want us to come up there."

"Yes."

Moxie became important. "Listen, we got two of Savage's boys. That lawyer and the homely one. We got 'em right here."

Doc called Moxie several violent names. "Why don't you get a loudspeaker and go down Broadway spilling names?"

"Damn, I didn't think," Moxie admitted. "What you want us to do with them?"

"Have you," Doc countered, "still got the other two?"

"Oh, the girl and—oh, yeah. The other two. Sure. They're here."

"Turn them loose."

"Huh?"

"Turn them all loose."

"You mean just the girl and—"

"No, no, all of them. Turn them all loose. Do it right now. Then get up here."

Moxie was astonished.

Doc didn't have too much hope of persuading Moxie and the others to free all the prisoners.

"Turn them all loose right now," he said. "That's important. Don't ask a lot of questions, because you'll understand when you get up here."

Moxie thought that over. The responsibility was evidently too much for his shoulders.

“Wait a minute, I’ll put Bob on the wire,” he said. Doc heard him call to Bob, and say the head cheese himself was on the wire, ordering them to turn the prisoners loose.

BOB was the man who had spent most of the day slapping Monk Mayfair around. He had a voice that was full of gravel.

Bob had emphatic ideas about turning the prisoners loose and he got them off his chest immediately. “Look, this Monk and Ham have seen us. They know us. That means if we are caught, they can identify us in a minute.”

“Turn them loose,” Doc said. “You’ll understand later why.”

Bob stuck to his guns. “Nothing doing.”

There was a minute or two of argument. Doc became violent, persuasive, reassuring, by turns. He did a selling job.

“Okay,” Bob said finally. “I don’t like the idea, but what you say goes.”

“Good.”

“Say, do you want us to drive direct—”

“No,” Doc said. “No, not directly. Drive to Central Park, and park on the Central Park West side in front of the Museum of Natural History. Park on the east side of the street, so that your car will be facing north. Wait there until you see a blue panel-body truck.

“This blue truck will pass you, and park ahead of you near the corner. If there is no room for parking, the panel job will pull over near the cars that are already parked and stop. Then you blow your horn twice, wait a moment, and blow it three times. Then pull out and go where you’re supposed to go. The blue panel-body truck will follow you all the way, and that will be okay.”

“How long we gotta wait on that truck?”

“It shouldn’t be more than an hour.”

“Okay,” Bob said gloomily. “I hope you know what you’re doin’.”

“That’s all. So long.”

“So long,” Bob said.

Doc Savage hastily disconnected the hand-set. He cut the telephone wire. Then he eased toward the front of the old building, so filled with excitement that he had to use hard effort to control it. Elation, leaping through him, carried waves of pleasure.

This was too good.

If they had been tricked into releasing Monk, Ham, Elma Champion and Daniel W. Lochaber, that would solve the most immediate problem.

Doc had described a blue panel truck which he owned. He would, when he made the rendezvous on Central Park, have it full of State Policemen. The back of the panel truck would make an excellent hiding-place for them. One of the cops in civilian clothes could drive the truck, on the chance that they might recognize Doc.

Once they were led to the gang's main hideout, the stage would be set for a quick cleanup and solution of the whole thing.

It was too good, all right.

It didn't work.

THE first sign of a monkey wrench in the works was a scream from Elma Champion. The shriek was quite wordless and full of terror.

Then Daniel W. Lochaber began bellowing. "Run, Miss Champion!" he squalled. And, "I'll help—blast you!—take that! And that!" Blows, scufflings, cursings.

Doc Savage, under the impression that Lochaber had made a break for liberty, and wondering why they weren't letting him go—headed for the fight.

Or maybe Lochaber, the moment they freed him, had started out to beat up on the gang for what they had already done to him.

It was neither. Lochaber and Elma Champion burst through a heavy old door. Four or five gunshots crashed out, and at least two of the bullets came through the door after Lochaber and the girl.

Lochaber was shoving frantically on the door to get it shut when he saw Doc. Seeing Doc didn't seem to surprise him at all.

"Help me!" Lochaber yelled. "They were turning us loose. Then they changed their minds."

In the other room, somebody barked, "My God, there's somebody in there with him!"

"You bet there is!" Lochaber howled at them. "Doc Savage is in here!"

"You are a great help," Doc told Lochaber.

He could hear the men dashing out of the other room. He began wrenching at the door Lochaber had just fastened.

"What are you going to do?" Lochaber demanded.

"Get this door open and follow them!"

It seemed that the men in the other room had locked the door on that side. Doc remembered noticing, as the door was closing, that it had a fastener on both sides. He hit the panel repeatedly with his shoulder, but it wouldn't give.

Lochaber said, "They were turning us loose, and the phone rang and—"

"When was that?"

“Just a second ago.”

“We will try another way to get at them,” Doc said.

He led the way back, down a flight of rotting stairs, through halls. He could hear the enemy moving fast, but it was hard to tell what they were doing.

Lochaber, bouncing behind, complained, “First they got a phone call and orders to turn us loose, then they started to free us, then—”

He flattened out on the floor in alarm as a bullet came in through a window and knocked splinters and glass over them.

“They are outside,” Doc said.

More shots banged out. They were shooting at the windows indiscriminately, which indicated they did not know exactly where Doc was.

They were crossing the yard behind the building, Doc saw by looking through a crack in the window planking.

Monk and Ham were with the men, both bound hand and foot and being dragged.

The men hauled Monk and Ham into a shed, which they unlocked. When the shed doors swung open, Doc saw a car inside. The men piled into the car, slinging their prisoners inside.

The car left in a hurry.

Doc said, “The taxi downstairs. Come on!”

THEY found the cab standing beside the body of the murdered driver. The body was still there; Bob and Moxie and the others had been waiting until darkness came to dump it into the canal.

“Why didn't they take this cab?” Lochaber blurted. “It would've been quicker.”

“I pulled the ignition wire apart,” Doc explained.

He had separated the wire, the main wire which led into the center of the coil, at the point where it was intersected by a radio suppressor. It was a simple matter to stick the wire back into the suppressor again. Doc did so.

They rolled out of the old building in the cab, and took up a belated pursuit of the other car. The latter was nowhere in sight.

“When did you fix the wire on this cab?” Lochaber demanded.

“Earlier in the day.”

“You mean you've been around all day?”

“Most of it,” Doc admitted. He sent the cab to the curb, shut off the motor and flung open the door. “Here is my own car,” he said. “We will use it. The machine is faster.”

They climbed into the car—it was the deceitful old heap which looked as if it would fall to pieces

momentarily, but which had special motor, armor and an array of gadgets—and Doc got that one going.

“Have you lost them?” Lochaber demanded. “What are you going to do?”

“Check with the police.”

Lochaber nodded eagerly. “All right, let's find a police station and report a description of the men and their car.”

Doc pointed out that there was a radio transmitter and receiver in the car, a built-in outfit which could be shifted to police frequency. Using that would be quicker, more likely to get results, because their broadcast would be heard by the prowl cars at the same time it was tuned in to headquarters.

He switched on transmitter and receiver. The apparatus warmed up, and he adjusted the wave length of the receiver. Routine police calls began coming out of the set.

“—believed to be in New York City at the present time,” the police broadcaster said. “Arrest on sight, and use great caution. The man has great ability, and a possible explanation may be that he has gone insane, in which case he would be much more dangerous.”

Lochaber said, “That doesn't sound like a regular police broadcast. I mean—they usually don't give out so much information. Just short stuff, like go to a certain street corner, man beating his wife—”

The police radiocaster continued:

“Repeating instructions to arrest Doc Savage on sight. The charge is murder, and the man may be dangerously insane. Doc Savage, sometimes known as the Man of Bronze, height about six-four, weight around two-ten or—twenty, straight bronze hair, regular features. Particular feature of face is strange flake-gold eyes. Wanted for murder—”

“Good God!” Lochaber muttered

“What's the matter with them?” Elma Champion gasped. “Has the world gone crazy?”

“Sh-h-h,” Doc said. “Listen to the rest of it.”

THE police radio went through the rest of Doc's description and instructions for his apprehension.

Then came something that dumfounded the bronze man:

“All cars, urgent notice! Pass along the following warning to civilians and others. A breakfast food known as Goody-Prest Specials is contaminated with germs of the fever known as *skoorsteen*, now sweeping the country.”

Elma Champion jumped. “Goody-Prest! Why we use that on the ranch, and have for years. There's nothing wrong with it.”

Shock had made Doc's face flat-cheeked and almost lipless.

“I want a long-distance telephone, and quick,” he said.

Chapter XIV

HE made the phone call from the home of a friend, a fellow named Gaines, who had a home in Flushing. Gaines, a plump man who was a skilled neurologist, met Doc at the door, and his mouth became round and his eyes popped a little.

“Come on in,” he said. “And if I look funny, it's because I was just listening to the radio.”

“Mind if I use your telephone?”

“Go ahead,” Gaines said.

He stood back and watched Doc while the bronze man got long distance and asked for the Goody-Prest Company, and to speak to Charlie Gunn, the president, personally.

When the connection went through, the operator said Charlie Gunn was not available, would anyone else do? Doc named a vice president, Conreve, who was on the wire a moment later.

“Where is Charlie Gunn?” Doc asked.

“Oh, my God! You shouldn't have called here!” Conreve recognized Doc's voice. “The police and the F.B.I. and the army are all over the place—”

“Where is Charlie Gunn?” Doc demanded.

“He disappeared several days ago.”

“What day?”

Conreve named the day on which the man had died in their headquarters, muttering about breakfast food.

When Doc got that information, he made, grimly, a small sound which was his unconscious reaction sometimes to moments of intense mental stress. The sound was a low trilling, musical but without much tune.

What shocked him now was the realization that the dead man must be Charlie Gunn, president of the company which made Goody-Prest.

“Was Charlie Gunn agitated before he disappeared? Did he seem worried about something?” Doc asked.

“Yes, he did.”

“All right,” Doc said grimly. “What else has happened?”

“There's hell to pay!” Conreve said. “Somebody put those damned germs into Goody-Prest. The shipment went all over the country. They started this epidemic.”

Doc said, “Get busy and find out who did it. Get the best detective agencies—”

“We already know.”

“Who was it?”

“Do you remember a fellow, a young fellow named Spencer Wallen? He was pale and sort of nervous. Had charge of the packing room where Goody-Prest is packaged and labeled.”

"I do not recall him," Doc said. "As you know, my ownership of the company was of recent date. I have owned the controlling interest only about three months, and have not had a chance to meet most of the employees."

"Well, young Wallen did it. He had charge of dumping the germs. It was simple. He just brought them in a container of some kind, and dumped a bunch in the big drier vat. Strong air streams go through the drier vat, and these mixed the germs thoroughly with the breakfast food."

"How did you catch Wallen?"

"He blew his top. Couldn't stand the idea of all those people getting the fever and dying, I guess. Anyway, he rushed in here screaming about two hours ago, and said he had doctored the breakfast-food with the germs. And then he killed himself."

"He what?"

"Committed suicide. Young Wallen shot himself in remorse over what he had done."

Doc demanded, "Didn't he explain who hired him to do it?"

"He said somebody had hired him. He then said he wasn't going to tell who it was, and that was when he killed himself. He used a gun. His own."

"So the police think I had the germs put in?"

"They haven't said so. But well—"

"Do everything you can to stop anyone eating Goody-Prest until the contaminated shipments are recovered."

"We are. We are doing everything."

Now there was a commotion at the other end of the wire.

Conreave said wildly, "Mr. Savage, my faith in you moves me to warn you the police are tracing this call—"

That ended the conversation.

DOC'S friend, Gaines, had gone into the kitchen. He came out with some sandwiches in waxed paper. "In case you don't have time to stop and eat anything," he said. "What else can I do?"

Doc said, "The police will trace that call here."

"I was afraid of that."

"When the police get here, tell them the truth."

Gaines grinned. "Then who bails me out of jail for aiding and abetting?"

"If my next plan works, they will discharge you with a medal," Doc told him. "If it doesn't they will probably hang you."

"I'll look forward to it," Gaines said. "Anything else I can do?"

“No, thanks.” Doc shook hands with the neurologist gratefully. “Thanks very much for the favor.”

Gaines snorted, and followed them outside. They got in the car. Gaines leaned in to say, “You can return the favor by letting me study your nervous system. I'd like to find out why it is you don't get scared.”

“I'm scared stiff,” Doc confessed.

DOC SAVAGE put the car in motion, drove half a dozen blocks, then got out and changed the license plates. He carried a spare set as a part of the numerous and odd pieces of equipment in the machine.

“Can you trust that Gaines?” Daniel W. Lochaber demanded when they were rolling again.

“Completely. We studied neurology in Vienna together.”

Doc Savage suggested that Elma Champion drive. He would ride in the back seat, where he could duck down out of sight.

“All right,” Elma agreed. “But where will I drive?”

“Head out on the Island, taking by-roads.”

But it was not long before Doc changed the instructions. He had been working with the locker which contained various gadgets, which was built under the rear seat of the car. It was dark in the back of the machine.

“Turn around,” Doc said. “Take a chance on getting across the Triborough Bridge, then head generally north.”

None of them said much until they were across the Triborough Bridge safely.

Elma did not know the city. Doc gave her instructions from time to time. She was a good driver, and expressed amazement at the mechanical power in the old car. “I'll bet it'll do a hundred and twenty,” she said.

“Nearer a hundred and fifty,” Doc told her. “But keep below thirty-five.”

LATER Elma said, “Mr. Savage, was the dead man my Uncle Dub?”

Doc began talking. He spoke quietly, and outlined his theories of what had happened.

Apparently, he explained, someone had done this thing with two things in mind. Two objectives: first, revenge against Doc himself. Second, profit.

The thing had been geared for revenge when Goody-Prest, the breakfast food produced by the company which Doc owned, had been chosen as the vehicle to carry the germs to the unsuspecting public. When Doc had bought Goody-Prest a few months ago, a story about it had appeared in the financial sections of some of the newspapers. Also anyone who was curious could make a few inquiries and find out a number of concerns which Doc now owned. So it had been easy to learn that Doc owned Goody-Prest.

The second step had been to buy off an employee of the firm—Doc was still voicing surmise only, he reminded them—and young Wallen had been bought. The germs had thereupon been loaded into

Goody-Prest, which was distributed, laden with the germs, to innocent grocers all over the country.

The profit motive was not yet obvious, but the supply of the one drug that would cure the malady had been bought up. Cornered. Taken off the market. Every speck of it, and there was no more available, because Japan controlled the only source.

Of course, the drug could have been bought up to make the uproar against Doc more thunderous. Actually, that was one reason. The buyers, for instance, had pretended to be Doc's aids—Lochaber had turned on the car radio, and they got a news broadcast which told that Doc's men apparently had cornered the drug.

However the profit motive, Doc repeated, would crop up before it was over, if his guess was anywhere near right.

“But what about my Uncle Dub?” Elma asked anxiously.

Doc said frankly that he had no idea how her Uncle Dub had happened to get into the thing in the first place. But one thing sure, the man who had died in Doc's office wasn't Dub Champion. He was Charlie Gunn, president of Goody-Prest. Charlie Gunn must have found out about the germs, and rushed to warn Doc, and been killed before he was successful.

To allay Doc's suspicions long enough for the storm to break on his head, an elaborate mumbo-jumbo had been rigged to make him think the dead man was her Uncle Dub.

“You mean I was hoaxed, too?” Daniel W. Lochaber screamed. “You mean the insurance company I worked for when I went to Wyoming was a phony?”

“Could it have been?”

Daniel W. Lochaber thought a minute.

“Yes,” he admitted. “But I never thought—” He fell silent. When they passed under a street lamp, Doc could see Lochaber was sweating profusely.

They were on the Post Road going north when Daniel W. Lochaber wheeled around—he was riding in the front seat—and peered down into the foot space in the rear.

“What on earth are you doing?” he demanded.

“Using a radio direction-finder, a small one,” Doc confessed.

Lochaber gasped his surprise. “What on earth for?”

“Trailing that car that left carrying Monk and Ham.”

“But how can you do that?”

Doc said he had not been idle all day. He had done more than tap the telephone line into the old building where the taxi driver had been murdered.

He had tied a little fixed-signal transmitter under the car in the shed, among other things. The transmitter was designed for just what it was being used for now. The thing wasn't new. The Army and Navy were putting them in the rubber boats which fliers carried.

“You mean,” Lochaber yelled, “that you can find where they're taking Monk and Ham?”

“We can find their car—if they do not stumble on to the transmitter,” Doc assured him.

“Great grief! We may stumble on to the whole gang!”

“Afraid?”

“No, I—yes. Decidedly, yes, I’m scared!”

“Are you armed?”

“No. No, I haven’t anything.”

Doc handed him a gun which he dug out of the locker, “Here, take this one.” Then the bronze man added, “We will put Miss Champion out at the next small town.”

“Oh, no, you won’t,” she said. “I’m going to drive the car.”

Doc said quietly, “If you wish.”

Alarmed, Lochaber said, “But it’s insane to let her go along! She’ll get killed!”

“This car,” Doc assured him, “is the best bulletproofing job this side of a General Sherman tank. She can lock herself in, and be perfectly safe. And she might be of considerable help.”

“But I don’t like to subject her to such terror,” Lochaber grumbled.

Elma said, “Listen, my grandmother fought Indians who scalped people. And I always have heard I took after her side of the family.”

Chapter XV

THE sign on the lane said, “*Private Drive. Keep Out.*” The sign was in Old English lettering on a rustic arch, and dangling under the arch was a larger and more age-worn sign that said, “*Happiness House Sanitarium.*”

Mountains were all around, not the kind of rocky, pointed sort which people get to thinking mountains should be like after looking at pictures of Switzerland and the Rockies. These mountains were the Catskills, great gentle humps, fat fellows covered all over with green trees, looking like big, pleased green cats sleeping placidly.

Doc swung the loop aerial of the radio direction-finder—the aerial was built into the set, so you twirled the whole set, and there was a compass in the top for direction-reading of the signal—as they rushed past on the highway.

The signal had been getting louder. When you are very close to a transmitter, the received signal has a different quality; there are undertone sounds you can hear, much as you can hear a speaker breathing when you are close to him.

“Next crossroads to the right,” Doc said.

About three-quarters of a mile, and they could swing right.

“All right, they have stopped back there,” Doc said, manipulating the finder.

“Back at that Happiness House place?” Elma asked.

“Apparently.”

It became evident that there were crisscrossing roads in the vicinity which blocked off about a section, a square mile, of very rough woodland, somewhere inside which stood the Happiness House, whatever it was.

Doc indicated a spot where they could pull off the road into the woods.

“But there's a fence there,” Lochaber objected.

The fence was a tall one, woven wire, topped by two strands of barbed wire. Doc studied the spot, decided it looked as if they could drive some distance into the woods here, and cut the wires, using pliers from the car.

Where he cut the fence, bushes would hide the fact that the wire was down. Doc went back and straightened up the grass, replaced bushes, and kicked tire-marks full of dirt, more or less hiding their trail.

“Pick your way through the trees,” he told the girl.

She drove with the confidence of a person who had spent hours driving over roadless range country. She knew where the ground was solid, where the car could go and could not.

“Far enough,” Doc said.

He got out of the machine, then walked around it, closing the doors, and using a key in the locks. Each door had an individual lock.

Lochaber started to get out. The door wouldn't open. Excited, he wrenched at the lock.

“What the hell!” Lochaber gasped. “You're locking us in!”

“That,” Doc told him, “is so I'll be sure you stay in the car while I am gone, where you'll be safe.”

“But damn it—”

“The car is as safe as a tank, nearly, as I have mentioned,” Doc explained. “Moreover, you can drive away if you see any danger. Whereas, if you are outside walking around, you might get picked off by a sniper before you even knew danger was close.”

“Shucks, there's no danger here because they don't know we're here!”

“That fence,” Doc warned him, “might have carried an alarm circuit. A current not strong enough to shock you, but enough to ring a bell in a capacity alarm, or show when the wire was cut.”

“Did it?” Lochaber looked alarmed.

“You need special apparatus to detect a capacity-alarm circuit in a wire, and I did not have the apparatus,” Doc said.

Elma Champion spoke up. “We'll stay here.”

Doc nodded. He headed through the woods.

HE found the Happiness House sitting in about the center of the land section.

Fifty years ago somebody with too much money and a feudal lord fixation had built the place. They had copied some Rhine castle on a peak. This one was on an abrupt knoll, an ugly thing of yellow-mud-gray fieldstone. It had been intended to look ageless and ancient, no doubt, but it only succeeded in looking childish and debauched. The towers, one at each corner, were too large, and the windows not right. The whole design had not quite come off.

It was the kind of a place that should have had half the windows broken out. But none of them were, Doc decided, studying the place carefully. That meant it was being used.

Doc approached. He was careful now. He kept low, behind bushes, in ditches, and his own breathing was about the loudest noise he made.

Drawing nearer, he came upon concrete sidewalks, cracked and upheaved by winter freezings.

Concrete sidewalks were a sample. A place such as this should have had flagstone walks to be in character, or cobbles.

The shrubbery had been cared for after a fashion. It was not neatly trimmed, not exactly manicured. But it had received care over a period of years.

When he was very close to the house, he could hear at least two radios going.

One radio was on broadcast; the other was taking police calls.

Under an overhanging willow tree in the rear, Doc discovered the car in which Monk and Ham had been taken out of town. Deviled by anxiety, he searched the car as well as he could without venturing out of the bush from which he was watching. He did not discover any bloodstains, or signs of violence. But then there wouldn't be any, of course.

The house was his objective.

Happiness House Sanitarium. Doc was a doctor and surgeon, and his first thought was that he should know of such a place. But then he could have missed it, particularly if it was only a rest home presided over by some doctor without a great following. All over the nation, there were thousands of little hospitals and sanitariums, many of which he had never heard about.

If Monk and Ham were in there, he had to get them out. First was finding if they were in there.

He decided on a second-floor window, largely because he could see that the window was open, and the stone wall up to that height should not be hard to climb.

He crawled through the grass, weeds and bushes to the side of the house. He was right about the wall. The builders had gone out of their way to make it rugged, give it a fake-ancient look.

He found fingerholds and went up.

THE window admitted into a room in which a man lay on his back on a bed, smoking.

The shock—Doc did not see the man until he was well into the room—was paralyzing. The man was

looking at Doc. He raised up on an elbow to stare.

The man was old. His face was grooved with age. The pipe he smoked was a corncob, black, with a stink like a civet cat. He took the pipe out of his mouth, blinking.

“You're a new one,” the old man said.

The old man, Doc saw, had been ill. He was still very weak. There was no strength in any of his movements.

“I just came in,” Doc said, truthfully. “How are you feeling?”

The old man considered the question for a while. “You don't give a dern about me,” he said finally. “Who are you kidding?”

“What do you mean?”

The old man blinked several times. He puffed at his pipe absently. The veins of his hands were as obvious as blue yarn-strings.

“You!” He pointed the pipe at Doc. “You don't belong with that gang downstairs.”

“What gave you that idea?”

He didn't answer that. “Just got here, eh?” he mumbled. “Better turn around and get out. That's what you should do. They're bad hombres, them fellers, right from that Doctor Tamil Shiraz on down. Clear out, young feller. You don't belong here. I can tell from your face. They'll make you stick.” He tried to sit up on the bed, but couldn't make it, and complained, “There's somethin' fishy here. Somethin' damned wrong goin' on.”

“How long have you been here, dad?”

“You don't know, eh? Probably lots you don't know. Me, too. Four weeks, I figure it. Twenty-eight days.”

“Are you a patient at the Sanitarium?”

The old man snorted. “Came here as one. My own free will, too.”

“Aren't you getting better?”

“Hell, I think I'm cured—I'm afraid. Don't know as I wanted to be cured after all. Sort of pleasant, bein' crazy. You wouldn't think that, would you?”

“You were crazy?”

“Sure. Locoed. Been so for years. Crazy is a lot of fun. Did you know that, boy?”

Doc—he had a violent suspicion now—said, “They treated you by giving you a fever, eh?”

That invigorated the old man. He gave a heave, and barely managed to sit up. “Boy, what'd they do to me?” he demanded hoarsely. “Boy, why were they so interested at first? Then why'd they lose all interest in me when I started to get well? Why, eh?”

“Maybe,” Doc said, “they were using you for a guinea pig?”

“Eh?”

“They might have wanted to try out a new fever on you, and test a cure,” Doc said.

The old man nodded. The effort made him fall back on the bed.

“Boy, I don't know what you're talkin' about. But there's devils in this house. Devils and they're doin' the devil's work. I know it. I feel it.”

Doc asked, “Who got you out of the Plainview County Sanitarium?”

“Oh, you know about that, eh?”

“Who did it?”

“This Doctor Tamil Shiraz, the head devil in this place.”

Doc looked at the old man thoughtfully.

“So you are Dub Champion,” he said.

“Hell, what's queer about that? Been my name for sixty-five years.”

Doc said, “Stay here, Uncle Dub. And keep quiet.”

The old man looked at him levelly, sanely, speculatively, for quite a while.

“If you'd bring me a gun, I might help by shooting any who ran through here,” he said.

“Where are they now?”

“Front room, the big hall. The men, not the guns.”

“Did they bring in two prisoners awhile ago?”

“I think they're in the basement padded cell.”

“Thanks,” Doc said.

The old man just grinned. “They keep their guns in the hall closet.”

A STAIRWAY, a huge winding staircase of which the ego-ridden builder of the place must have been inordinately proud, wound down to the front hall. The hall was high, narrow, as inviting as a tomb.

No one could mistake the closet door. Doc went down the stairs fast, reached the closet door. Locked. He tried it, wrenching. Locked. No key.

He tore a wedge of cloth out of his shirt, muffling the sound, chewed it hastily into a ball, and thrust it into the lock keyhole. He pressed it there with a fingernail, jamming it so that nothing less than a pick and a little time would get it out.

The basement. Monk and Ham, Old Dub Champion had said, were in the basement. A padded cell down there.

Doc eyed various doors, frowning. The thunder of the radios beat against his ears. A police broadcaster was directing a search on Long Island, where it had been discovered that Doc had visited the home of a neurologist named Gaines.

Gaines, bless his soul, had told the officers that Doc was going out toward Montauk, on the tip of Long Island. Knowing Gaines' scruples against lying, particularly to the police, Doc appreciated that.

The basement. The basement—Doc picked a door. Steps down, sure enough. He descended quietly, hoping the treads wouldn't howl.

He didn't find what he expected. What he did find was a long room, neat as neat, white, smelling of paint and ozone and chemicals.

Here half a dozen men worked quietly. They were mixing some kind of stuff in long troughs, and packaging it.

"How much more of the blasted stuff is there, Syl?" someone asked sourly.

"About five minutes' more work."

"Oh, rats."

"Goddam it, stop grumbling!" Syl yelled. "Do you think I wanted to work down here? All day, I been sweating my insides out over them prisoners, and getting the hell scared out of me. You think I like working down here?"

"Okay, okay, I just asked—"

"Beef, beef, bellyache!" Syl shouted. "This drug has got to all be in solution, so nobody can prove it's the same drug that was bought up all over the country. We've got to be in the clear."

"What're you yelling at me for? I just asked—"

"Oh, shut up," someone else said.

"I just asked—"

"All right, all right," Syl said more calmly. "I'm on edge. You're on edge. Let it go at that. We'll be through in a few minutes. Forget it."

Mollified, the grumbler said, "Sure, Syl, sure. But the idea that we might get caught selling the cure—the idea the cops might trace the drug that was taken off the market to us—it gives me jeeps."

"Nobody'll catch us."

"Maybe not."

"Sure they won't." Syl gestured at the stuff they were putting in containers. "The head guy, Shiraz, has it down pat that he has a way of making the synthetic drug. He'll use the original drug, but nobody can prove it's the drug we bought up. He says it's synthetic. If anybody wants proof, he's got proof. Fake, but it'll get by."

"There oughta be a fortune in peddling the cure."

"There will be."

Doc Savage's face felt hard, cold, as he put a hand against it in an instinctive gesture of horror.

Here was the money part of the motive. Two reasons for this monstrous thing, he'd surmised. First, hate. Second, money.

They were going to sell a cure they claimed was synthetic, but in reality using the drug they'd bought off the market.

An automobile horn began hooting outdoors.

"Damn! Who's that?" Syl exploded.

Every man in the basement workroom dropped what he was doing. They made a rush for the stairs. Toward Doc.

Doc wheeled, retreated silently up the stairs. But there were men in the hall, too, when he stepped out into it. Barring a miracle, he was trapped.

Chapter XVI

DOC took a long chance. Maybe it wasn't a chance, because there was nothing else he could have done.

He opened the cellar door, and stepped behind the door after it was open. It was, considering that the house was roaring with excitement, apparently no hiding place at all.

The men streamed out of the basement without noticing him.

The men in the hall were charging for the front door.

Some of them fought to get the closet door open. They couldn't get the key in.

The car horn hooted again—violently, and someone yelled, "Wait! Wait! It's all right."

They switched on a front-door floodlight. Doc, looking through the door, between the moving figures, saw that it was his own car, the machine he had left in the woods with Lochaber and Elma Champion locked inside.

The girl was driving.

She stopped in front of the door.

She made gestures to the men, indicating they were to get something and smash into the car, releasing her.

Doc stepped from behind the door. He went down into the basement.

Beyond the white room where they had been packing the drug were two doors. Going toward them, Doc said, "Monk! Ham!"

"Here!" It was Monk's voice, behind the right-hand door.

The fastening was a heavy hasp latch, no padlock. Doc threw it back.

Monk came out saying, "Ham's still tied. I got loose. Is it all over?"

“It hasn't started.” Doc ran for a pair of heavy shears on the packing table.

He cut Ham loose.

Monk was heading for the stairs.

“Wait, Monk!” Doc warned. “We'll have to do this together.”

“The house is full of them.” Monk looked doubtful about the outcome of a fight, the first time Doc had ever seen him show such an emotion. “Can we take them?”

“We have to,” Doc said.

“We might get away, and call police—”

Doc indicated the drug in solution jars. “We can't do that. They would destroy the drug. Burn down the place probably, to get rid of the evidence. Because the fact that we have the drug, and can testify it is the drug which was cornered off the market, would hang them all.”

Ham said, “That's right.”

Monk didn't get it at once. “But I don't see—”

“The victims of the epidemic,” Doc told him.

“Oh!” Monk lost color. All over the country, people would die if this stuff was destroyed.

He stared at the containers of drug which had been put in solution. Much of it was in glass five-gallon jugs. There were dozens of them. Every bit of the drug, every drop of it, that would cure the tropical fever, was here.

There were a few empty jugs, one-gallons and fives.

Doc said, “Take the ones. Fill them with water, then dump in some dust, to make the water look muddy.”

THEY filled six jugs, two apiece, with water. There was a faucet. The dust was not as easy. Monk finally dug into a coal bin.

“Not coal dust!” Doc warned. “The color we want is brown, not black.”

“Brown?”

“A color that would blend with the Goody-Prest breakfast food.”

They solved the dust problem by forcing open a basement window and hauling-in handfuls of yard dirt. It did not take much.

Doc said, “Make them think this stuff is germ-colony. Make them think it was the stuff that was poured into Goody-Prest.”

“Then throw it at them, eh?” Monk asked.

“Yes.”

“Boy, it might work. It'll worry the dickens out of them, anyway.”

They went up the basement stairs, carrying the jugs, two apiece. They were not bothered in the hall.

“They're all outdoors, trying to open the car,” Ham muttered.

The men at the car hadn't been able to find a sledge. They were using rocks. Rocks of all sizes, beating at the car windows which looked so innocent. So far the bulletproof and shatter-proof glass was only showing webs of cracks. It would take heavy sledge work to smash that glass, which was an inch thick and mostly special plastic.

Monk said, “Let me make the announcement.”

He went out the front door, lifted both jugs for throwing, and used his best foghorn volume.

“You see these jugfuls of germs?” he yelled at the crowd around the car.

He got their attention. All of it, and instantly. He got the kind of a silence that comes, for a second or two, after automobile crashes, kisses, lightning striking, and other great events.

“You put germs in Goody-Prest!” Monk roared. “Now see how you like them yourself.”

The six jugs sailed through the air. The car was thirty feet away; they couldn't miss. The jugs broke and threw dirty yellow sprays over almost everyone.

Doc said, “Back inside. Close the door. Smash in that closet.”

They did that.

The closet door, of oak, didn't collapse immediately. “All together, hit it!” Doc urged. Bullets were coming in through the door they had slammed, the front door. But not many. The closet door went down finally, after what seemed ages. Probably it was a second and a half.

Monk fished inside. His bellow was immediate and gleeful. “Look, brothers, a sprinkler!”

He had a hand machine gun, the drum heavy with cartridges.

He threw open the front door.

He yelled, “Surrender, and we'll cure you guys of the fever you're gonna get! Fight us, and we'll let you die!”

He stood there, to the side of the door, waiting. The thick stone wall of the house protected him. Enough time seemed to pass for a lot to happen, and nothing did.

And finally a frightened voice hailed them from outside, giving up. They were all giving up.

“Why, dang their souls!” Monk complained. “I oughta shoot 'em all for cowardice, or something.”

THERE was no catch to it. Doc could hardly believe it until they had searched all of the men, and counted heads, and found that none were missing. Monk and Ham stood around menacingly with the guns they had taken from the hall closet.

Then Monk shouted, “The car! What's going on in it?”

Whatever was occurring in the machine was violent. Doc ran to it, digging out the key which would unlock the doors.

Daniel W. Lochaber, he saw, was clubbing Elma Champion over the head and shoulders with his gun. The girl was dazed, squirming, trying to fight off the attack.

Doc got the door unlocked and open. "Stop that!" he shouted, and dragged Lochaber out.

"That devil!" Lochaber pointed at the girl and screamed. "That she-devil!"

The girl was motionless on the car seat.

"That she-devil!" Lochaber shrieked. "You know what she did? Grabbed my gun and held me up and drove here and tried to surrender me to them!"

Doc said, "That's enough, Shiraz."

"She-devil!" Lochaber screeched. "Held me up—" He pointed the gun at the girl. The same gun Doc had handed him earlier in the car.

"You can't shut her up, Shiraz."

"Eh? Shiraz?" Lochaber turned slowly. His face was suddenly queer. "What do you mean?"

"You are Doctor Shiraz."

"Me? Are you crazy? I—"

Doc said, "Just last month, we were in Egypt and Arabia. We had quite a lot of trouble there, with a very clever devil who was trying to take over the governments of several countries as their governments collapsed in defeat. We finally got the fellow. His name was Shiraz."

Lochaber's teeth began to show.

"Any kin of yours?" Doc asked.

Lochaber spoke, barely whispering.

"My brother," he said. He pointed his gun at Doc Savage's chest and pulled the trigger until the cylinder had gone clear around. The loudest noise he got was the smacking of the hammer. Not a bullet came out.

The man sounded strange when he said in the same whisper, "You gave me an empty gun!"

"Do you think I would have left you in the car with Miss Champion with a loaded gun?" Doc asked. "Or allowed you behind my back for a minute with a loaded gun, for that matter?"

"Oh, you already knew?" He still whispered.

Doc said, "Back at the warehouse, where you and the others were prisoners all day—you said the telephone rang and warned the men. The telephone couldn't have rung. I had cut the wire. No call could have come in, as you said. Which made it plain you warned them yourself, and said the phone rang to cover up."

Monk came over. He prodded Lochaber—or Shiraz alias Lochaber—toward the other prisoners. "Might as well join the other disappointed ones," Monk said.

Doc moved Elma Champion in the car. She was conscious.

She said, fear and reaction shaking in her voice, "He kept bragging, all the time he was forcing me to drive here, how clever he was to make you think he was just a fool private detective. He said that as long as he was with you, he would know exactly what you were doing, and trap you easily."

Then the girl was staring, wide-eyed, unbelieving, at the house.

"Uncle Dub!" she breathed.

The old man came outdoors. He could barely walk, but he had found two canes somewhere, and he propped himself with those.

He pointed at the prisoners. "What's the matter with them? Why didn't they fight? Why wasn't there a regular war?"

"Oh, we threw some muddy water on them," Monk said.

Uncle Dub thought that over for a while. He didn't get it.

"Here they been tellin' me I was crazy all my life," he complained. "Somebody's been barking in the wrong hole, if you ask me."

THE END