THE WEE ONES

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

Scanned and Proofed
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Chapter I

JOHNNY began barking a few minutes after ten o'clock. It had gotten dark at eight.

Johnny was John Fain's Great Dane, and under normal conditions the only thing to do when he started an uproar was to look into the matter and then scratch his chest for him the way he liked, or fan his stern with a folded newspaper, depending on what he had on his mind.

Tonight it was different. The dog's barking started John Fain to trembling violently. Fain was already pale, and almost ill with incredulous disbelief, so stricken in fact that he would not have been surprised at himself for fainting.

But the trembling took him by surprise.

He eyed his hands foolishly, like a man who had discovered a hole in his new fifty-cent socks. John Fain was a hard-muscled man of forty who had never before seen his hands shake of their own accord. His physical fitness was one of his prides. He took setting-up exercises daily, even had a gymnasium in the basement of his home, although his wife, Grace, had laughed at him for that. Grace didn't believe in exercise for exercise's sake, because her metallic nerves obviously didn't need it.

Then there was the bluish haze overhead.

This haze, a slightly darker azure hue than tobacco smoke, made a layer about two feet thick against the ceiling. It was semi-transparent; at least it was possible to discern the rough texture of the plaster ceiling. It smelled of ozone. Ozone. The stuff you smell after a lightning bolt hits close.

And there was the female clothing on the floor.

This clothing, a young woman's garments, lay in a rather shapeless pile and consisted of one complete outfit for one woman. A young woman. Slippers, hose, panties, garter belt, brassiere, and a beige dress in a sculptured model. All just piled there. But not arranged as if they had been casually dropped there. Not quite.

The scarf, John Fain thought . . .

The scarf was missing.

At the south end of the room, the window was down from the top, and the haze was gradually drifting outdoors. The stuff was clearing out of the laboratory. The apparatus was making noise. The generators, two of them, were whining, and a condenser was leaking now and then with a popping sound, and tubes were humming.

Fain shook his head violently. “Nuts,” he said.

It didn't do much good. He didn't fool himself.

THE dog was still barking. He sounded excited, but puzzled, too.

Fain discovered the hole in the window screen. Slashing hadn't made the hole in the screen. Actually, there was not a hole in the screen; the screen wire had been loosened by prying away the moulding, or forcing it outward by a blow, then bending up the loosened corner of the screen wire. The opening thus made was about large enough to pass a man's two fists held close together.

Fain put his hands in his coat pockets. He could feel them shaking there, actually knocking against his ribs.

“Lys!” he called.

The name burst out of his throat, jumped past the constriction there, loud enough to be a shout. But it got no answer.

“Miss Smith!” he tried again.

He did better, a little, that time, but it drew no response. Fain shut down the apparatus, threw switches and pulled plugs. He did this more from habit than from conscious thought, because he had spent most of his life working in a laboratory, It was the same sort of a gesture a motorist makes in switching off his engine after he has had an accident.

“What the hell kind of a gag is this?” he demanded loudly.

The silence, for that was all there was now, made the nap of his neck creep.

Gag. Sure, a gag. He began telling himself that was what it was, because he wanted to believe that was it. A gag. Couldn't be anything else.

He went over to look at the hole in the window screen. He had to make himself go, and he didn't like that. He examined the window sill, and there was a little dust there, he saw. The laboratory didn't get a cleaning as often as it should, because he didn't like to have his tools and books disturbed.

After he had looked at the dust film a while, he knew his face must be quite white, or maybe it was blue, as if it were cyanosed. It felt that way.

He began repeating to himself that it was a gag, and he was in earnest now, for he really needed to think that. *Gag, gag, gag. It's gotta be a gag. Hell, am I going nuts?*

The footprint on the sill was clearly defined in the dust, slender and feminine. The trouble with it was that it was about two inches long.

There was a peach tree outside, one branch of which had grown close to the window sill.

He went to the door, stepped out into the night.

HIS home was in the country, on a hill. Below and about half a mile away he could see the plant. Electrar Corporation. His plant. Not large as some industrial plants go these days, but it was all paid for and it was his and it was making good money now and had a sure future. Worth about five millions, probably.

He had built his home on the hill because he liked to look at the plant whenever he wished. Not bad for a man of forty, Fain liked to think. Worth the unrelenting work and attention to business which the plant had cost him. The plant was his life. That, and his research work. But of course they were the same thing, since the results of his research had built the plant.

Beyond was the town, Hammond City. Not quite a city, for the population, last census, had been 14,575, although it was slightly larger now. The streetlights made even patterns; lighted windows were plentiful, and the business district was a distinct glow. An average, prosperous, midwestern town.

John Fain drew in a deep breath.

“Johnny!” he shouted. “Get him! Johnny, get him, boy!”

This was harmless. Johnny was a city-apartment-raised dog; there wasn't a bite in a carload of him. He was really Mrs. Fain's dog; she'd had him before she and Fain were married, two years ago.

But Johnny had one hair-lifting vice. He liked to dash right up to people, barking like hell. When he did this he was like a lion twenty feet tall, strangers said. John Fain felt the same way, because the dog had surprised him with that trick a time or two. Johnny weighed about a hundred and forty pounds; he was the size of a calf. He would frighten the pants off any practical jokers hanging around tonight.

“Take him, Johnny!” Fain yelled. “Get him!”

But the big dog behaved strangely, bouncing around the yard, saying, “Woof! Woof!”

“Damn!” said John Fain, although he didn't feel like saying damn. He felt more like having a good shake, from head to foot.

He said, “Johnny! Lie down!”

The dog now came to the porch, as big as thunder, and as noisy.

“Lie down, Johnny. Down.”

The dog did not lie down, which was strange, because lying down was probably the thing he did most enthusiastically, next to bolting his dinner.

The telephone began ringing. It rang two longs, which was the laboratory ring.

John Fain actually ran back into the lab, to the telephone. He was that glad to get hold of something tangible, something believable.

The fluorescent lights in the laboratory took a moment to come on after he threw the switch, and he had the telephone in his hands before the bluish light spilled into the room.

“John? Golly, I hope I didn't bother you,” a voice said.

“Gard!” Fain exclaimed.

“That's right. Look, John, I hope I didn't interrupt you in the middle of anything.”

Gard's in trouble, Fain thought. Gard McKim was never conscientious about other people, particularly about such small things as bothering someone at work, unless he was in something sticky and wanted you to put a jack under him.

“What is it, Gard?” Fain asked.

“Look, John, my car is out of gasoline and Ikey, darn him, won't give me a drop.”

Outdoors the dog, Johnny, suddenly barked. He barked loudly for a moment, stopped, whined.

Fain said, “Gard, where are you?”

“At Ikey's filling station.”

“Oh.”

“What the hell?” Gard said. “You sound funny, John.”

Fain thought: Shall I tell Gard about this? Gard McKim had come in as manager of the plant about a year and a half ago. Fain hadn't liked him at first. Gard McKim was all business, and cold-blooded business, too. After he got hold of Electrar Corporation as general manager, the plant began to grow like the devil. He was directly the opposite of John Fain. Fain was a dreamer, a creator. McKim was aggressive, a go-getter. Now, a year and a half later, John Fain felt that McKim was exactly what the plant needed. He didn't particularly like McKim even yet, any more than he would have developed a fondness for a shark, but he considered the man invaluable.

He decided he wouldn't tell Gard McKim what had happened.

He asked, “Gard, whose car have you got?”

“Yours.”

“Okay. In the baggage compartment, behind the spare tire, there is a five-gallon can of gasoline.”

“Oh, thanks.” Gard McKim was silent a moment. “John, I found that gas can last night and emptied it. And I've no B coupons and Ikey won't give me any gas without coupons.”

John Fain said, “I know, Gard. But I filled the can this afternoon again.”

Gard McKim swore with pleasure.

“John, you're sure God's gift to improvident lugs like me,” he said.

He hung up.

John Fain hung up himself. He put a hand to his forehead and found wetness under it. There was wetness on his cheeks, on the backs of his hands. He was in a nervous perspiration from head to foot.

“Miss Smith!” he called. “Miss Lys Smith!” There was no answer.

Sick with terror now, he went to the house.

HIS wife was on the terrace with another woman, long gin drinks before them. The way to the garage led past the terrace, and John Fain stopped for a moment, said, “I'm going to drive downtown a moment, dear.”

He saw then that the other woman was Faye Linsky, and at another time, when his mind was not in such a grisly turmoil, he probably would have been surprised. He barely knew Faye Linsky. The girl was in some department or other at the plant and he had met her only once or twice. She seemed a quiet, gentle sort. Not exactly Mrs. Fain's type.

“Good evening, Miss Linsky,” he said.

She said, “Hello, Mr. Fain.” She could have been a little tight. Maybe not. It might have been excitement, restrained, and perhaps it was the last thought which motivated his next question.

“Have you seen Lys Smith around?” he asked.

Faye Linsky looked puzzled.

Grace Fain explained, “Lys Smith is John's laboratory assistant.” She turned to Fain. “No, I haven't seen Lys recently, darling. Not for an hour or two, when she came to work.”

Faye Linsky asked, “Why?”

The question shocked him; he didn't know why she should ask it. Or maybe his wonder was just the product of his upset condition.

“If you see her, tell her to wait in the laboratory until I get back,” he said, not answering the Linsky girl's question directly.

“Of course, darling,” Mrs. Fain said.

He went to get his car.

The garage was on the west side of the house, and it was an ample sort of a place with room for a station wagon and three other cars, and electrically opened doors and a little workshop in the back where the chauffeur could keep things in order. Of course there wasn't any chauffeur now because of the war. There wasn't a station wagon, nor three cars either. There was only one car; Fain had two really, but Gard McKim was driving the second.

He was behind the wheel when he heard Mrs. Fain scream.

The shriek did a great deal to his already strumming nerves. It nearly pulled the cork out for him; for a moment he thought he was going to have one of those things the doctors called a nervous collapse. Then he was out of the car and running.

His wife's scream had been terrible, and its echoes, glancing back from the valley to the east of the house, had the same guttering quality of horror.

“Grace!” he shouted. “What happened?”

His wife was standing with an arm upraised, her hand clutching the cut-glass bowl which had contained ice cubes for their drinks. She was all ready to throw the bowl. She was peering into dark corners of the terrace, under the bushes; she wasn't moving about, just standing still and peering.

Faye Linsky came out of the house. She had a quart bottle of ginger ale.

“What happened?” Fain asked the Linsky girl.

She shook her head. “I was in the house.”

Suddenly Mrs. Fain screamed again. She hurled the glass bowl. She hurled it at a darkened spot under some bushes near the corner of the terrace. The bowl broke with a jittering crash.

The Linsky girl said, “For God's sake, Mrs. Fain, what's the matter?”

THEY saw then that Mrs. Fain was hurt. Her leg, the right one, was welling crimson from a point below the knee.

Fain's wife seemed to snap out of her horrified preoccupation with something near the terrace. She screamed again, this time with words. She shrieked, “John! Oh, John! Something horrible attacked me!” And she threw herself in her husband's arms.

John Fain had thought nothing could shock him much worse, but this did. He looked over his wife's head with glazed eyes, and he saw that the servants had appeared.

There were two servants, the maid and the cook. Annie Rice was the maid, and Mrs. Giggins the cook. Fain did not have a very high opinion of them, particularly of the morals of the maid, Annie Rice. And Mrs. Giggins, a respectable old lady, was a terrific gossip. For that matter, they were both gossips, which was another reason Fain didn't like them to tidy up his laboratory.

“John!” Mrs. Fain gasped. “John, you'd better call Doctor Willimetz.”

Fain took her to a chair, or started to; when she hung back and wailed. “Please! Take me away from this terrace!” he changed his mind and took her in the house.

He examined the wound on her leg.

“This is only a cut,” he said.

“Get Doctor Willimetz!”

“First aid will do the job, Grace,” he explained patiently. “Times like these, the doctors are busy and—”

She looked at him with glazed fright.

“Don't you understand—I want to know whether I've gone insane!” she said, and there was nothing rational about the tone of her voice.

“What cut you?” he asked.

She looked at him wordlessly. He had the feeling she wasn't going to answer, but he tried again.

“Grace, what was it?” he asked.

“I won't tell you,” she said.

He turned to the cook, Mrs. Giggins. “Will you telephone Doctor Willimetz.” His voice was hoarse.

Mrs. Giggins said she would. Her eyes were as large as saucers.

“John!” his wife gasped.

“Yes?”

“Will you—look—on the terrace.” Her words were separated by intervals of strain.

“Look for what?”

She didn't answer. She wasn't going to answer. He went out on the terrace, very carefully, and looked. He turned on all the lights, the floodlights that illuminated the yard and which they didn't use because it was patriotic to conserve lights. He hunted for a while, and he didn't find anything. There was nothing where the glass bowl had broken. There was no dust that would have retained fingerprints.

He went back into the house.

Mrs. Giggins was saying, “I got Doctor Willimetz. He will come right out.”

John Fain cleared his throat. His voice wasn't normal, but it was as normal as he could make it.

He said, “Keep all the lights on. Miss Linsky, will you stay with Grace? You too, Mrs. Giggins?”

They said they would.

“I've got to go to town,” John Fain said. “I'll be back as soon as I can.”

He went to the garage and got in his car, drove toward town.

Chapter II

THE telegraph office for Hammond City was located in the business district adjacent to the Merchant's Hotel. It was not a large place, and the manager, Mr. Bartlett, had been the manager for nearly twenty years. Of late, because of the scarcity of help, he had been coming down himself one night a week to let the regular evening operator have a day off. The office remained open until midnight because of the Electrar plant business.

“Why, hello Mr. Fain,” said Mr. Bartlett. “I haven't seen you in a long time.”

John Fain tried to make his voice natural. He said, “No, Mr. Bartlett, I don't get downtown much any more.”

“Things keeping you busy at the plant, eh?”

“Rather.”

“These times are keeping us all busy.”

John Fain drew out a telegraph blank, picked up a pencil. On the address line, he wrote: DOC SAVAGE, NEW YORK CITY. . . .

The text of his message proved more difficult. He wrote the address with considerable vigor, because it represented—the name did—a life preserver for his sanity. He had a great deal of confidence in Doc Savage, although he knew the man but slightly—had met him only once, in fact, more than a year ago. For a moment he was distracted by his own inability with words so suddenly after he had written Doc Savage's name, as if by merely writing the name he'd settled things. There was going to be a lot more to it than that. Finally he got enough words together to make:

WISH YOUR AID ON MATTER BORDERING COMPLETE FANTASY STOP VITAL IMPORTANCE STOP WILL YOU COME AT ONCE.

That was what he wrote, but it struck him as inane, silly. Unable to improve on it, though, he signed his name and shoved it across the counter. As an afterthought, he withdrew the message, added: PRESIDENT, ELECTRAR CORPORATION after his name. That was in case Doc Savage should think the message came from a nut.

Mr. Bartlett said, “New York City . . . that's a right fair-sized town. Shouldn't there be a street address?”

“I imagine he's well enough known,” Fain said. “Anyway, I don't know his street address. They'll find him, I'm sure.”

“I'll send it this way if you wish.”

“Do.”

“You want me to charge it to the plant account?”

“No, I'll pay for it personally.”

John Fain paid for the telegram and left.

IT happened that John Fain's message was one of the last taken by Mr. Bartlett for transmission before he closed up and went home. He handed it to the operator, began checking up the day's receipts and entering them in the forms, and had not finished when the operator got his hat and coat and paused at the door to say, “Good night, Mr. Bartlett.”

“Good night, Fred.”

Mr. Bartlett locked the cash and the money-order code in the safe, tidied up his personal desk, and lit a cigar. He locked the front door, and followed his usual routine, which was to go to the south one block, then half a block west to a parking lot where he kept his car.

However he followed this routine only as far as the alley halfway between McPherson and Broad Streets, where he was hit over the head with a hard object and knocked senseless.

The striking was done by a man who stepped up behind old Bartlett. A second skulker had waited in the alleyway.

“He out?” the latter demanded.

The one who had struck the blow did some wrist-holding. “Yeah, out.” He was relieved that he had found a pulse.

“Get his keys.”

“Okay.”

Mr. Bartlett's keys were not hard to find, and the two men coöperated in dragging the old man into the alley.

“Reckon you'd better bop him again?”

“Nah, I don't think so.”

“He got any dough on him?”

“Didn't find any.”

“Okay. Let's go.”

They walked to the telegraph office. They did not skulk, but neither did they make themselves conspicuous. The night was not particularly warm for the season, a circumstance which enabled them legitimately to turn up their coat collars and yank their hats down. The shadows hid their faces.

One said, when they reached the telegraph office, “You unlock the door. I'll keep look-out.”

“No, you fool, act as if we were on legitimate business,” the other ordered.

They tried several keys without attracting any unwelcome attention; finally the door swung inward. They entered.

“Turn on the lights,” one ordered.

“But hell—”

“Turn on the lights!” the first man growled. “You want a night cop to notice us prowling around in here without any lights and figure something has gone wrong? Where's you head.”

“What if some guy wants to send a telegram?”

“Just accept it.”

But no one came in, and they found what they had come after.

They found the telegram John Fain had filed.

“Oh, my God!” The searcher said when he read the message.

THE other one read it, and he said, “Let's get out of here with that. No, better take a copy of it. We might as well not advertise this any more than we have to.”

They left, after copying the message, and locked the door behind them. They walked three blocks

rapidly, got into a car, and drove to an apartment house in what was known as the Country Club Addition, one of the swankier parts of town. Sportier was probably a better word. Sporty, and not always on the up-and-up.

Their apartment was on the second floor rear, and they did not turn on the lights for a while, not until they had pulled the shades.

"I always hate living on the second floor," the shorter of the two men complained. "The damned neighbors always looking in your windows."

The other said, "It's always easier to slide out of a second-story window in case of a raid." There was nothing in his manner to show whether or not he was in earnest.

They searched their apartment thoroughly.

"I don't know why we're doing this," the tall man complained.

He got on the telephone. Hammond City had the dial system, so there was no worry about operators listening in. But the man spoke enigmatically, anyway. He said: "The shipment contained the merchandise you believed it contained. . . . Yes, that's right. No, no details, just the bare merchandise. . . . Who? Well, hold your hat. It went to Doc Savage, in New York City. . . . Yes, it sort of got me, too. Okay, hang on."

There was a wait now, and the man put his hand over the mouthpiece and told his companion, "Thinking what to do."

"Scared?"

"You bet. That's the reason for the thinking."

"I was scared, too."

"You weren't by yourself." He took his hand off the mouthpiece to say, "Yes . . . Yes, I guess that's the thing to do . . . Okay. Sure. We'll meet you." He hung up.

The other man was leaning forward from the hips, lips parted. "Well?" he demanded.

"We get the hell to New York," he said, "and try to take care of this Savage at that end."

Chapter III

CLARK SAVAGE had a sensible arrangement. He was unmarried, had no close family ties, did no entertaining at all in a social sense; so he did his living at his laboratory-office. This included his sleeping. He had a folding bed arrangement in a cubicle off the laboratory, and there was also a bath and a clothes locker and a kitchenette. The latter was a joke to his five close friends who frequently worked with him. Doc was an awful cook. His friends considered this remarkable for the reason that Doc had so many other abilities that it didn't seem possible he could be such a Ptomaine Pete when he got hold of a skillet. His friends didn't even consider his jungle cooking safe. So the kitchenette was purely atmosphere. The headquarters' layout of laboratory, library and reception-room-office was located on the eighty-sixth floor of a midtown building, had a wonderful view and was about as unnoticeable as a sore thumb. Anyone who wished could visit the place, and get shunted into the screening room on the twelfth floor where the cranks were sorted from those who had legitimate business. But the twelfth-floor sieve didn't

function at night, and it was Doc's custom to switch off the doorbell and the telephones when he wanted to get some sleep. By closing the reception room and library doors, he wouldn't hear knocking on the hall door, hence slept in peace.

It was hammering on the door however, which awakened him. He turned over, focused one eye on his wrist watch and saw that it was the ungodly hour of 5 a.m. He waited for the pounding to stop and the visitor to go away.

Neither happened.

The pounding got louder. It had a frantic, determined violence.

Doc Savage got up and put on a dressing robe and stepped into his shoes, resisting a normal impulse to carry one of the shoes to the door with him and use it to swat the pest over the head.

Habitual caution asserted itself when he reached the door.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“My name's Chesler,” said a hoarse and frantic voice.

“Chesler who?”

“François Chesler,” the voice said. “My God, I've got to talk to you!”

Doc did not open the door immediately. He knew no one named François Chesler. He also had quite a few enemies collected over a period of time, and some of these were possessed of an abnormal amount of ingenuity.

The man outside cried, “I think they poisoned me.”

He sounded so earnest about this that Doc overcame his inclination to take his time and find out what this was all about. He opened the door.

François Chesler seemed to be alone in the hall. He spoke in terror. He said:

“They made me swallow something. I think it was poison.” He peered at Doc Savage. “You're a doctor, aren't you? Can't you do something?”

Doc examined the man's face intently. He decided that Chesler was poisoned, all right.

He hauled the man inside and closed the door. He asked, “What kind of poison?”

“I don't know,” Chesler said. “It was in capsules.”

Doc took him into the laboratory. The thing to do was get it out of the man, whatever it was.

IN the next ten minutes, he learned quite a lot about Chesler without asking the man any questions and without a word from Chesler.

Chesler worked with his brains, and evidently made good money at it. At least he had soft hands and a two-hundred-dollar suit, a fifteen-dollar shirt and a twelve-dollar cravat. Any necktie that cost twelve dollars, and anything of that quality from Kiel's on Madison Avenue cost that much at least, was not to be

called a necktie. It was a cravat. Chesler was about five feet six, weight about a hundred and sixty. He was nearsighted, and wore glasses, and he had an arrested case of pyorrhea.

The poison was nicotine.

“Nicotine,” Doc told him. “But it's out of you now, and I don't think it got enough of a hold to hurt you.”

“Nicotine?” the man said. “You mean like in tobacco?”

“Yes. But this was nicotine, the alkaloid of tobacco, which is almost as deadly a poison as prussic acid. It's an oily liquid, volatile, acrid, pale amber in color, and smells strongly of tobacco when the air gets to it. The salts are dextrorotatory although the free base is levorotatory.”

“That sounds bad.”

“It could have been.”

“I don't smoke.”

“That might make it a little worse. You wouldn't have a partial tolerance for it. But it obviously hadn't been in you long.”

“Only a few minutes.”

“Who gave it to you?”

“There were four of them.”

Doc Savage put the instruments he had used in the sterilizer. He said, “Maybe you'd better tell a complete story.”

François Chesler wiped sweat off his forehead. “That's exactly what I want to do.”

He was, he explained, French. Apparently wishing to prove this, he changed into French, which he spoke excellently and with a patois which only a real Frenchman would be likely to use.

“I'm a French private detective, you might call me,” he said. “And I've got hold of something too big for me to handle, and I thought of you.”

He paused and examined Doc Savage as if seeing him for the first time.

“Lord, you're big,” he added.

“What about your story?” Doc asked.

Chesler licked his lips. “I've heard a lot about you, even in France and England. You have a terrific reputation.”

“You don't need to do a buttering-up job,” Doc said.

Chesler jumped. He looked frightened. “I didn't mean it as flattery. I'm not trying to sell you anything.”

“Let's hear your story.”

Chesler nodded, said, “Your business, or perhaps I should say your hobby, is helping people out of trouble and righting wrongs and punishing evildoers who are outside the law, isn't it?”

“Business,” Doc said, correcting him. “Not a hobby. And it isn't quite that Galahadian or melodramatic.”

“Well, that's why I was coming to you.” Chesler wiped perspiration off his face again. The ordeal he had undergone had brought on a nervous sweat. “I am employed by Conciero Et Cie, a Paris private banking concern, in an effort to trace down certain movable assets which the Nazis appropriated—stolen is the word—during their occupancy of France. These particular assets consist of some three million dollars worth of paintings, a Raphael and two Fra Angelicos among them.”

He paused to make a soothing gesture.

“I know you're not a ferret for any company which lost property during the mess in Europe,” he continued. “But it so happens that these particular paintings represent the trust funds of Le Matin Safran, a home for the blind. Without this fund, God knows what will happen to the blind inmates of the place. It was for this reason I thought of you.”

Doc removed his dressing robe and began getting dressed. He was a bronzed giant of a man, remarkably muscled, in fact almost unnaturally muscled. His hair was a bronze only slightly darker than his skin, and his eyes were a very light brown, a flake gold color.

Chesler continued: “I'll make a long story short. I traced the gang with the paintings here. I found out they are going back to Europe with them. They have managed passage on a ship, have the paintings aboard. They learned I was on their trail, tried to kill me. I got away.”

Doc was knotting a solid-color tie. He said, “You want me to board this ship with you and get the paintings?”

Chesler nodded.

“It won't be entirely simple,” he said. “I'm afraid we'll have to sail on the ship and do our job enroute. It will be hard finding the paintings.”

“When does this ship sail?”

“In about an hour.”

“Have you made arrangements to get aboard?”

“None whatever. We will have to do that with ingenuity.”

THEY met Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks in the lobby. Monk Mayfair was Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, and there was not much mystery about his nickname of Monk. He looked like a slightly advanced form of ape, a physical appearance that did not fit with the fact that he was one of the world's leading industrial chemists—whenever he took time off from chasing excitement to work at it. He had been kept on the Army's inactive list throughout the war because his activities as a Doc Savage aide were considered more important. He'd raised plenty of hell about this, but with no luck.

Ham Brooks was a lawyer. He outranked Monk, his full title being Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, but it made no difference because he was on the inactive list also for the same reason. He was a slender man with the large flexible mouth of an orator and a mania for fancy clothes, always in the best taste.

He and Monk Mayfair liked to work together, and they quarreled continuously.

Doc met them coming into the lobby as he and Chesler were leaving, and they were fussing about who had gotten whom out of bed at this ungodly hour.

Monk was saying, “There was no need of you waking me up, you overdressed shyster. I was sleeping like a top . . .”

“Which probably explains why you're so dizzy,” Ham said. “Hello, Doc.”

Doc Savage examined them suspiciously. “It must have taken an earthquake to get you two up this early.”

“I wouldn't call Ham an earthquake,” Monk said.

“The telegraph company routed me out, Doc,” Ham explained. “They said they had a wire for you that looked important, and they couldn't raise you at the office.”

“Oh.”

Monk was eyeing Chesler. “Who's your friend?”

Chesler was smiling. His smile said: “I'm happy to meet you, gentlemen.”

Doc said, “He claims his name is François Chesler, but he's probably lying.”

Chesler lost the smile.

“Who is he?” Monk asked.

“A fellow who turned up a while ago, beat on my door, and when he heard my voice, took a couple of capsules of nicotine.”

“Blazes!” Monk was astonished.

François Chesler was astonished too, but more unpleasantly.

“You're being ridiculous!” he exclaimed.

Doc shook his head. “How long do you think it takes a capsule to dissolve? One of them hadn't yet when the stomach pump brought it up. Your international story was good, but . . .”

“Watch him!” Monk yelled.

Chesler had taken off. His feet made some cuffing noises on the floor as they tried to get traction, then he was under way.

IF it had not been for the man behind the cigar counter, Chesler would not have gotten far, probably.

Doc was carrying a small handbag into which he'd thrust what clothes he thought he might absolutely have to have; he watched Chesler, calculated the man's speed and direction, then took a forward step and down like a bowler. The handbag skidded across the smooth parquet flooring, engaged Chesler's ankles, brought him down. Chesler landed spread out, slid several feet on his stomach, turning slowly so that when he got up he would be facing them.

The man who'd been behind the cigar counter by now had lifted into view.

He roared, “Let 'im go!”

He had a voice like a railroad engine in a tunnel, and also something which was wrapped in a newspaper. He was trying to get his hands on this object in just the correct places. When he succeeded, fire and noise came out of the end of the parcel. It was a gun disguised to look like something else.

He shot from the hip, he was behind the counter, and he didn't do an accurate job. The first shot broke a display case containing advertisements from the observation roof of the building.

Ham Brooks and Monk Mayfair were making for François Chesler or whatever his name.

They didn't stop for Chesler. They kept going. There was a recess ahead, a passage between the central shafts which contained the batteries of elevators. They got to it.

Doc Savage was moving also. He went down low, to get the cigar counter between himself and the man's gun, and headed for another recess.

Chesler was on his feet. He ran.

The gun made two more loud reports, and the man holding it yelled at Chesler, “Wait, you dope! I gotta car.”

The two of them dashed outdoors, and a car engine and gears began making a racket.

HAM BROOKS looked at Monk Mayfair and began laughing. He said, “Junior, that woke you up, didn't it?”

“That guy was trying to kill us.” Monk was alarmed. “What's so funny about it?”

Doc Savage was standing in the street, staring after the departing car. Suddenly he made a dash for the sidewalk and a sheltering doorway. A shot noise came bumping along the street, following the violin-string snap of a bullet.

“They're a little reckless,” Doc remarked.

“Did you get the license number?”

“I think so, but it probably won't help much, if the car is stolen.”

Monk had lost his hat during the recent maneuvers. “I'm a little confused,” he confessed. “Just who were those guys?”

“The second one was a complete stranger,” Doc admitted. “And a more complete surprise,” he added.

“What about the first one. What's his name—Chesler—what about him?”

Doc explained the circumstances of François Chesler's visit, and repeated the story Chesler had told about the valuable paintings.

Monk ran a hand through the rusty bristles which served him as hair. “He told a wild one, didn't he.”

Doc nodded. “He probably hoped it was wild enough that I would forget to ask him for his credentials as a French private sleuth.”

“He was a phony?”

“Probably.”

“What about his picture story?”

“We can check on that,” Doc said. “What was that you fellows were saying about a telegram that brought you here?”

“Ham's got it,” Monk said.

Doc Savage read John Fain's telegram from Hammond City. When he looked up, Monk and Ham were eyeing him questioningly.

Monk asked, “Think there's any connection?”

“It shouldn't take long to find out.”

Chapter IV

SUNLIGHT, slanting down through a thin stratus cloud layer, took on a gentle silver quality. Penetrating the eighty-sixth floor windows, it spilled across the reception room rug, slightly brightened the big inlaid table that was the largest piece of furniture, and fell across Doc Savage's shoulders as he leaned over the telephone. But the light was not quite bright enough to make a shadow, Doc noticed. He proved this by trying to make different shaped shadows with his free hand while he was waiting. Finally a voice croaked at him in the receiver.

Doc said, “Yes. . . . I see. Well, that was quick work.” He thanked the croaking voice and hung up.

Ham Brooks made a pair of quizzical bows out of his eyebrows, demanded, “Don't tell me that they caught the two guys already?”

“Only identified the car,” Doc explained.

“Whose was it?”

“Belongs to a man named Gilliam who lives in a Lexington Avenue apartment. He reported it stolen about an hour ago.”

“Oh.”

Doc added, “The license plates hadn't been changed.”

“That supposed to mean anything?” Ham was puzzled.

“It means they were in a hurry. They didn't feel they had time to bother about changing license plates.”

“Let me see that telegram,” Ham said. He studied the message, added, “This was sent from Hammond City at 11:45 last night and received here at 12:10 this morning. Let's see . . . five hours ago . . . a hundred and ten miles to Hammond City about . . . an hour in a private airplane, say, plus another half hour to get in town from the nearest flying field . . . that adds up to them being pretty busy.”

“If they came from Hammond City,” Doc said.

"Yes. If."

Monk Mayfair was busy on a second telephone. He was having trouble with somebody, and having it in French, which he didn't speak too well. What French Monk did speak, however, was well fitted for a row. He had learned it long ago from a French chemistry student who, as a gag, had taught Monk a vocabulary consisting almost exclusively of French cusswords.

Doc Savage was disturbed. "They'll arrest you for talking like that over the telephone."

Presently Monk hung up. "That button-head!" he said, eyeing the instrument unpleasantly.

Ham asked, "Who were you talking to?"

"That French outfit that's got a place in Radio City, the one with the fancy show windows."

"Who did you have, the janitor?"

Monk was doubtful. "I guess so. Some guy said he was *un gérant*. Is that janitor?"

"My God, you were talking to the manager himself! The biggest French firm in the city. What'd he do, spit in the telephone?"

"Nah, he parleyvooed my fransay all right. They got a French dictionary up there, a kind of who's who of the business firms in France. He says there's a banking company named Conciero Et Cie, and there's a home for the blind named Le Matin Safran."

Ham Brooks was astonished.

"Then François Chesler was telling the truth!" he exclaimed.

Doc said, "Or he was smart."

He was not convinced. He picked up the telephone, asked for the long-distance operator, and placed a person-to-person call for John Fain, Hammond City. Waiting for the call to go through, he contemplated the ceiling thoughtfully.

"Nicotine is not a poison you pick up just anywhere," he remarked.

A DEEPLY pleasant and puzzled voice said, "Hello. This is John Fain speaking."

Doc asked, "Are you in a position to talk without being overheard?"

"Why, of course." The man sounded surprised.

Doc identified himself, added, "I called about that telegram."

"What telegram?" Astonishment succeeded surprise in the man's voice.

"The telegram you sent me last night from Hammond City," Doc said.

"A telegram which I addressed to Doc Savage?"

"Yes."

“I sent no such message, Mr. Savage,” the voice said. “I assure you that I hardly know you, and that I certainly did not impose on you. No, I sent no message.”

“This is Mr. John Fain?”

“Yes.”

“What is your occupation, Mr. Fain?”

“I am president and sole owner of the Electrar Corporation of Hammond City.”

“I see.” Doc contemplated the ceiling wonderingly. He added, “Very well, Mr. Fain, and thank you. Sorry to have bothered you.”

Monk Mayfair had been on the telephone again during the long-distance conversation. There were two outside lines into the office, and he had been using the second to call the harbor master's office.

Monk said, “Doc, there was a ship sailed about when Chesler said it was going to sail. The *Confiteurs*. It sailed for France.”

Doc Savage was eyeing the telephone doubtfully. “That fellow knew the telegram was an imposition on us,” he said. “He knew that much about it.”

“You mean the message from Hammond City is genuine, the guy said?” Ham asked.

“The man said exactly the opposite,” Doc admitted.

Ham made a statement. He made it sound as if he had solved everything.

“The telegram from Hammond City was a red herring,” he stated. “Somebody hoped we would dash off to Hammond City on a wild goose chase and not go to France on that boat.” He became a man of action, added, “The thing for us to do is grab a plane and fly out to that steamer and board it.”

“That sounds logical,” Doc admitted.

“Sure it does.”

“Except for one thing,” Doc added. “I think the French angle was the red herring.”

Ham was startled. “How do you figure that?”

“A hunch.”

“Based on what?” Ham asked skeptically.

“The feeling that I know when a man is lying,” Doc said. “Chesler was.”

Ham opened his mouth, closed it while he thought for a while, then said, “I've seen you wrong a few times, but not very often. I think you're wrong now.”

Monk Mayfair grinned. He liked to oppose Ham's ideas. He said, “I favor looking into the Hammond City angle.”

Doc asked, “What is the harbor master's number?” Monk gave him the number, and Doc asked the speed of the French ship *Confiteurs*, and its course. The harbor master refused to divulge this; he would give it personally, he explained, but not over the telephone. There was still a war going on, and the

information came under the heading of strictly secret. He knew Monk personally, he added, or he would not have revealed that the ship had sailed.

“Give me an idea of its speed, then,” Doc suggested.

“Sure. That's no secret,” the harbor master said readily. “Anybody could dig that up by looking in the pre-war ship registry. It's nine knots cruising, not over twelve top. She's slow.”

Doc thanked him and hung up. He told Monk and Ham, “The boat is slow. We can waste as much as a couple of days investigating Hammond City, and still have time to overhaul the ship by plane.”

Ham was relieved. “Good idea. That won't put me out on a limb.”

Doc asked, “How soon can you and Monk be headed for Hammond City by plane?”

“In practically no time.”

“Hey!” Monk was confused. “What do we do after we get there?”

“Find out if a telegram was sent, and let me know as soon as you can. I'll be on the first train leaving for Hammond City after twelve o'clock. Send me a wire on the train if you find out that soon, and you should.”

“Want us to check on this John Fain?”

Doc nodded. “And another thing—find out who could have taken my telephone call a minute ago and pretended to be John Fain.”

Ham blinked, startled. “You think it wasn't Fain on the phone?”

“I'm sure it wasn't.”

“How the . . .”

Doc lifted a hand. “I'm afraid I forgot to mention that I remember what John Fain's voice is like. It wasn't Fain on the telephone.”

Ham registered such a look of surprise that Monk burst into laughter.

Chapter V

THE Municipal Airport at Hammond City was located five miles east of town on the river flats and had a paved north-south runway, brick hangar, brick line shack, and not much activity. The gas pumps, one for seventy-two octane and the other for eighty octane, were in front of the line shack. A middle-aged man stood in front of the hose pit and made listless come-hither gestures with his hands, guiding the plane carrying Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks to the gas pit. The man's overalls looked as if he had used them to wipe off a motor. When he thought they were within hose reach, he made a dragging motion with one finger across his throat, signifying they should cut the motor.

Monk told the man, “We'll want ninety octane.”

“Ain't got it.”

“Well, eighty, then. And hangarage.”

“No hangar room,” the man said. “Have to stake her out.”

Monk didn't like the idea, because it was the season of the year when hail storms were occasional. He shrugged. There was nothing else to do. “Where do we sign in?” he asked.

“Book in the line shack.”

There was enough cigarette smoke in the line shack to make Monk sneeze. Ham was leaning over the registration book, pencil in hand. But he was listening to the conversation of three men who were in the line shack. Catching Monk's glance, he indicated, by moving his eyes, that Monk should listen also.

A fat man with crossed eyes was saying, “That's wrong. My wife talked to a neighbor woman who got it straight from the Giggins woman who cooks for the Fains. Mrs. Fain didn't go to the hospital. She was too bad to be taken.”

“I heard she was.”

“Mrs. Giggins says it was the same thing this guy Blake got away from.”

“You say Blake's in the hospital?”

“Yeah, in the part where they put boobies. The doctor thought he was nuts.”

The third man spoke. “I think somebody's nuts,” he said. He was a solid looking man in a blue suit and a cap that said TAXI. “I don't believe none of this stuff,” he added.

The fat man sneered at him. “The way science is goin' ahead, who can say what is possible and what ain't. When them scientists are experimentin', half the time they don't know what they're doin'.”

The other man, who was nondescript, said, “I saw a movie once—”

“I don't believe a damned word of the goofy thing,” the taxi driver said.

The nondescript man was offended. The fat one was contemptuous. He said, “You're so smart, Alvy, how come you're driving a hack for a living at your age?”

This made Alvy mad. “You're a bunch of idiots!” he yelled. “By God, any time I get scared over such a thing, I'll be ready for a strait-jacket.”

Apprehensive lest there be a fight, Monk said, “How about a cab into town.”

“Okay,” Alvy said. He examined the pair with whom he had been conversing. He spit on the floor.

THE road to town was a straight mouse-colored slab of concrete between tall, gaunt poplar trees. Alvy, still angry, said, “Them guys is goofs.”

“What was the fuss about?” Monk asked.

“Aw-w-w-w,” Alvy said. “There's a story going around that somethin' terrible got away from John Fain in his laboratory last night, and is attackin' people. It probably didn't happen.” Alvy sounded as if he wanted them to be sure that he himself didn't take any stock in the yarn.

Monk asked, “What was it that got away?”

“I dunno,” Alvy said. “Somethin' about two feet high.”

“That's not very big,” Monk said.

Alvy grunted. He said, “They're sayin' this thing got hold of Mrs. Fain and crippled her up, though.”

“Who is Mrs. Fain?”

“John Fain's wife.”

“Oh. Is he the Fain who owns the Electrar Corporation?”

“Yeah.”

Monk pushed the conversation, suggesting, “Got away from him in his laboratory, eh?”

“So the story goes.”

“Didn't Mrs. Fain see it?”

“She ain't talking, supposedly.” Alvy scratched his head. “Fain ain't got anything to say, either. And Fain didn't go to the plant this morning.”

“Sounds queer,” Monk said.

Alvy admitted it did, added, “A guy named Blake, a bird who works in a filling station, kind of got the story going hot. He says some kind of a damned thing got after him on his way to work this morning, and he barely got away.” Alvy sighed, settled back. “Nuts to it.”

Ham Brooks contemplated the back of the driver's head. He asked, “You know the Fains?”

“Just by sight.”

“Oh.” Ham was surprised. “You knowing so much about it, I thought maybe you were close to the family.”

“Me? A taxi pusher!” Alvy snorted. “Hell, the story's all over town.”

Ham looked out of the cab windows at Hammond City. “It's a pretty good-sized town,” he remarked.

“Yeah,” Alvy said. He had missed the point.

“What have you got here?” Ham asked. “A bunch of gossips?”

“Oh.” Alvy turned his head. “You mean how did the story get all over town so quick? Damned if I know. Just got, I guess.”

“Somebody spreading it?”

“Hell, it don't need no spreading. Half a dozen guys have told me about it already. Whenever it goes back, it goes to them two Fain servants, Annie Rice and Mrs. Giggins.”

Monk Mayfair cleared his throat. “You know this filling station fellow, this Blake?” he asked. Monk had a freak voice; any perceptible amount of excitement made it rise in scale, so that he sounded about thirteen years old.

Alvy shook his head. “But I know where he works.”

“This story fascinates me,” Monk said. “What do you say we drive past and have a word with Blake about it?”

Alvy was not averse to this. “I'd like to hear it straight from the horse's mouth myself,” he said.

THEIR arrival in the Gray Cross Filling Station created quite a stir. Two men dashed for the cab, one an attendant and the other, it seemed, the owner himself. The pair fell over each other polishing the windshield and checking the tires. Alvy said out of the corner of his mouth, “Boy, look at 'em shake the lead out of their pants. They think I'm maybe gonna give 'em all my business.”

Monk and Ham strolled into the station and got a coke from the red dispensing machine.

“You Blake?” Monk asked.

“Yes.”

“We heard about your experience this morning,” Monk said invitingly. “What's the straight on that?”

Blake said, “Be with you in a minute.” He went into the station. He was a thin, stooped man with very black eyes and a mouth with downturned corners.

Alvy said, “You guys know your meter's running.”

“We know it,” Ham said.

They could not see what Blake was doing inside the station. The morning was pleasantly warm. It was fifteen minutes past eleven o'clock, Monk saw when he consulted his wrist. Alvy pondered, then shut off the engine of his cab.

Presently Blake came out. “Had to call my wife,” he said. His brown tie was crooked. “What'd you wanta know?”

“We heard about your experience this morning,” Monk told him.

“Oh, that.” Blake licked his lips, leaving them moist and shiny. “Well, it beat any damned thing you ever saw.”

“What happened?”

“Something got after me.”

“That's what we heard.” Monk was encouraging the fellow by showing great interest. “What was it?”

Blake said, “It happened out on Euclid Avenue, before daylight, on my way to work. Euclid leads on out to Euclid Road, where the Fain house is situated. But this happened about a mile from the Fain place.”

“What was it?” Monk asked.

“It sure scared me, I can tell you,” Blake said. A car had driven into the filling station. “It was dark, but there was light enough for me to see it.” Three men got out of the car which had just arrived. It was a touring car, black, 1939 model. Blake licked his lips again, added, “I ran like hell, I can tell you.” The

three men wore masks made of white handkerchiefs.

Monk frowned at Blake.

“What's the matter? Ain't you gonna tell us what it was?” he demanded.

One of the three men who had arrived in the touring car said loudly, “You looking for information, bub?”

Monk wheeled. He saw the masks. “Hey!” he exclaimed. “Put that gun away!” The man didn't put his gun away, however, and his two companions also produced guns.

“Get in our car, both you guys,” the man said.

BLAKE and the owner of the Gray Cross Service Station both had their hands in the air the last Monk and Ham saw of them. They looked very scared. Too frightened, Monk suspected, to call the police immediately.

“Point that thing the other way,” Monk urged. “It might go off.”

The man gave Monk a harder gouge in the ribs with the revolver. “Hey Charlie, guess what,” he said.

“What?” asked Charlie.

“The missing link's afraid of getting shot.”

Charlie looked at the man in the front seat with him and said, “The missing link's afraid of getting shot.”

“The hell you say,” said the other man.

This comprised the conversation for several blocks. The car moved at about twenty-five miles an hour, turned various corners, and finally lined out on a street that rapidly took it out of town. The road grew bumpy.

Ham Brooks' hat was dislodged in passing over one of the bumps, and he raised his hands cautiously to fix it more firmly on his head.

“You wanta get shot?” the spokesman of their captors asked.

“No.”

The man relayed this information to Charlie. “He don't wanta get shot.”

“He don't wanta get shot,” Charlie told the driver.

“That's too bad,” the driver said.

Monk, who was enraged and frightened, demanded, “What is this, a clown act?”

“What's your name?” Charlie countered.

“Nuts,” Monk said.

“Maybe you ain't the guy we want, then,” Charlie said. “The guy we want is named Monk Mayfair.” Charlie hung the muzzle of his gun over the back of the seat menacingly. “Sit still. Bill, frisk 'em.”

Bill went through their pockets, first by slapping, then by emptying the pockets. Finally he became interested in what was inside their shirts, and unbuttoned their shirts to look. “By God, iron underwear!” he exclaimed.

“What's that?” Charlie demanded.

“They got bulletproof vests on,” Bill said. He became doubtful. “Or I guess that's what they've got on.” He wrenched open Ham's shirt, tearing off two buttons. “Look. Ain't that what it is?”

Ham was angered. “This shirt cost twenty dollars!” he yelled. “Be careful with it!”

Charlie was peering at the vests. “That's what it is, a bulletproof vest,” he said. “Say, you better shoot 'em in the head when you shoot.” He pointed his gun at Monk's left eye. “Bill, look in their billfolds and see it they're the guys.”

Presently Bill announced, “That's right. Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks and Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair.”

Charlie was pleased.

“We hit the jackpot,” he said.

The car drove more slowly now, and the road was worse. They were in a woods and the road was no longer paved. It did not look as if it was used much.

Ham Brooks, having done some thinking, told Monk, “These guys must have been watching the airport.”

Monk had been thinking himself. “Either that,” he said, “or that guy Blake called them when he was using the telephone.”

Charlie grinned at them. “Which do you think it was?” he wanted to know.

Monk didn't like Charlie's gin. He didn't like the way Bill was taking the money out of their billfolds, either. “You going to rob us?” he demanded.

“You won't mind,” Bill said.

“The hell I won't! I'll make you wish—”

“Not unless you become a ghost, you won't,” Bill said. “You're going to be dead.”

The driver said, “Don't get them excited.”

“Let 'em get excited,” Charlie said. “I'd rather shoot a bird on the wing than a sitting one, any time.”

Bill eyed Monk and Ham. “Go ahead, start something,” he invited.

“No, thanks,” Monk said.

He was sure they were going to be killed. He was surprised at the assortment of sensations this knowledge produced in him. He decided he didn't care for any of the feelings, though. It was unreal. He knew the men intended to kill him, but it didn't produce any of the feelings he supposed a man had before he died. Maybe the thing had come too suddenly.

SHORTLY the car turned off on a course where there was no road, only weeds and low brush which scraped and whacked against fenders, running-boards, chassis. This did not last long. The car stopped.

“Whoe-e-e-e-e!” Charlie gasped, giving the driver a frightened look. “You didn't need to drive so damn close to the edge!”

“This heap's got good brakes,” the driver said. “Whatcha worried about?”

With horror, Monk stared at an expanse of green water in front of them and some thirty feet below. The water looked filthy and deep. It covered about an acre, and was the lake in an old quarry pit.

Bill said, “We ain't very original. Lots of bodies have been put in quarry pits.” He leered, demanded, “Maybe you'd like a more original death?”

“Cut out the funny stuff,” Charlie said. “Go see if anybody's around the place.”

Bill went away, pushing through the brush, stopping to look all directions.

Monk told Ham, “These guys are funny as skeletons.”

Ham looked at Monk in horror and said, “What are you trying to do, make a joke of it? Don't you see they intend to kill us?” His face was the color of an aluminum utensil which had been out in the weather a considerable time.

“Shut up!” Charlie ordered.

The driver got out of the car. He stumbled over a rock, which he kicked in a rage; then he picked up the rock and threw it in the water. He watched the green ripples, like the crawling movement of a grass snake, with satisfaction.

“I damned near got drowned right there when I was a kid,” he announced. “Twenty-five feet deep, if she's an inch.”

He went around behind the car, put his shoulder to the machine and shoved. It moved several inches, enough to put Monk's hair on end.

“We can push her right over,” the driver added.

A crashing in the brush caused them all to hold their breath. But it was Bill coming back.

“Didn't see nobody,” Bill said.

“You look good?”

“What do you think I am, a fool?”

Charlie eyed Bill with sudden suspicion. “Let's see that dough you took off them,” he said.

Bill produced some greenbacks. “They only had about a hundred,” he said. He tossed the money on the grass. “Good thing we are on a salary,” he added.

Wrath suffused Charlie's face.

“There was more dough than that!” he said.

“Dammit, you think I'm holding out?” Bill was injured. “Search me, if you want to.”

“Sure, after you went off in the brush and hid it!” Charlie yelled.

The driver was holding an automatic pistol. He was aiming it carefully at Monk.

The driver said, “First things come first, don't they?” He pulled the trigger.

Chapter VI

THE 1:15 train out of Grand Central was made up of day coaches, but it was a streamliner and went express as far as Hartford, after which Hammond City was the next stop. Thinking Monk and Ham might have wired him care of the train, or that a message might come aboard at Hartford, Doc Savage found the conductor, in whose care any such telegram would be given, and identified himself. The conductor, having heard of Doc Savage, was impressed, and said that if anything came in, he would see that it didn't lie around.

Doc had dropped his suitcase in the last seat in a coach, so that no one was facing him, in order not to be conspicuous. Not that he had a bobby sox public. But he was often recognized, and it was embarrassing to be pointed at. If he were in show business, he imagined he would learn not to mind, and probably to like it. Exhibitionism was the life blood of show business.

Approaching his seat, he noticed a woman had occupied the other half, automatically noted also that she wasn't hard to look at.

“Pardon me,” he said. She stood up to let him to the window seat, where he'd dropped his suitcase. She was possibly twenty. He asked, “Care to sit by the window?”

Her response was in a pleasant voice. But it wasn't what he expected her to say.

“Did you know you're being followed?” she asked.

Alarmed, he examined her. Blue eyes, nice lips, a nose that wasn't as straight as it could be, but nice anyway.

“By male or female?” he asked.

“Female,” she said. “And I don't mean myself.”

“Oh,” he said. He thought he sounded foolish, but not as foolish as he felt. Enroute to the station and all day in fact, he had taken the utmost precautions to learn if he were being trailed. Not to shake the trailers, if any, but to learn if he were being followed. And he suddenly remembered that he had been looking only for men shadows. A dozen women could have trailed him, he suspected.

“This must be my dumb day,” he said.

“I followed you from your office,” the girl said. “Didn't you see me?”

“That's what I mean,” he said. “Dumb. No, I didn't. But you might have done such a good job that I wouldn't have noticed.”

She shook her head. “I'm not an expert. I never did it before.”

“What does this woman look like?”

"Tall. Dark hair. Cruise-tan frock with notched collar and box pleats in the skirt. Brown accessories."

He said, "I wouldn't know anything about notched collars and box pleats." He pondered. He did not recall any particular dark-haired tall woman. He said, "I didn't notice her."

She nodded.

"I'm Faye Linsky," she said. "However, I don't think you're supposed to know me. I'm a friend of the Fain family."

HE studied her for some time, at least a minute. She *was* nice looking. And he decided she was frightened. She had very good control of herself, but she was frightened. Actually, he reflected, she might be as scared as the devil. He put no trust at all in his judgment of what a woman was feeling or thinking.

He played dumb, said, "Fain? Do I know a Fain?"

"So you didn't get the telegram." She sounded surprised.

"What telegram?"

"Mr. Fain said he sent you one last night."

"Oh." He pondered some more. "Who do you think I am?"

"I know who you are. You're Doc Savage. Mr. Fain has a snapshot of you."

This was true, Doc recalled. He had met John Fain about a year ago when he had visited the Electrar Corporation plant for the War Department to organize a department to produce an advanced type of radar. At the time Fain's laboratory assistant, a Miss Lys Smith, if he recalled her name rightly, had taken a snapshot of a group which included Doc. That must be the picture.

He asked, "Fain send you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Mr. Fain has gone into seclusion. He wishes me to conduct you to him."

"Seclusion?" Doc said. That could have different meanings. "Hiding, you mean?"

Faye Linsky hesitated. Her face, for the first time, changed from composure to troubled concern. "Mr. Savage, something quite horrible has happened, I am afraid," she said. "You are going to Hammond City, aren't you?"

"There doesn't seem much point in denying it," he admitted. "Yes, I'm going to Hammond City."

"Good." She put a hand on his arm. "You do not need to trust me if you don't wish."

She let the hand remain on his arm. The fingernails were done in a shade he believed was called gingerbread. He asked, "What happened?"

"You're going to be disappointed in this," she said. "I was visiting the Fains last night. Mrs. Fain and I were on the terrace, playing gin rummy. It was a little after ten o'clock when the Fain's Great Dane,

Johnny, began barking. The dog barked strangely, so strangely that both Mrs. Fain and I noticed the difference. The dog was at the laboratory, which is about a hundred and fifty feet from the house. We heard Mr. Fain calling for Miss Smith—"

"Lys Smith, his laboratory assistant?" Doc asked.

"Yes. He called her two or three times. His voice wasn't natural. Then Mr. Fain came past the terrace, on his way to the garage. He stopped to ask if we had seen Lys Smith, and his voice really was strange. Mrs. Fain told him we hadn't seen Lys, and he went on. I went into the house to get some ginger ale for our drinks."

She paused, took the hand off his arm, made the hand into a tightly clenched fist. She looked as if what she was thinking was about to lift her out of the seat.

"Mrs. Fain screamed," she said. "It was—well—it was an utterly frightening way for a woman to scream. I ran to the terrace. Something had wounded Mrs. Fain in the leg. Suddenly she threw the glass bowl which had contained cracked ice, threw it at something under a bush."

"At what?" Doc asked.

"I don't know. She wouldn't say, except that she acted like it was a *thing."* She looked up at him from wide, scared eyes. "This sounds as if some child was telling a horror story, doesn't it?"

Doc thought: Or a pack of lies. But he said, "It sounds very unusual."

She gathered together gloves and purse, said, "I missed my lunch. What do you say we finish this in the diner. Or have you eaten?"

"Good idea," Doc agreed.

THE diner was surprisingly uncrowded, and they were able to get a table for two. When the head-waiter had placed the menus and pencils and pads in front of them and gone away, Faye Linsky said, "To return to the story: Mr. Fain instructed me to stay with Mrs. Fain. He was very emphatic about this. I think he knew what had hurt his wife, what she had seen."

"Mrs. Fain didn't tell you what it was?"

"No. She seemed afraid to. I don't mean that anyone had threatened her, nothing like that. She seemed to fear that her sanity would be doubted."

"I see."

"Mr. Fain came back and told me he had sent you this telegram. He asked me to come to New York in the morning and bring you to him. Or rather, bring you to Mrs. Fain and Mr. McKim, and they would take you to Mr. Fain."

"Why that arrangement?" Doc asked.

"I'm not quite clear, but I think—" She fell silent. The waiter had come. She glanced at the menu, said, "I'll take the mackerel."

Doc was suspicious of the steak on the menu because it was called a steak *salmis,* and *salmis* in French meant hash, and he had never heard of a steak hash. He took the mackerel, too, and the consommé. The

waiter departed.

“You think what?” Doc asked.

“I think Mr. Fain is worried about his nerves,” Faye Linsky said.

“Nerves?”

“Two years ago Mr. Fain had a nervous breakdown. Didn't you know that?”

Doc said he didn't know very much about Mr. Fain. He hadn't known about any nervous trouble.

The girl said, “Well, Mr. Fain worries about his nerves. He watches his health very closely. For example, he had a gymnasium put in his home and takes exercises every day, and has a masseur come up three days a week for treatments.”

“Sensible precautions,” Doc said.

“I think Mr. Fain went into seclusion because of his nerves.”

“Seclusion with his nerves?” Doc said. He contemplated the young woman. He added, “You're not saying what you mean, are you?”

She was uncomfortable.

“Not exactly,” she confessed.

“You mean,” Doc said, “that Fain's crazy.”

“I mean that I don't think he knows,” she explained. “I think he's not certain whether he is having hallucinations or not.”

The waiter came with the mackerel, and Doc wished they had ordered the steak *salmis*, hamburger or no hamburger. The mackerel looked as if someone had prepared it for the purpose of half-soling a shoe. It didn't taste bad, though. It didn't have much of any taste.

Doc asked, “What about Mrs. Fain? She would know whether she saw something or not.”

“She also seems to doubt her sanity.”

“That's strange.”

“I think they must have seen something quite terrible, both of them.”

The waiter brought their coffee, although they hadn't ordered coffee. He went away.

Doc Savage asked, “What about Lys Smith?”

“The laboratory assistant?”

“Yes. Where did she turn up?”

The girl was looking intently at the back of the dining car.

“She hasn't turned up,” she said.

“You mean she's disappeared?”

Still staring at the back of the car, Faye Linsky said, “Yes, no trace of her.” Her eyes became wide. She asked, “Do you know a tall man in a brown suit? He's red-headed.”

“Why?” Doc asked. He had taken hold of his coffee cup.

The girl suddenly put her hand palm down, over his cup of coffee.

“I think the man poisoned it,” she said.

DOC SAVAGE came to his feet, wheeled and looked. But he saw no tall red-headed brown-suited man.

“He left,” Faye Linsky said. “Just a moment ago. I saw the waiter set the tray down on the serving table at the end of the coach, and that man got up from his table, stopped a moment at the tray, and went on.”

Doc sat down again, picked up his coffee, sniffed of it. “Oh, oh.”

“Poisoned?”

“Let's see yours,” he said.

The girl's coffee had the same smoky odor.

“Nicotine,” he explained. “They're not showing much versatility.”

She was puzzled. “Nicotine? Could anyone put enough of that in to be fatal?”

“In concentrated form, it is one of the deadliest poisons,” he said. “There's probably enough in here to kill a dozen.”

Her lips seemed to get stiff. “In both cups?”

“Yes.”

She thought that over. She looked at what remained of the mackerel in horror. But when she spoke, she surprised him with a question. “What did you mean, not much versatility?” she asked.

“Just a remark,” he said.

He had meant that it was the same poison which the man who had said his name was François Chesler had used on himself—or had had used on him. There was still some doubt which.

Faye Linsky picked up her gloves and purse. Her fingers bit into the purse. “I couldn't eat another thing if I were starving,” she said. “You—you don't think that the food was—was—”

“That they put poison in it? I doubt that. Here comes the waiter.” Doc caught the waiter's eye and beckoned.

The waiter was a tall stovepipe-colored man with a nice face and a lot of grin. “Yes, suh,” he said.

“How much did the tall red-headed fellow pay you to put our coffee down where he could get at it?” Doc asked.

The waiter was genuinely startled. “Boss, you got something wrong.” He pondered. “I do remember puttin' the tray down for a minute, though.”

Doc was quite sure the waiter was innocent.

He asked, “You notice a tall, red-headed man go to the tray?”

“No.” The waiter thought some more, turned and examined the other diners. “Ah don't remember no such a man,” he said. “Ah sure don't.”

“You never saw him?”

“No.”

Doc said, “All right. Thanks.” He indicated the coffee. “Be careful where you pour this. There's enough poison in these two cups to kill twenty people.”

The waiter's color changed from stovepipe-black to dust gray and he showed considerable eye-white. “Yassuh,” he said. “You want me to call the conductor.”

“We'll see him ourselves,” Doc said. “And don't worry about it. It wasn't your fault.”

The checks came to two dollars and fifty cents, an outrageous sum for what they'd had. Doc paid both, and they worked toward the rear of the train.

Faye Linsky said, “You seemed certain the waiter had nothing to do with it.”

“He probably didn't.”

“Maybe not.”

Doc said, “We'll look this train over with a fine-tooth comb. You take the ladies' lounges, and I'll take the men's. One of us will stay in the corridors all the time so the fellow can't get past.”

“Good.”

But she didn't think there was anything good about it half an hour later, when they had worked their way the length of the train. They found no tall red-headed man in a brown suit. They didn't even find a red-headed man.

Chapter VII

HAMMOND CITY'S Union Depot had been built of blond brick and shiny metal just before the war. It had a crisply new look and it was in a nice part of town. The station porter spoke to Faye Linsky, saying “You been away, Miss Linsky?” During the walk up the ramp to the station, others spoke to Miss Linsky and she responded with a voice and smile sufficiently convincing. She explained, “A small town like this, one gets to know so many.”

“Lived here long?” Doc asked.

“Oh, several years.” She waved at someone whom she called Irene.

Suddenly a man yelled, “There's the Linsky woman!” Doc saw that the fellow had a Speed Graphic camera and surmised that he was the newspaper photographer.

Doc wheeled away, intent on escaping. But Faye Linsky seized his arm, demanded, “What's wrong?” By that time, the photographer was on them, and Doc couldn't leave without causing excitement. He did say, “I want to get a newspaper,” and went to the news rack about a dozen feet away.

The photographer's flashgun flicked light over the station.

“Oh!” Faye Linsky gasped. “What on earth do you want with my picture?”

“You don't mind, I hope?”

“No, but I—why do you want *my* picture?”

“On account of what happened last night, and today,” the photographer explained. “Could you give us a statement, Miss Linsky?”

“Why should I?” The girl sounded puzzled. “I don't see why—”

The photographer, who seemed to be a reporter as well, was excited. He said, “We think this is going to be the story of the year. The way it's sweeping town is amazing. First, a guy named Blake is chased by something. And then two guys land at the airport, and go to talk to Blake, and they're kidnapped. And then a woman named Ginsmetz sees something in her front room.”

“Something?” Faye Linsky stared at him. “What do you mean by that?”

The photographer laughed. “This Ginsmetz dame is a screwball. She says she saw a terrible little dwarf of a woman about two feet tall, and it tried to kill her. She ran into the street screaming her head off and having hysterics about it.”

Suddenly both of Faye Linsky's hands went to her cheeks. She lost color. “That—that is insane,” she said. But she didn't sound convincing. She sounded horrified. She wheeled, said, “Mr. Savage—”

The photographer nearly dropped his camera.

“Doc Savage!” he yelled. “My God! It was two of his assistants, Ham Brooks and Monk Mayfair, who got kidnapped!”

THERE was nothing for Doc to do but be photographed. He composed himself, blinked after the flash whitened everything briefly.

Excitedly, the reporter demanded, “Did Miss Linsky go to New York to get you, Mr. Savage?”

Doc asked, “What about this kidnapping?”

The reporter was full of information. Being a newspaper man accustomed to corroborating his facts, he had names and times and places exactly. The time Monk and Ham had arrived at the airport—they had signed the register, so their names were there—and who had been present at the filling station when they were kidnapped, together with the fact that they had been asking questions about the Fain mystery.

“Now,” the reporter said, “you owe me some information. First, you are here to investigate the Fain mystery?”

“That seems rather obvious,” Doc said.

“What is behind it?”

“I can't say.”

“What do you think about this Ginsmetz dame and her terrible midget?”

“No comment.”

“Is it possible for a human being to be only two feet high?”

“Nothing is impossible, but many things are ridiculous,” Doc said.

The reporter-photographer had a notebook. “That's good.” He scribbled. “What are your plans?”

Doc shook his head.

“You're not very free with information,” the reporter said. He was displeased.

“Sorry.”

“I've heard you are a tough guy to get information out of,” the reporter said unpleasantly. “What's the idea?”

Doc took Miss Linsky's arm. “Let's go,” he said.

“Here, you can't walk out on me!” the reporter said angrily.

Doc hurried the girl out of the station. There was a taxi in the street stand, and he entered. Doc was unpleasantly surprised when the reporter started to get in with them.

“What do you think you are doing?” Doc asked.

“I'm getting this story.” The reporter was nasty. “You may be pretty hot stuff in the city, but around here we don't go for that.”

“You're being unpleasant, aren't you?” Doc asked.

“My manners are my own business, brother.”

Doc contemplated the man thoughtfully. He said, “So are an individual's photographs, in case you didn't know it.” He reached quickly, slipped the two plate-holders the man had exposed in the station out of the reporter-photographer's pockets, jerked out the slides.

“Damn you!” the man yelled. “You light-struck my negatives!”

Doc flipped the plate holders and slides out on the sidewalk. The man cursed him, scrambled out to get them.

“Get moving,” Doc told the driver.

When he looked back, the man was shaking his fist after the departing cab.

Faye Linsky was nervous. “That was Carl Brunow of the *Tribune,”* she said. “He throws a good deal of weight here in Hammond City.”

Doc was not impressed. “He should throw his manners away and get some new ones.”

THE Fain home was a pleasant place in the late afternoon sunlight. The house was while and square, but with pleasant lines and nicely landscaped. Faye Linsky pointed out the laboratory, a small building, one-storied, white like the house, located about a hundred and fifty feet from the main dwelling. She also indicated the terrace where she and Mrs. Fain had been playing gin rummy the night before when John Fain came out of the laboratory and things began happening.

“Oh, there's Gard McKim,” Faye Linsky said.

A man had been about to get in a car; now he came toward them. He walked heavily, with the tread of a bear, and in many ways he resembled a bear. His face was round and from a distance looked benign, but seen closer it was an intense falcon-like face. He was very flashily dressed.

Faye Linsky introduced him: “Mr. Savage, this is Gard McKim, general manager of the plant.”

Gard McKim had a hard quick handclasp. He said, “Heard of you, Savage. Understand you were here about a year ago. Sorry I was in Washington at the time.”

Doc said, “Have you any ideas about this thing?”

Gard McKim looked puzzled.

Faye Linsky said, “Mr. Savage received a telegram from John Fain asking for help.”

“Oh,” McKim's eyes widened. “I didn't know that. By George, old John does have a practical idea now and then.” He looked at Doc Savage approvingly. “This is damned fine. It's okay. This thing needs your touch. I never saw a thing go with such wildfire.”

“Go?”

“Over the town. Rumors. Wild stories.” Gard McKim chuckled, added, “Reminds me of something that happened in a midwestern town.” He pondered, scratched his head. “Name of the place escapes me. Anyway, the whole town got in an uproar over a phantom gas assailant.”

Doc said, “You mean Mattoon, Illinois.”

“Yes, that's the place. Got a lot of publicity. The whole town went crazy. I remember it now. There was a phantom who used a mysterious gas that put people to sleep without their knowing what had happened. They never did catch their phantom, either.”

Doc shook his head. “There was no phantom, was the final conclusion. It was a case of mass hysteria.”

Faye Linsky's eyebrows arched. “You mean to tell me a whole town became upset over something that didn't exist?”

“They did,” Doc said. “And it was rather terrible while it lasted, I understand.”

Gard McKim adjusted his necktie. “You get a mob of people, you can't tell what they'll do.” His necktie was a rayon and silk with all-over figuring. He added, “You'll want to meet Mrs. Fain.”

“Yes, where is Grace?” Faye Linsky asked.

MRS. JOHN FAIN was resting in a gloomy room which was made doubly somber by drawn shades and closed windows.

“Mr. Savage!” she exclaimed. “I'm so glad you got here.” She indicated the room. “I was resting—resting my nerves.”

The gloomy room, Doc Savage reflected, was a poor place for her to rest her nerves, if her nervousness was caused by fear. The somber place was an incubator for terror, in his opinion.

Gard McKim was registering astonishment. “Grace, you knew John had sent for Mr. Savage?” he asked.

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Fain told him.

“You didn't say anything to me.”

“I know. But John said no one was to know but myself and Faye, here.”

“I'll be damned!” Gard McKim wasn't injured. He was surprised.

Mrs. Fain said, “I'm sure John didn't intend for you to be kept in the dark, Gard. He just didn't think of telling you.”

“Have you a telephone I could use?” Doc Savage asked.

“Yes, you can use the extension there.” She pointed at an ivory handset.

Doc eyed the telephone. He recalled the phony voice which had answered his long-distance call from New York. He asked, “Are there many extensions in the house, Mrs. Fain?”

Mrs. Fain pondered. “There's—let me see, at least five. One in the laboratory, one in the gardener's cottage, and three, no four, here in the house.”

“Who lives in the gardener's cottage?”

“Why, no one. Our gardener is in war work.”

Doc picked up the telephone book under the instrument, thumbed through it and found the police station number. He called, identified himself, and was rather pleased that the chief of police—Tucker, the man said his name was—had never heard of him, except that he had learned that Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks worked for a man named Doc Savage in New York, Doc found out what he wished to know:

Monk and Ham had not been found.

“LET'S take a look at the gardener's cottage,” Doc said.

Mrs. Fain was surprised. “Don't you want to hear—”

“Later. After we look at the cottage.”

The gardener's cottage was square and white like the main house, but much smaller, covered with vines, pleasantly shaded by a large American elm tree. Mrs. Fain had brought the keys, and while she was looking among them, she explained, “I suppose we really should rent this place to someone because of the housing shortage in town, but I can't bring myself to liking strangers around the place.”

“We will not need the keys, probably,” Doc said. “Just a minute.”

He moved around the cottage, giving attention to each window, first examining, then trying the window to see if it was unlocked. The third window came open under his shove.

He indicated marks on the sill.

“Forced,” he said. “And rather crudely, at that.”

Mrs. Fain seemed alarmed. “Oh, my goodness! I'm going to see if anything was taken.”

Seemingly nothing was missing, however. “I don't understand it,” she said.

“Some bum,” said Gard McKim.

“Why would a bum—”

“Hunting a place to sleep.”

“Been any rain recently?” Doc asked.

“No. But—”

“Bums usually prefer to sleep outdoors during nice weather,” Doc said thoughtfully. He had been scrutinizing the floor. “Notice the recent sweeping job in this room?”

They all noticed it now. Faye Linsky looked in some of the other rooms, said, “This is the only one that is swept. Isn't that strange? The floors in all the other rooms are dusty.”

“Very strange,” Gard McKim agreed.

“Unless the sweeping was done to get rid of footprints in the dust,” Doc said. “The telephone happens to be in this room.”

McKim looked astonished. “Eh?”

“I made a telephone call this morning,” Doc explained. “Man answered, said he was John Fain. It wasn't John Fain, because I happen to know Fain's voice. The faker tried to make me believe Fain hadn't sent a telegram which I had received.”

Gard McKim blinked. “I guess I'd make a damned poor detective. You figure the guy waited here and took your call.”

“It is possible.”

Mrs. Fain was showing fright. “But the telephones in the house ring at the same time. How would this faker have been sure someone at the house wouldn't answer and—” She stopped. Her hands went to her cheeks. “Oh!” She was startled. “I see now! The telephone trouble!”

“What telephone trouble?” Doc asked.

“Why, our phone was out this morning. It wasn't ringing. The man came out and fixed it about an hour ago. I had forgotten.”

Doc was satisfied. “That takes care of the telephone call,” he said. “Now let's hear your story, Mrs. Fain.”

MRS. FAIN'S story covered about the same territory which Faye Linsky had covered with hers. She passed over the part about her scream on the terrace by merely saying she had shrieked. He was astonished.

“Why did you scream?” he asked.

The look she gave him was desperate. “I—do I have to tell that?”

“It might be important.”

Gard McKim spoke firmly: “Grace, you must tell everything. Absolutely everything. Has what you saw any connection with this wild story that's sweeping town?”

Mrs. Fain nibbled at her lips. Her arms were down at her sides, her hands tightly clenched. An actress could not have done a better job of portraying frightened desperation.

“I was the first to see the horrible dwarf woman. She—the thing—attacked me. She had a chisel, a carpenter's chisel, and it was razor sharp when she struck me with it.” She pressed her hands to her cheeks, squeezing. “Oh my God, it was awful!” She began to tremble.

Gard McKim jumped to her side, put his arm around her shoulders. “Get hold of yourself, Grace,” he urged. “This is no time to throw a wing-ding.”

Mrs. Fain moistened her lips.

“It was Lys Smith,” she said.

Gard McKim jumped violently. “What the hell!”

“It was.”

“Now wait a minute!” McKim didn't get it. “You said this was a dwarf. And now you say—”

“It was both.”

“You mean the midget was Lys?”

“Yes. But not Lys like we knew her. This was a horrible shrunken thing, and it was insane, I know it was. A hideous, little, bloodthirsty horror!”

Mrs. Fain burst into tears.

Gard McKim had been the most incredulous, the most unbelieving, of the lot of them. But now, and this was surprising, he was the one who seemed to accept the goofy story as a fact.

“I'll be damned!” he said. His eyes, made round and porcinely predatory by nature, grew rounder from surprise. “I'll be damned!”

Doc Savage said nothing. He was watching them closely.

Faye Linsky moved back a step. She lifted a hand, but didn't finish whatever gesture she had intended to make. She said, “The story going over town—the man Blake, that Ginsmetz woman—they saw. . . .” She did make a gesture now. It was of disbelief. “I don't believe it!” she exclaimed.

Gard McKim still had one arm around Mrs. Fain's shoulders. He used his free hand to give his jaw a vigorous rubbing.

“I wish to God we knew what happened in that laboratory last night,” he said.

Doc Savage spoke quietly. He said, “Why couldn't we look in the laboratory. The setup of equipment might tell us what Fain was doing.”

McKim shook his head.

“It wouldn't tell me anything.” He was positive they wouldn't learn anything. “I'm a businessman, not a scientist. I don't know a positive electron from a negative one.”

“I might be able to tell something,” Doc said.

Mrs. Fain took hold of herself with quite an obvious effort. “We'll look,” she said. “I feel we should look.”

THE laboratory was not locked. Doc shoved the door open, entered first. He saw that the place was excellently equipped, saw apparatus which he himself did not possess, but wished he did. But about a third of the laboratory was a ruin.

Gard McKim yelled. “Somebody's smashed the place to bits!” He pointed excitedly.

“Not quite to bits.” Doc Savage eyed the damage thoughtfully. “But enough.”

“So much is ruined that you couldn't tell what John Fain was working on?” McKim demanded.

“That's right.”

Gard McKim said he would be damned, totally damned. He sounded as if a little more of this would start him screeching.

“No use wasting time here,” Doc said. “Where is John Fain?”

Mrs. Fain wheeled suddenly, dashed out of the laboratory. Surprised, Doc ran after her, only to discover that she had stopped outside and was waiting. She looked ashamed. “I couldn't stand it in there,” she explained.

“Do you know where your husband is?”

She nodded. “The farm.”

“Farm?”

“Well, it's really our place on the river. About ten miles out.”

“Have you a car?”

“Yes.”

Gard McKim asked, “Can all of us go along?”

Doc said he saw no reason why not.

Chapter VIII

RURAL breezes, laden with the aroma of clover and wildflowers, stirred the tall hollyhocks that had overgrown what had once been a garden spot beside the farmhouse, making them bow gently in concert as if a day of mourning was in effect. This effect of sobriety was further carried out by the river, which now lay in deep shadow because the sun was behind a hill. It had a darksome appearance, as if the black ribbon from a funeral wreath had come untied and dropped there in the valley. The breeze, freshening now that the sun was going away with its stuporizing warmth, moved among the trees and around the clapboarded corners of the farmhouse, made sighing sounds that were remorseful. These sighings accentuated the stifled sobbing of the woman inside the farmhouse.

Mrs. John Fain did not cry loudly, but she cried with deep emotion and continuously, holding a dab of white handkerchief to her eyes.

Presently Doc Savage came in from outdoors and said, “He's gone. I think he has been gone three or four hours.”

Mrs. Fain stopped her sobbing long enough to make an announcement. She said, “I know he's dead.”

Faye Linsky said, “There's nothing to indicate any such thing, darling.” Her sympathy did not sound quite genuine, probably because she was frightened.

Gard McKim rubbed his hands. “He's probably all right, Grace.” His hands sounded like sandpaper.

Doc Savage did not join in the cheering-up.

He said: “He was gotten by two men.”

“Yes, we could all see the signs,” McKim said. He seemed to think it was unnecessary to discuss what had happened.

“Mrs. Fain,” Doc said. “Stop that sobbing.”

He had spoken without thinking, but his request got results that surprised him. Mrs. Fain ceased crying. “You must find my husband,” she said.

“How was he dressed when you last saw him?” Doc asked.

She pondered. “A blue suit,” she said. After more thought, she added a blue-striped shirt, blue-and red regimental tie, red handkerchief, black hat and black shoes to her husband's ensemble.

“And just what did he say?” Doc asked. “Before he left.”

She fumbled in her purse. “Here, you can see for yourself.”

Surprised, Doc wondered if she had taken the conversation down in shorthand or something. But it developed otherwise, because she handed him a slip of paper with typewriting on it which said:

Faye Linsky has gone to New York to meet a man named Doc Savage. She will bring him to Hammond City. When she comes, please fetch Savage to the farm. I will be there. Do not speak to anyone about this matter or what happened last night.

John

The signature was pencil-written.

“His signature?” Doc asked.

“Why, I think—” Mrs. Fain took the note, examined it. “Yes, I think so.”

“Let me see,” Gard McKim said. Later he added, “It's Fain's signature, all right.”

“How was this delivered to you, Mrs. Fain?” Doc asked.

“By a taxi driver.”

“Did that strike you as strange?”

“Why should it?” The woman seemed surprised.

“Then it wasn't unusual?”

“The note being delivered? No, John often did that.” Her eyes swam with moisture, and she used the handkerchief again.

A shadow darkened the window.

Doc Savage sprang suddenly, wildly, knocking Mrs. Fain off balance, lifting her, carrying her to the other side of the room.

The suddenness of the move and its violence held everyone rigid for a moment, then Faye Linsky jumped also and screamed, not because she was scared, but because she thought something had happened and she should jump and scream. Gard McKim burst out laughing.

“Ho, ho!” McKim roared. “That was a hawk or something flew over. My god, you're jittery!”

Doc looked sheepish.

“Jittery is right,” he said.

He went over and picked up Mrs. Fain's handkerchief, which she had dropped, and handed it to her. He then looked out through the door, eyed a circling hawk, said, “It was a hawk.”

Mrs. Fain was pulling at her handkerchief, staring at it as she did so. “Can't we do something besides stand here and ask questions? Can't we find John?” She dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief.

“Have you a suggestion?” Doc asked.

She shook her head.

Gard McKim stared at Doc. “Mean to tell me you're up a tree?” he demanded.

“Not necessarily.”

“Then you've got a plan?”

“Not yet.”

Gard McKim snorted. “I should think it's time you had a plan.” He sounded disgusted.

Doc Savage rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, moved around the room, picked a kettle off the stove and looked in it. It was empty. He lifted a broom thoughtfully, eyed a pale scattering of white drops; spilled sugar he found when he tasted it. He kicked a slice of onion on the floor, noted potato peelings in the garbage pail and saw they were very old. He asked, “How long since you have used the place?”

Mrs. Fain pondered. “Weeks,” she said.

Doc went outside again. He looked at the footprints.

The footprints indicated as plainly as signs could indicate that two men had dragged another man from the house. They had hauled him through the dust, his heels raking the dust, and put him in a car. The car tires had knob tread on the rear wheels.

“We might as well go back to town,” Doc said.

Mrs. Fain became offended by the expression on Gard McKim's face. McKim's expression said he did not think much of Doc Savage. It said: This guy is a bust as a detective. He hasn't done anything yet but jump from a hawk's shadow.

Mrs. Fain said, “Gard, Mr. Savage will solve this thing; I know he will.”

Gard McKim grinned at Doc Savage. “Being big and bronzed and handsome always gets them, doesn't it?” he said.

Doc thought: I hope I get a good excuse to swat this guy on the nose.

MRS. GIGGINS, the Fain cook, was a woman of girth and emphasis, gifted with a fire engine red face and a rafter-shaking voice. And a Swedish accent worthy of a radio comedian. She met them at the door, displaying indignation.

“Aye got fine yob,” she said. “But aye tank it bane run me nuts.” She settled lobster-colored fists on her hips. “Aye von't answer telephone no more, so help me Yoseph,” she added.

“What's the trouble, Mrs. Giggins?” Gard McKim asked.

“Aye got enough vithout crazy peoples call,” said Mrs. Giggins.

McKim made his voice soothing. “You mustn't get upset, Mrs. Giggins. A tragedy has befallen the household, and we must all be patient. Naturally there are going to be a lot of telephone calls from the newspaper people, from friends, and of course from a few cranks. But you'll have to be patient.”

Mrs. Giggins didn't think so. “I yoost got about enough,” she said. She snorted loudly. “Drawin' pictures bane last straw.”

Doc's curiosity was aroused. “Pictures?” he said. “What do you mean?”

“Wait sax seconds, aye show you.” Mrs. Giggins vanished into the house, returned with a sheet of tablet paper which she presented for inspection. “Dummoxes,” she said.

The picture bore a crude drawing of two objects, only one of which Doc could identify. The one he made out was a picture of some kind of an animal. Mrs. Giggins spoke continuously while he was looking at the drawings. She said the person who had called on the telephone, a man, had sounded perfectly sane when he asked her to make the drawing. The second drawing was that of a line about two inches long

with a crook on the end. What convinced her the caller was nuts, explained Mrs. Giggins, was his asking her to show the drawing to any and every man who visited the Fain house.

Gard McKim said, “That's crazy. That *is* crazy, isn't it.”

“What kind of an animal is this supposed to be?” Doc asked.

“A wild dog.”

“Wild dog?”

“Yas.”

Gard McKim, looking over Doc's shoulder, demanded. “What's that line with a hook on the end?”

Mrs. Giggins didn't know. The man had told her how to draw the line, and that was all. “Aye tank he got nuts in head,” she said.

“It seems silly,” Doc said.

Mrs. Fain was puzzled. “But why should he want that shown to everyone who came here.”

“Every man,” Doc corrected.

“Probably a nut, as Mrs. Giggins said,” McKim declared. “I think he bane got nuts in head too.”

Mrs. Giggins took offense. “Aye yus don't speak English goot, but you don't need make fun,” she said.

“I was just kidding,” McKim said.

“Aye don't kid.”

Gard McKim looked as if he was going to say the hell with her then. But he didn't. He shrugged.

Doc Savage made an announcement.

“I am going to town,” he said.

“I'll go with—”

Doc shook his head at Gard McKim.

“Alone,” Doc said.

Chapter IX

HAMMOND CITY was a courthouse square town. The main business houses were on the square and the streets within three or four blocks of the square. On the north side were the theaters, the west side had the ladies' ready to wear and most of the drugstores.

It was now dark enough that the electric signs, bulb and neon, made a nice display, and early enough that the theater crowds were milling on the north side. The taxicab in which Doc Savage was riding made two trips north and south along different streets, after which Doc directed it to follow the east and west streets. Puzzled, the driver said, “Whatcha huntin'? One of the wee people?”

“Eh?” Doc was surprised.

“You know, one of them terrible little people they been seeing around town.”

“Have more of them been seen?” Doc asked.

“So I hear.”

“Do you believe such stuff?”

“I dunno,” the driver said. “It's kind of weird. You take that guy Blake, I've known him for years. He used to drive a hack, too. Told me a while back he wasn't making no dough in the filling station racket and was going back to hacking. If he said it, well I don't know.”

“You do believe it, then?”

“I said I dunno.” But the driver did believe it, his tone proved.

“Just keep driving in the business section,” Doc said. “I'm trying to solve a puzzle.”

He resumed watching the signs on the streets, the names on the business firms. Presently he grinned at a sign that said JAECKEL DRUGSTORE.

“Jackal,” he said. “A wild dog.”

“Huh?” asked the driver.

“Talking to myself,” Doc said. He was pleased with himself. “All right, I leave you here. What's the meter?”

“Two dollars ten.”

The Jaeckel Drugstore was elaborate, probably the largest drugstore in town. Doc Savage glanced approvingly at the banks of fluorescent tubing overhead, at the neat displays. He walked past the long, pale tan fountain with the girl soda jerks in pale tan uniforms and slid into a blond wood booth in the back.

He said, “The straight mark with a hook on the end was easy enough because you always carry a cane. So I surmised it was you. But that wild dog business almost threw me.”

Ham Brooks said, “You figured it out, anyway.”

Doc examined him. “What parted your hair like that?”

“A bullet.” Ham touched the arrangement of gauze and adhesive tape which angled across the top of his head from left front to right back. “Let's get going. I'll tell you about it.”

He picked up his black cane.

HAM, it developed, was driving a small, black coupé with white sidewall tires and soiled upholstery that reeked of spilled whiskey and stale cigarette smoke. Doc commented that the car smelled like a honky-tonk. “Where did you get it?” he demanded.

“Found it in the brush near the quarry pit,” Ham explained. “I think it belonged to one of the three fellows

who tried to kill us."

"Maybe you had better tell me the whole story," Doc suggested.

Ham had dramatic inclinations, this being one of the things which had made him a great courtroom lawyer. He told the story of the flight he and Monk had made to Hammond City, how at the airport they had heard about Blake having been chased by something mysterious, and that a strange kind of story was sweeping the town. Rising in dramatic scale, he told how he and Monk had visited the filling station and had been kidnapped. By the time he got to the abandoned quarry, and Monk and himself about to be killed, he had Doc on edge. "And so the man who had driven their car shot Monk." Ham laughed heartily. "It was the funniest thing I ever saw," he added.

"It sounds very humorous," Doc agreed. He was shocked.

"Oh, this guy forgot Monk was wearing a bulletproof vest," Ham said. "That was the funny part. They had searched us a little before that, and found the vests, but this guy was so excited he forgot about the vests. You should have heard Monk yell. The bullet hit him in the bay window and made him as mad as a hornet."

"What happened?"

"We cleaned house," Ham said. "Or rather Monk did. As mad as he was, he could have licked the German army."

"You catch them?"

"Two got away. We've got one."

"Where?"

"Monk is holding the fellow in the woods near the quarry. We're going to make him talk."

"Then Monk is okay?"

"Except for a sore belly."

Doc leaned back. He was relieved. Also he was amazed by Monk and Ham, as he frequently was. They got into the strangest scrapes, but managed to get out of them somehow every time. This one was a little less zany than the ones they usually got into, but the outcome was about the same. He wished he had seen the fight that followed Monk getting shot. It must have been worth watching.

Ham was driving with reckless abandon. He was pleased with himself. He explained:

"We drew straws, and I got the short one, so I came to town to hunt you up. Monk stayed with our prisoner. I thought I might find you through the Fains, so I telephoned out there. But I was afraid to let anybody know where I was, so I used that drawing gag to tip you off where I could be found."

"Suppose that I hadn't figured out the drawing?" Doc said. "I might not have found you."

"Well, neither would the outfit that wants me and Monk killed," Ham said.

"You two haven't got a monopoly on the killing attempts," Doc said. He described the trip from New York, and the poison which he, or rather Faye Linsky, had found in his coffee in the diner.

"Is this Linsky babe good looking?" Ham asked.

“Aren't you impressed by the fact that someone tried to kill me?” Doc asked. He was disgusted.

“Sure. But what about the babe?”

“She'll pass inspection,” Doc said.

Ham was suspicious. “She's not the mental type? I notice you're inclined to look at their brains instead of their better points.”

“She's moderately brainless,” Doc said.

“DID you bring something to eat?” Monk demanded.

He was sitting crosslegged beside a tree to a branch of which the man named Charlie was hanging by his feet. Charlie's head was barely clear of the ground, his face was distorted and plum-colored, and he was gagged. He looked as if he had a rough time.

“Eat?” Ham said. “What do you want to eat for?”

“To keep alive,” Monk said. “And don't try to be cute and ask me why. I'm starving.”

“I forgot it,” Ham said.

Monk was of the opinion that Ham had forgotten to bring food on purpose. He said so, and tacked on an opinion of Ham and his ancestors, all of whom were pork-eaters according to Monk. This form of insult always enraged Ham, because he had a mania against pork, one of his few peculiar traits.

Doc Savage asked, “Is this one of the fellows who tried to kill you?”

Monk nodded. “His name's Charlie.”

“Charlie what?”

“He prefers not to tell us,” Monk admitted.

Ham yelled. “You mean you've wasted all this time and you haven't got him to talk?”

“Maybe you'd like to try it,” Monk retorted. “This guy is the original no-answer boy.” He indicated Charlie. “I hung him upside down half an hour ago thinking it might make the words run out of him, but none have.”

Doc removed Charlie's gag, said, “Listen fellow, don't you know you are going to have to talk to save your skin?”

Charlie thought deeply for his answer.

“No,” he said

GARD McKIM had changed to evening clothes, a tux and batwing tie, patent leather slippers. The black-and-whites of the outfit gave him a more predatory look than usual, made the eyes with which he was examining Charlie look dark and bright like a crow's.

“There's something familiar about him,” he said. “But I don't know him, I'm sure.”

Doc asked, “Why the familiarity?”

“I've got a damned good memory for faces,” Gard McKim said. “I think the guy must be a resident of Hammond City and I've seen him in the year and a half I've been here, but not to speak to or know his name.”

Doc asked Charlie, “Is that right, Charlie?”

“No,” Charlie said.

Monk Mayfair said, “He's a guy with a vocabulary of one word.”

Ham said, “He had more words than that before we caught him.”

Gard McKim consulted his wrist watch. “I have a Commerce Club meeting at nine,” he said. Doc Savage was surprised to notice that McKim's wrist watch band was also black to harmonize with his monkey suit. McKim added, “What are you going to do with him?”

“Find out if Mrs. Fain or Miss Linsky knows him,” Doc said.

“Oh.”

Mrs. Fain appeared shortly. Doc was surprised to notice how much worse she looked than she had not much more than an hour ago. It made him realize that the woman was under much more of a strain then he had thought.

She didn't know Charlie.

Faye Linsky didn't know Charlie. Monk and Ham looked at Miss Linsky, then looked at each other, and Monk said, “I think one of us should stay right here and guard Miss Linsky and Mrs. Fain.”

“Why? demanded Gard McKim.

“They may be in danger.”

“Nothing of the sort.”

“We don't know,” Monk said ominously. “This is a very mysterious affair, and we don't know what its ramifications are.”

“I'll stay,” Ham offered.

Monk gave him a look that said: I thought of it first, you overdressed shyster, so don't try to horn in on my ideas. The look also said: I'll probably knock your block off if you insist.

Doc Savage had been thinking. “Maybe we had better have Mrs. Giggins, the cook, and Annie Rice, the maid, look at Charlie.”

Gard McKim said angrily, “You're missing the main issue, aren't you?”

“Which is?” Doc asked.

“Finding John Fain.”

Doc said, “Let's see what Mrs. Giggins and Annie Rice say about Charlie.”

Mrs. Giggins was no help. “Aye don't know dot vun,” she said.

But Annie Rice squealed at Charlie. “Charlie!” she cried. “Whatcha doin' here, Charlie?” Charlie was disturbed.

THEY didn't have as much as they thought they had. It seemed that Annie Rice usually made the local bars on her night off, and that she had run into Charlie a time or two and he'd bought her some drinks and taken her for a drive and they'd done some smooching. That was about all; she didn't know Charlie's other name, or where he lived or what he did. But she did know the bars where she'd been with Charlie, and remembered that they'd met men who seemed to know him.

During most of this, Charlie thought of things which he could call Annie Rice, a slut being about the mildest.

Gard McKim became angry at this profanity. He said, “I'll take you in the library, you blackguard, and kick your teeth in!”

“Just take him in the library,” Doc said, “and keep him there.”

McKim flung Charlie into the library, which was the adjoining room. “I'll keep him here,” he said. “I'll leave the door open.”

Monk said he would stand in the door, and would personally hold Charlie's head up like a teed golf ball so McKim could knock it off if the man didn't stop cussing.

Annie Rice stopped to give her opinion of Charlie, which about made them even, Doc thought. She knew a couple of words that surprised him, and he looked to see if the ladies were blushing. The Linsky girl was, but Mrs. Fain wasn't.

“He's just a fella around town,” Annie Rice finished.

“Do you know any of his associates by name?” asked Doc.

“Nah, I don't remember.”

“Thank you very much,” Doc said. He was anxious to get the maid back to her job before she did some more swearing.

Ham Brooks said, “Now we're getting someplace. We'll take this Charlie around the joints and somebody's sure to know who he pals with. We corner some of the pals and we've opened up a line of investigation that'll lead to somebody.”

There was a yell in the library. Gard McKim yelled, “Here! Stop that!” A blow sounded. “Ouch!” McKim howled. There was a falling noise. Rattle of feet. Glass breaking. Wood snapping. Glass falling jangling to a floor, and more hammering of feet.

Monk shouted, “Hey!” He whirled, dashed into the library.

Doc ran to the library door, through it, saw Monk going through the large French windows, saw Gard McKim getting up off the floor. McKim's nose was bleeding. He was angry.

There was a shotgun among several other arms in a gun cabinet beside the fireplace. McKim ran to that, yanked the cabinet open, got out a shotgun, scooped up shells from a box. He was remarkably fast about this, and had the gun loaded by the time he and Doc gained the terrace outside.

Charlie was taking long running steps across the lawn with Monk in pursuit. Monk was gaining.

McKim threw up the shotgun, aimed.

Doc knocked the gun down.

Gard McKim said, “I can blow the hell out of that Charlie!” He sounded bloodthirsty.

Doc said, “We want him in shape to question him.” He twisted, got the gun. “Come on. He won't get away.”

Charlie and Monk vanished into the shrubbery.

Doc took up the chase. McKim followed, making some specific remarks about what he thought of not being allowed to shoot Charlie. “The blighter hit me in the nose!” McKim complained.

Doc ran with all the speed possible, left McKim and his complaints behind. Sounds of smashing in the brush guided Doc; then this sound ceased. Puzzled, Doc called, “Monk!”

“Here.”

“Where is he?”

“Right here.”

Doc presently found Monk standing over Charlie, who was on the ground, his face congested, his mouth gaping, his hands clutching spasmodically.

“He don't feel so good,” Monk said. “He just fell over.”

Doc went to a knee. His examination was quick, and after he had caught the odor on Charlie's breath, he gave his opinion.

“Nicotine poisoning,” he said.

Presently Charlie was dead.

Chapter X

PATRICK HENNESSY McGUIRE, Police Chief of Hammond City, was a tall sunburned Ulsterman with a stubby black pipe fixed in his teeth as if it had grown there, a pleasant voice, and a reasonable manner. He sat behind a golden oak desk marked with cigarette burns in his office at police headquarters, and carefully built a log cabin out of the kitchen matches in the ash tray on his desk while he listened to Dan Edgar, the coroner, tell what had killed Charlie. The coroner finished, “It was nicotine poisoning, as Mr. Savage said.”

Chief of Police McGuire asked a reasonable question.

“Who the hell gave him the poison?” he asked.

“Maybe he took it himself.”

“Why?”

“He was in a mess.”

McGuire admitted, “Sure, and he was at that.” He turned to Monk Mayfair and asked, “Didn't you search this Charlie?”

“I searched him,” Monk said.

“You sure he didn't have this poison hid on him?”

“I didn't think he had,” Monk said. “But only the Lord is infallible, and I haven't got any wings, so he might have had.”

McGuire fiddled with his log cabin of matches. He was trying to make the roof. He made a bobble, and one wall fell down. He swore. “Well, it's damned funny,” he said.

Doc Savage said, “A lot of strange things have happened, but one definite thread runs through them all.”

“You mean somebody doesn't want you here in Hammond City?” McGuire asked.

Doc nodded. “Yes. First, the attempt to get us on a wild goose chase on a boat going to France. Then the attempt to kidnap and murder Monk and Ham. The try at poisoning me on the train. Then . . .”

“That thing on the train,” interrupted McGuire. “That's screwy. Where did the tall, red-headed man go?”

“I didn't see him.”

“This Miss Faye Linsky says she saw him.”

“Yes, but I didn't, and we didn't find him on the train when we looked.”

“Was the train going too fast for him to jump off?”

“If he jumped off, it didn't do him any good,” Doc said. “The train was going about sixty miles an hour the whole time.”

“He must've crawled on top of the coaches, or something.”

“Something, all right.”

McGuire looked at Doc. “I called the New York police about you,” he said. “They say you're okay, and I won't lose anything by coöperating with you. So that's what I want to do.”

“Thank you, chief.”

“You got any ideas?”

“Two or three,” Doc said.

“Let's hear them.”

DOC SAVAGE said there were some people he thought they ought to investigate. One was the man called Alvy, the taxi driver who had picked up Monk and Ham at the airport on their arrival. “While we're at it, we might give the other men, who were at the airport when Monk arrived a checking,” Doc added. “The idea is that somebody tipped off the three men, Charlie and the other pair, when Monk and Ham arrived.”

“That's a lead.” Police Chief McGuire was pleased. He started rebuilding his cabin.

Another fellow they should investigate, Doc continued, was Blake, the man at the filling station. “The fellow made a telephone call while Monk and Ham were there,” Doc explained. “He could have been calling the kidnappers. Monk and Ham seem to think there wasn't much time between the call Blake made and the appearance of the kidnappers, but they might have been in the near neighborhood.”

“I already got a man on Blake,” McGuire said. He placed two matches carefully. “Maybe it was him that did the tipping.”

“Quite possible,” Doc admitted. “The people behind this, knowing we would have to come to Hammond City to investigate the mystery of the little person, could have been reasonably certain we would question Blake about the first thing. So they could have had their ambush ready.”

McGuire became enthusiastic. “Sure. They even could have had Blake lie about something getting after him and spread the story. That would have been bait to get you to the filling station where they could lay hands on you.”

Doc was pleased also. He said, “Of course, it doesn't prove Blake is guilty. Blake could have been in earnest with his story, and the gang, hearing of it, could have had the ambush planted for us when we appeared, as they could have surmised we would.”

Ham Brooks entered. He was wiping his forehead with an immaculate handkerchief. He said, “Well, I described Charlie's two pals until I got blue in the face. If they don't pick them up from that description, they can't be picked up.”

“We're not infallible,” said Chief McGuire modestly.

A uniformed officer entered. “Chief!” he said. “There's another woman seen it.” He was excited.

“Seen what?” McGuire demanded.

“The wee person.”

“The hell you say!” McGuire was amazed. “That's the third one already tonight.” He turned back to the officer. “Who was it this time, Mike?”

“Old maid on Gale Street,” Mike said. “We're going out there now.”

McGuire looked at Doc Savage, Monk and Ham. “You want to go along and see what's what?”

They did.

THE house was on Gale north of Fourteenth Avenue, a modest cottage among many flowers and vines. They could see a small crowd around the place when they were two blocks away, and Chief McGuire said, “It takes something crazy to get people excited.”

Mike said, “I know this dame.” He grinned. “Three times she's called us this year. Same thing every time. A guy under her bed.”

“What was he doing there?” McGuire wanted to know.

“He wasn't. He was imaginary.”

“The hell!” McGuire lit his pipe. “Old maid, eh? Must be a goony.”

“Sure,” Mike said. “Goony as they come.”

The lady's name was Miss Tiller, and she could make a great deal of noise. She had a shrill calliope-like voice and a way of using six words to do the work of one. She didn't like them immediately. “Well, you took your time getting here!” she snapped.

“Lady,” said Chief McGuire, “we got here quick, and you know it.”

Miss Tiller's opening accusation was the only short-winded statement she made. It took them five minutes to find out that she had gone out on her back porch to lock the screen door and had seen a little fiend in the form of a woman about eighteen inches high carrying a knife of about equal length, and wearing an utterly fiendish expression. The general impression was that Miss Tiller had barely escaped back into the house with her life.

“Only eighteen inches high.” Chief McGuire was masking a grin. “Surely you weren't afraid of such a little woman.”

Miss Tiller said: “It wasn't any ordinary woman who could move in an ordinary way because this thing could move fast as a flash and jump higher than my head and wave that awful little knife at my throat as if she were going to cut it if I hadn't got away, back into the house and slammed the door before she got at my throat and that made her mad so that she jumped up and shot right out through the porch screen tearing a hole right in the screen wire and the hole I can show you.”

The Chief wiped his forehead.

“Let's see this hole,” he requested.

He was somewhat astonished when the aperture in the porch screen was shown him, and further bemused when he made a close inspection and ascertained, from the unrusted condition of the places where the wire had broken, that the break was recent.

Doc Savage pointed out: “Except for the broken ends, the wire is rusty, and you can see where the rust, which was knocked off the screen by the blow, fell on drops of dew which had gathered on the railing. The rust specks are floating on top of the dew drops, indicating the break was made tonight.”

“You trying to scare me?” McGuire demanded.

Doc said, “We both know there aren't people eighteen inches high. Anyway, the other reports were of a wild girl two feet high.”

McGuire grinned. “The other one must have been a giantess.”

But he was displeased with the situation.

Doc Savage said, “We had better look around some more.”

They found there was a cement sidewalk under the hole in the screen, a walk about three feet wide which ran around the house, and on which dew had gathered. But it was impossible to learn anything from the tracks because there were too many. The neighbors had trampled all over the place. The excited shrieking of Miss Tiller had created plenty of commotion.

Doc listened to some of the talk. A fat woman was saying to a small man: “Dan, don't you dare go to work and leave me alone in that house. I won't stay there. I won't for a minute. I'll go home to Mama.”

Dan was her husband, and he evidently thought that he would enjoy it if she went home to Mama. But he didn't say that. He spit on the sidewalk and said, “You women are nuts.”

“I don't care,” his wife said. “You're going to stay right with me. We're going to lock all the doors and windows, keep the dog in the house and load the shotgun.”

“What about my job in the plant?” Dan demanded.

His wife spoke further, wishing to know which he valued more, his job or her.

Chief McGuire was disturbed.

“That's going on all over town,” he said. “And that's bad.”

Doc Savage observed a photographer taking photoflash pictures of the scene. He saw that it was Carl Brunow of the *Tribune,* the fellow with whom he'd had some trouble at the railway station.

“If the newspapers play up the goofy angle of this,” Doc Savage told McGuire, “it isn't going to help the situation.”

“That's right.”

“Why don't you suggest to Brunow that they play it down?”

“That's an idea.” Chief McGuire went over and talked to Carl Brunow. Presently their voices rose in an argument, and the reporter-photographer said, “You can go straight to hell! The press prints what it wants to in this town.”

“He doesn't want to coöperate,” McGuire reported when he returned.

“Who does that fellow think he is?” Doc asked.

“His old man owns the paper.”

“Oh.”

“He's a stinker from far up the creek.”

WHEN they were back at the police station, Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks suggested that, if Doc didn't have anything else for them to do, they'd like to hang around the station and engage in wee people hunting with the cops.

“The Associated Press has got a man down here already,” Monk reported.

Doc Savage frowned. “The newspapers are getting ready to make a Roman holiday out of the thing,

apparently."

"You can't blame them much. Something as crazy as this doesn't happen every day."

Doc admitted this was true. "But it's going to affect absenteeism at the Electrar Corporation plant, and they're doing essential war work. This thing, if it really gets going, could shut the plant down."

Ham Brooks started. "Do you suppose that's the purpose behind it?"

Monk asked, "Who would do that?"

"Oh, Nazis or Japs."

Monk was skeptical. "It looks to me like burning down the house to get rid of one bedbug."

"Well, there's something behind it."

Doc Savage said, "Chasing around phantom hunting may entertain you fellows, but we really should be doing something constructive."

"For example?" Ham was curious.

"Well, let's go over the Fain ménage," Doc suggested. "For one thing, Monk, you investigate Mrs. Fain's past. Ham, you take Gard McKim. Don't be conspicuous about it, but don't miss anything for say, the last five years."

"I'd rather take Miss Linsky," Monk said.

Ham was discouraged also. "Gard McKim, eh? That'll mean a lot of work by telephone. I understand he hasn't been here over a year and a half."

Monk eyed Doc. "What are you going to do, Doc?"

"Take Miss Linsky," Doc said. "What do you suppose?"

Chapter XI

MRS. JOHN FAIN was darkly dressed and her face was pale, but composed, set in the expression of a martyred saint made of plaster. She spoke in a voice surprisingly gone, milked of feeling.

She said "Miss Linsky? She's in the hospital."

"She is!" Doc was astonished. "What happened?"

"She says she was afraid she was going to collapse."

"Who took her?"

"She went herself."

"What hospital?"

Mrs. Fain looked startled. She put her fingertips against her cheek. "Why, it's—I've forgotten. Isn't that silly of me. I must be upset myself."

Mrs. Giggins had overheard. She said, “Aye took telephone call. She bane in Central.”

Mrs. Fain was relieved. “That's right.”

Mrs. Giggins said, “Aye wish cop was watch the telephone. All kinds noots bane call oop.”

Doc inquired what kind of nuts were calling up, and it developed that they were Hammond City citizens who were disturbed about the excitement and were blaming the Fains. They wanted to *know* whether John Fain had accidentally released some kind of a horror on the town.

“I'm worried,” said Mrs. Fain. “Gard McKim had to go back to the plant, and he'll have to get some sleep sometime tonight. That's going to leave me alone here. I'm afraid to be alone. Mr. Savage, you'll have to stay.”

Doc said he had an idea. He said, “I'll call Chief McGuire and have him station a policeman here to take care of the nuts on the telephone and serve as bodyguard.”

Mrs. Fain seemed about to object, but she didn't. “I suppose that would be all right,” she said. “Yes, I'm sure it will. It'll leave you free to hunt my husband.”

Doc telephoned McGuire.

“Sure,” the police officer said. “It's a good notion. I'll have Bill Spencer up there in two shakes.”

Two shakes proved to be about fifteen minutes. Bill Spencer was a fortyish policeman with cheeks the color of Jonathan apples. He was no hick cop, his manners indicated. Doc was astonished to see that he had brought a recording machine, which he proceeded to attach to the telephone. He explained, “There might be some significance to one of these nut calls, and McGuire thought we might as well record them.”

CENTRAL HOSPITAL was located on the hill in the better north side residential district, a rambling two-storied brick building with a coating of Boston ivy.

After an extended argument, the receptionist called a doctor, who at first was obstinate. He said, “Miss Linsky is obviously suffering from strain, and she did the right thing in coming here. If more people would come to hospitals when . . .”

He stopped and pondered. He examined Doc Savage intently. “Savage,” he said. “Did the receptionist say your name was Doc Savage?”

Doc admitted this.

The doctor flushed.

“Good Lord!” He was impressed. “I'm making a twenty-four carat ass out of myself, telling you what people should do about doctors and hospitals. You're the fellow who developed the new surgical method for paranoia, aren't you?” He conducted Doc to a room, explaining, “I examined Miss Linsky, and she shows signs of great nervous strain, although I'll confess I was surprised that she came to the hospital for treatment. Usually they wait until their physical symptoms drive them here, or until it's almost too late.” He opened the door of a room, added, “Anything we can do, let me know.”

“You give Miss Linsky nembutal?”

“Yes. Not a heavy dose, however. You can awaken her.”

Doc entered the room, closing the door. Faye Linsky was breathing regularly and deeply, had her eyes closed, but Doc decided after he had watched her for a while that she was not asleep.

He said, “So you were afraid they'd kill you, too.”

She kept her eyes closed.

“Cut it out,” he said. “You're not asleep. It takes a thief to catch a thief and a doctor to fool a doctor.”

She opened her eyes then. “You're talking strangely,” she said.

“The truth sound strange?”

She didn't say anything.

He added, “I figured out why we didn't find the red-headed man on the train whom you said put poison in my coffee.”

Fear made her eyes round and bright. She didn't speak.

“There wasn't any red-headed man,” he said. “You put the stuff in my coffee yourself when you laid your hand over the cup to keep me from drinking it.”

Her lips moved without sound, but he could see that she was asking, “Did you see me?”

He shook his head.

“Deduction,” he said.

IT was very dark outdoors, and the blackness gave the night breeze an animal breath quality which the warmth of the air enhanced. The milk-colored window curtains stirred restlessly, switched at the bottoms, and somewhere in the distance and the sky there was noise of a passing multi-motored airplane.

Faye Linsky began to sob softly, and for a while there was only the dry sounds of her sobs in the room.

Doc said, “What upset you? The murder?”

She covered her face with her hands, asked, “Was—was Charlie murdered?”

“Of course.” Doc watched her. “You know he was.”

“I didn't—” She hesitated, pressed her fingers tighter against her cheeks, said, “I didn't know that.”

“But you thought so.”

She didn't say anything.

Doc leaned forward. “Look, you're in this pretty deep, but possibly not too deep to keep out of the electric chair—or to keep your associates from killing you. They will kill you, you know.”

He knew, from the flash of terror across her face, that she was afraid of being killed. He guessed the rest, added, “That's why you came to the hospital, to be safe. However, I doubt if that will guarantee security. Remember Charlie? Poisoned right under our noses.”

This got no response.

He shrugged. “I have it fairly well worked out,” he said. “We won't really need your help.”

No answer.

He added, “Your job, or course, was to come to New York and meet me, get in my confidence. That trick on the train wasn't an attempt to poison me at all, but an attempt to establish yourself in my confidence. You had saved my life, so I would be grateful. As an extra touch, of course, you put some nicotine in your own coffee on the train.”

She spoke. Again it was lip movements rather than words with sound. “Who told you?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Nothing but the facts told me,” he explained. “When my suspicions began to shape up, it was fairly evident that the only place you fitted was the part of spying on me and reporting what I learned and what I was going to do.”

She was silent again.

“Your following me in New York,” he added, “was rather fishy, too. And people trailing me as you described. I think I'd have noticed such a procession. There wasn't any, was there?”

“No.”

He waited for a while. She was stewing, and it was doing her good. Finally he said, “How would you like to tell me where John Fain is.”

“What good would that do?”

“It would wind things up, and you know it.”

That scared her. It shocked her more than anything he had said previously. “What would happen to me?” she wanted to know.

“A minor accomplice.” He shrugged. “You have a nice leg to show the jury. You might get off with a suspended sentence if you were of some help.”

She thought about it for a long time. Five minutes at least.

She said. “I'm going to tell you just one thing. It's all I know, really.”

“What?”

“Where John Fain is.”

“Where?”

“At home,” she said.

AT the reception desk, Doc Savage used the telephone to call police headquarters. Chief McGuire was not there; he had gone home to get some sleep. Doc called McGuire's residence number, and his wife said she would call him.

“Something come up?” McGuire didn't sound sleepy.

“I wanted you to start your men doing something for me,” Doc said. “And then you can go back to sleep.”

“Shoot.”

“I want to know all there is to be known about Faye Linsky's background.”

“Linsky? Oh, that's the girl who is a friend of the Fain's. Just what do you want to know?”

“Her past,” Doc said. “And I don't mean whether or not she has been in jail, because probably she hasn't. What I want to know is all we can find about her family, her relatives, her past associations, close friends at school and that sort of thing.”

“She in this?”

“Up to her pretty ears.”

McGuire chuckled. “She has got pretty ears at that.” He spoke cautiously, as though his wife might be in the neighborhood. “I think I'll take that angle myself. I don't feel a damned bit sleepy. You know, this thing has got me upset. You've no idea how crazy this town is going. Everybody is beginning to see wee people.”

“There is no justification for them seeing any.”

“I know, but that isn't keeping them from seeing 'em.”

Doc said, “I know that, with you on Miss Linsky's trail, we'll uncover something.”

“Thanks.”

“There's one other thing.”

“There is!”

“Miss Linsky is in the Central hospital, and I think it would be a good idea to put a guard over her.”

“What the hell's wrong with her?”

“A violent attack of conscience complicated by fear.”

“Huh?”

“It doesn't make much sense yet,” Doc said.

“Who's she afraid of?”

“The people who killed Charlie to shut him up. She's afraid she may know too much, too.”

“I'll be damned,” McGuire said. “I'll have a man right over there. If this keeps up, I'm going to run short of cops.”

“It won't keep up much longer.”

“Let's hope.”

Doc Savage waited at the hospital until McGuire's officer arrived. He talked to the man long enough to decide that he was an alert fellow, and to impress on the cop that Miss Linsky's life might be in danger.

Chapter XII

MONK MAYFAIR said, “What've I got on Mrs. Fain? My God, you expect quick results, don't you?”

“What have you been doing, phantom chasing?” Doc asked.

Monk grinned. “Well, she came from Chicago. I dug that out of a member of her bridge club, and I got the Chicago police on the telephone, and sure enough, the lady's name was in the city directory of two years ago. From the directory, the cops were able to give me the names of some of her neighbors. Of course she was living there at the time under her maiden name of McKim and . . .”

“Wait a minute!” Doc was surprised.

Monk grinned.

“Yeh, it struck me, too.”

“McKim, you say?”

“That was Mrs. John Fain's maiden name, yes.”

“Any relation to Gard McKim?”

“That's what Ham is trying to find out.”

“Oh.” Doc pondered. “Did you ask Mrs. McKim's, or Mrs. Fain's Chicago neighbors anything about the lady?”

“Yep. They said she was okay. An average sort of a lively woman. Quite a lot of parties and that sort of thing, but nothing bad, particularly. She wasn't a working girl. She seemed to have a little money, and she didn't live on too flourishing a scale, although she did have a fairly snazzy medium-priced roadster, and she traveled in the better circles.”

“What do you mean by better circles?”

“The circles where an unmarried gal her age would be likely to meet and fascinate a nice guy with quite a lot of money.”

“Nothing against her, then?”

“No.”

“Where is Ham?”

“In the room where the telephone switchboard is,” Monk explained. He added maliciously, “They got a pretty telephone operator.”

DOC found Ham. Ham looked guilty. He had been leaning over the board talking to the operator, and the operator was giggling.

“Working hard?” Doc asked.

With the bustling energy of a man trying to make it appear that he had been as busy as a beaver, Ham rushed into a report of his activities, making it as wordy as possible to give it more impressive substance.

He said: “Gard McKim came from Chicago, where he was in the airplane brokerage business. He bought and sold airplanes, and was what they call an airplane consultant, which I take to be more of a promoter than anything else.”

The telephone operator, a honey blond, was looking at Doc Savage with interest. He was returning the inspection.

Ham continued: “Gard McKim's outfit folded up about two years ago, probably because of the war and what it did to the airplane business for civilians. Anyway, there was some money lost, but McKim straightened it out all right.”

Doc asked, “Did you talk to anyone who knew him in private life?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of a private life did he lead?”

“Okay, as far as I could learn. He's been married twice, but so have lots of other guys. His credit rating was okay, as far as I could learn.”

“I see.”

Ham said, “That's all I have dug up so far. Of course, I've only had a couple of hours to work.” He sounded as if he, personally, thought he had done darned well.

Doc thought he had too, so he said, “That's a lot of information for so short a time.”

DOC SAVAGE contemplated the windows absently. He wished they could get their hands on something definite. He wasn't entirely satisfied that his theories were correct.

They had missed a night's sleep, he saw. The window faced the east, and a flush of dawn was in the sky, suffusing a packed layer of stratocumulus clouds with the color of watermelon flesh.

Ham said, “Want me to keep at it?”

Doc consulted his watch.

“Yes,” he said. “But I think it would save time if you would call Gard McKim and get his own story of his past, then check on it.”

Ham grinned. “The guy's a big shot. He may not like the idea of being investigated.”

“On the contrary, I imagine he will welcome it,” Doc said.

“Yeah?” Ham was skeptical.

“Certainly. He won't want any suspicion attached to himself.”

“Oh.”

Doc buttoned his coat. “I'll see you later. I'm going out to the Fain home.”

“Anything particular out there?”

Doc said, “You might call out there and check with me about once every hour.”

Ham nodded.

A drop on the telephone girl's switchboard whirred. She inserted a plug, said, “City offices,” and listened. “For you, Mr. Savage,” she said.

It was the police officer Doc had left at the hospital to guard Miss Faye Linsky. The cop was as mad as he could be and still speak coherently.

“She got away,” he said.

“Miss Linsky?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Tied some sheets together and slipped out of her room.”

“She left of her own accord, then?”

“Yes.”

“In that case,” Doc reassured the officer, “I don't think any harm has been done.”

The cop thought differently. “Chief McGuire is going to eat a leg off me,” he said gloomily.

HAM BROOKS watched Doc Savage leave, and Ham was suspicious. “I think Doc's got this thing about cracked. I think he's maneuvering these crooks into stubbing their toes, and doing it so smoothly that nobody notices anything unnatural happening.”

The phone girl said, “He's very handsome, isn't he?” Her voice was admiring.

Ham looked at the operator. He thought she was lovely. He decided this was the time for a good lie. He said, “Doc's secretly married.”

“Oh!” The girl was shocked and disappointed.

Ham thought he might as well toss in another one.

“That Monk Mayfair is married, too,” he said.

“Oh.”

Ham grinned. “How about that date we were talking about when we were interrupted, baby?”

The girl looked shocked. “Aren't you ashamed of yourself?” she demanded.

“Me?” Ham was surprised.

“I know all about your wife and thirteen poor children in a home for the feeble-minded,” the girl said.

Ham turned somewhat purple. “You believe a yarn as goofy as that?”

“Why not?” She shrugged. “Anyway, my boy friend wouldn't like it if I went out with you.”

Ham went hunting Monk Mayfair. “You got a nerve,” Ham complained bitterly. “If you've got to lie about me, why does it always have to be that goofy yarn about me having a wife and thirteen children?”

“Half-witted children,” Monk corrected. “I always put that in.”

The two stared at each other bitterly. It was an argument of long standing, and they couldn't think of a fresh approach to it at the moment. Ham gave up and snorted.

“I got to go talk to Gard McKim about himself,” he said. “You got time to go along?”

“I guess so,” Monk said. “We've got to eat breakfast some time, too.” They left the police station, Monk yawning and complaining that he wasn't the man he used to be apparently, because he certainly missed a night's sleep.

“GOOD morning, supersleuths,” Gard McKim said brightly. “I'm sure glad you came here. I was just telephoning the police station, and they said you'd gone.”

“We wanted to ask some questions,” Monk said.

Gard McKim, neatly dressed but unshaven, looked excited. He said, “That'll have to wait.”

“Eh?”

“I got a telephone call from John Fain,” McKim said.

Monk and Ham were startled. Monk's mouth merely hung open, but Ham recovered and demanded, “What did he say?”

“I didn't talk to him directly,” McKim said. “But I talked to his laboratory assistant, Lys Smith.”

“The hell you did!” Monk was amazed. “The girl who is supposed to be the wee one that is scaring the hell out of everybody in town?”

“Exactly.”

“How'd she sound?”

“Why, perfectly natural.”

Ham became suspicious. “Are you sure it was Lys Smith?”

“I think so.” Gard McKim pondered. “We'd better be careful, though. It might have been someone else.”

“Well, it's an interesting development anyway,” Monk declared. “What did she have to say?”

“John Fain wants to see us.”

“You mean Doc Savage?”

"Yes."

Ham said, "Doc went out to the Fain home." He picked up the telephone, rubbed his nose until he recalled the Fain home telephone number, and put in the call. Bill Spencer, the cop who was stationed at the Fains, answered the telephone.

He said Doc Savage hadn't put in an appearance. "You want him to call you if he does come?" Spencer demanded.

Monk pondered. "We'll call back," he said. "But tell Doc we've got a line on where John Fain is."

"The hell you have," said Spencer. "Sure, I'll tell him."

Gard McKim's car was a long convertible which looked as if it had just come out of the factory, although it was a pre-war model. Driving out of the parking lot, he said, "The car's not as good as it looks. Half the time I've got it in the garage and have to borrow one of the Fain's cars. John Fain is sure a nice guy about lending his car."

"Why shouldn't he be?" Monk wanted to know. "A man as rich as Fain is shouldn't bother about cars. He's worth a million or so, isn't he?"

"More than that," McKim assured them. "The plant is worth about four million, and John owns it, lock, stock and barrel."

Ham demanded, "Where's Fain now?"

"We go out in the country, place called Indian Woods, the girl said," McKim explained. "I guess he's got a cabin out there nobody knew about. Probably a hideout to go to when his nerves got the best of him and he had to have some real rest."

Monk was interested in John Fain's health. He asked, "What about this nervous breakdown Fain had some time ago?"

"Overwork."

"Was it bad?"

"It had people worried."

"Did he go dingy?" Monk wanted to know. "I mean, did he blow his top, sort of, like people do sometimes when their nerves get to the ragged edge?"

Gard McKim looked uncomfortable. "I would prefer that you fellows didn't scatter it all over town, but Mr. Fain was very ill. It scared the devil out of him, and it scared all of us. Since then, he has had to be very careful. The doctors said that the least sort of worry might push him over the edge."

"Oh, John Fain was in danger of going crazy, then?"

"Well, that's what it amounted to."

Monk looked pleased with an idea which had occurred to him. "Maybe Fain went nuts, and the whole case is the result of his craziness."

McKim looked at them. He moistened his lips. "Boys, the same thing has occurred to me." He stared straight ahead at the winding country road. "Poor John. We're all very much his friends, and if this does

prove to be the result of dementia, we'll carry on."

"Who will take charge in that case? Of the plant, I mean?"

"Oh, Mrs. Fain, I imagine," Gard McKim said. "To tell the truth, I hadn't given much thought to it."

INDIAN WOODS was a stretch of thickly overgrown timberland, a damp and somber place that smelled of flowers and wet wood. They parked the car in a clearing where there were signs of picnicking in the past, and got out and looked around.

"John!" Gard McKim called.

His shout silenced the song birds who were noisy in the trees, but got no other result. Nor did three other yells.

"That's queer," McKim complained. "Let's look around."

They began wading through the undergrowth and the weeds, and discovered there had been an unusually heavy dew the night before. McKim complained, "A man needs boots."

"He needs a diving suit," Ham said.

Monk looked at the clouds in the sky. Monk was the old-fashioned type of weather man, and still clung to the conviction that there couldn't be any dew when the sky was cloudy. Clear nights, lots of dew; cloudy nights, no dew. But there was lots of dew this morning in spite of the cloudy sky. He complained about this contrariness of nature. "Something's screwy," he said.

The others thought he was referring to their inability to find John Fain.

"You're darned right something's funny," Gard McKim said. "I think somebody sucked us out here on a wild goose chase."

"But why would they do that?" Ham demanded.

They discussed this. They decided they didn't know. "But we'd better get back to town and find out," McKim said.

Monk was thinking about the deposit of dew in connection with their search. "There hasn't even been anybody around this clearing," he said. "The fact that the dew isn't disturbed on the leaves anywhere proves that. I've been noticing that." He added proudly, "I'm pretty good on woodcraft."

Ham snorted. "Come on, Hiawatha. Let's get back to town and find out what kind of suckers they've made of us."

McKim was disgusted.

"Maybe that wasn't Lys Smith on the telephone after all," he said.

"This is a funny time to think of that," Monk grumbled.

"How was I to know!" McKim snapped. "I hardly know the girl."

THE road which they must follow out of the woods was narrow, rough, winding and rocky. They had covered a hundred yards bumping and jolting, when the wheels took on a different, but quite self-explanatory sound. Ham glowered at Monk, who was driving. “Your missing link!” he said. “You've got a flat tire.”

Monk was enraged. “I suppose I punctured it myself!”

They got out to look at the tires. The one on the left rear wheel was flat.

“Dammit!” McKim said. “The jack is in the compartment, I hope. One of you get it and—”

He didn't finish when a voice advised him, “You won't need to fix anything, brother.”

“Oh my God!” Ham gasped.

So many men had come out of the bushes around them that it looked as if the woods had turned into humanity. The men were all armed, and displaying their weapons prominently.

“I guess the phone call wasn't phony after all,” Monk muttered.

He knew some of their hosts. He knew the two who had been with Charlie at the kidnapping. He would never forget their faces, he suspected. And he recognized François Chesler, the man who had appeared at Doc Savage's headquarters in New York and tried to get Doc started on a wild goose chase aboard a boat bound for France. Ham was doing some recognizing himself. He pointed, said, “My, my, the fellows who rescued Chesler. The guy who was hiding behind the cigar counter in the lobby in New York.”

“Old home week,” Monk agreed.

The two who had been Charlie's friends were particularly ugly.

“Want to bet you don't get away from us this time?” one of them asked.

Monk thought it would be a risky bet

Chapter XIII

DOC SAVAGE had finished his examination of the Fain laboratory, and having found nothing, was devoting his attention to the Fain home.. From a distance. From the shrubbery in the neighborhood, in fact. He had been doing that for an hour, without discovering anything particularly interesting, and now he had moved down to the gardener's cottage which he had previously visited with Mrs. Fain and McKim in trying to ascertain who had taken the long-distance call which he had made from New York to Fain, the call which the fake John Fain had answered. Now he was not interested in research. He was interested in the telephone, which he wished to use. He climbed through the window, which they had found forced, and used the instrument. He found that there was no ringer; in order to get a call back on the line, or to the house, there was a push-button which probably sounded a buzzer at the house. He didn't wish to use that, because he didn't want it known that the call he was to make came from the premises. He lifted the receiver, and when the operator answered, said, “Will you ring back, please.”

He held the hook down until the instrument rang, and then listened again. Presently he heard the cop on watch, Bill Spencer.

Doc changed his voice, making it sound as much as possible like that of Chief McGuire.

He said, “This is McGuire, Spencer.”

“Yes, Chief,” McGuire said. “What have you got on your mind?”

“Have you seen Doc Savage?”

“No, he ain't been out here.”

“That's damned bad,” McGuire said with Doc's voice. “I'm afraid he's in trouble.”

“What kinda trouble?” officer Spencer wished to know.

“I think he found out who is at the bottom of this case, then made a misstep and they grabbed him.”

Spencer was impressed. “The hell! Who's guilty?”

Doc swore disgustedly, as he imagined Chief McGuire would have sworn. He added, “He didn't say.”

“That's bad.”

“You bet. I think they've either got Savage, or he's gone to the place they're hiding out. In the latter case we'll hear from him, if they don't discover he's around and put him out of commission.” Doc swore some more. “If you hear from him, for God's sake let me know.”

“Okay.”

That terminated the telephone conversation.

Doc left the gardener's cottage hurriedly, left the grounds. He had a car, a rented machine, parked down the hill, in a side road. He had learned from previous examination of the neighborhood that cars leaving the Fain estate would have to take this road. He got in his machine, drove a quarter of a mile to the crossroads, took a right turn, drove another quarter of a mile, going slowly and always watching the back road, parked on top of a hill. He waited there, watching the lane to the Fain place.

PRESENTLY a figure appeared on the road, not coming down the lane from the Fain's, but appearing furtively from the brushland near the road. It was Mrs. John Fain.

Doc Savage started the motor of his car, got the machine in motion, and went on over the brow of the hill out of sight. He left the car there and ran back to take a cautious look over the top to see what Mrs. Fain was doing. She was plodding forward. In a few moments, when an automobile approached, she stopped and thumbed a ride.

The moment Doc saw she was going to be picked up, he wheeled and dashed for his car. He barely made it, and was inside the machine when the car passed him carrying Mrs. Fain.

She didn't ride far. To the nearest cluster of neighborhood stores, a grocery-, drug-, tobacco-, hardware-store setup on the four corners of an intersection. Mrs. Fain went into the drugstore.

Doc Savage parked when he noticed the hardware store had a side door and that he could watch the place Mrs. Fain had entered through the front window. What he really wanted was a telephone. “Of course,” he was told.

He started breathing freely again when he discovered the instrument was located where he could watch

the drugstore.

“Fain residence,” said Spencer, the policeman on watch.

“Why did you let Mrs. Fain leave alone?” Doc asked.

“Oh, Mr. Savage!” said Spencer. “Say, Chief McGuire telephoned me a while ago and he wants you to . . .” Spencer was completely silent for a moment. “What did you say?”

“Mrs. Fain.”

“What about her?

“Didn't you know she had left the house?”

“I'll be damned, no!” Spencer yelled. “What'll I do about it?”

Doc said, “There's not much you can do except feel embarrassed.” He hung up, amused by Spencer's astonishment. He had made the telephone call to ascertain whether Spencer was uninjured. Apparently he was, and Mrs. Fain had merely slipped from the house after eavesdropping on the telephone call Doc had made.

He went out to his car.

He sat in the machine and scowled at the drugstore which Mrs. Fain had entered, wishing it would have been practical to call police headquarters and the telephone company and have any calls Mrs. Fain might make listened-in upon. But this was not practical. The sign on the place indicated there were telephone booths inside, which meant several instruments to watch. Too many.

Presently Mrs. Fain left the drug store, walking westward along a street that was not deserted.

The car that picked her up was a grass-green sedan.

NORTH of town about fourteen miles on a blacktop road Doc Savage watched the green car turn into a farmyard. The farm did not look particularly prosperous, although the buildings were large and substantial. They needed painting. Hills shouldered up around the place, thickly forested. Doc drove on past, hat over his forehead, shoulders drawn up, hoping they weren't watching the road too closely.

He didn't drive on just a quarter of a mile or so and stop. He kept going for three miles, parked and waited five minutes, then drove back slowly, turning into a side road at least three quarters of a mile from the farm.

It was not the Fain farm where they had gone earlier.

Doc went toward the farm, moving through the woods, not trying at first to be particularly quiet or careful. A loud commotion, snorting and crashing of the brush, gave him a bad moment or two. But it was a cow. It went bolting off through the brush. He went ahead more cautiously.

Later he came to a hoglot fence, and beyond it was the barn. He eyed several sleeping pigs in the lot, decided to take a chance of not arousing them, and worked his way around the lot to the barn to a double door, the upper half of which was open. He decided not take a chance on opening the closed half of the door because the hinges looked rusty enough to squeak. He felt for the beam over the door, hooked his fingers over it, and swung over the door and inside. He was in a runway and hay crushed

softly underfoot.

He saw Mrs. Fain a moment later. The man who had told Doc the French loot story in New York, François Chesler, was with her. They were not saying anything. They were just standing.

Finally Mrs. Fain said, “What's keeping him?”

“Everything is probably all right,” Chesler said. “He went back to town to see how things were going, to get track of Savage if he could.”

“Savage worries me.” Mrs. Fair's fingers were working at her purse, digging at the fabric.

“He doesn't exactly ease the minds of any of us,” Chesler said.

Nothing more was said for five minutes or so, then Mrs. Fain exclaimed, “There he is!”

Gard McKim had driven into the farmyard in a tan coupé. He drove straight to the barn, waited for Chesler to open the doors of the wagon shed section, then rolled his car inside.

“Shut the doors,” McKim said. When Chesler had done that, McKim grinned at Mrs. Fain. It wasn't a very enthusiastic grin. “I didn't find Savage. Something screwy is going on. Somebody called Spencer, the cop at the house, and told him Savage had been seized, or at least had disappeared.”

“What on earth!” Mrs. Fain was frightened.

A muffled female voice said angrily, “Let me out of here!”

Gard McKim went to the baggage compartment of his car, raised the lid, and let an angry young woman crawl out. She was stiff from her confinement and she stumbled a few paces, stamping the floor, knocking dust from her garments, straightening her skirt.

“Hello Lys,” said Mrs. Fain.

DOC SAVAGE examined the strange young lady. Lys Smith, he presumed. John Fain's laboratory assistant. She was a slender young woman with blue eyes and a baby face which wasn't kittenish or soft.

Lys Smith said, “When does this thing end? I'm getting tired of hiding out!”

Gard McKim looked at her unpleasantly. “You've got to stay out of sight quite a while yet.”

“I thought you said it would only be a few days.”

“That was before things got in a mess.”

Mrs. Fain said, “Lys, I think you'll have to take a trip.”

“Why?”

McKim answered her. He said, “Because you're supposed to be the terrible midget who's scaring the pants off the town.”

Lys Smith pretended to think about this. “I wouldn't mind going to Yellowstone Park. I've always wanted to spend some time there.” It obviously wasn't an idea she'd thought up on the spur of the moment.

“A damned good thought,” McKim said.

Mrs. Fain thought so, too. “She should be out of the country. If John should happen to see her now, it would ruin the whole thing.”

“It'd cure him of his jitters, all right,” McKim admitted.

“Gard, what are we going to do next?” Mrs. Fain asked.

“The thing we've got to do,” McKim told her, “is get John Fain back in town so he can see the uproar the town's in, and listen to those phantom stories that are going around. I think a little of that, and he will go satisfactorily nuts, and we can have him committed. Very sorrowfully, or course.”

Mrs. Fain thought that was funny. She laughed and said, “With fitting sorrow, to be sure.”

Lys demanded, “When do I get paid?”

“Right away.”

“Good. But what about Doc Savage?”

Doc was an unpleasant topic. McKim scowled, said, “I've got to get hold of him like we did his friends, and get him out of the way.”

“Going to kill him?”

“We'll have to, I guess.”

“What about his two friends?”

“We'll have to knock them off at the same time,” McKim said. He turned to Chesler. “By the way, how are they getting along?”

Chesler grinned. “Very unhappy.”

“That's good.”

Lys Smith was looking more composed. “Does anybody mind if I ask a question?” she demanded.

Nobody seemed to mind.

“What is an accomplice?” Lys Smith asked. “That's what I want to know. All this killing, will the law figure I'm guilty?”

“The law won't ever know about it.”

“They know about Charlie.” Lys Smith wasn't convinced. “What if they should find out the truth, Gard, that you gave Charlie that capsule of nicotine before you turned him loose.”

Gard McKim stiffened. “Don't say anything about that!”

“I'm not, but—”

“Shut up!” McKim ordered.

“I—”

“Shut up!” Gard McKim was angry.

Chesler said dryly, “There's nothing to get worried about, Gard. Charlie isn't around to tell the cops you gave him the capsule and told him it was something that would make him sleep so the cops couldn't question him. Why worry?”

McKim glared at him.

Mrs. Fain was looking at Lys Smith.

“To answer your question, Lys,” she said. “Yes. Yes, we're all accomplices. One hang, all hang. Remember that if you're tempted to talk.”

Gard McKim raised his eyes. “Savage's two friends in the haymow?”

“That's right,” said Chesler.

McKim put a hand in his pocket and brought out a small, shining revolver. He said, “I think I'll go up and look at them now.” He moved toward a slanting stairway.

“Why not shoot them now?” Chesler asked.

“I may.” McKim climbed two steps toward the mow. He added, “But I'm going to do some other shooting first.” He turned, leveled his gun at Doc Savage and fired.

Chapter XIV

DOC SAVAGE was moving down and to the side when the bullet reached him and he felt it strike his back. There was some shock, but he couldn't tell, couldn't tell at all, what the bullet had done to him. His next few moments were very bad, because he knew that spinal injuries would fool you. With some of them, you could feel fine, or at least no more than a little strange, right up to the moment you dropped dead.

He kept moving. There was nothing else to do. There were three pitchforks in a rack in the runway and he made for those. He could hear McKim clattering down the steps to get in a position to shoot over the runway sides at him.

How the man had seen him, he didn't know.

He got one of the pitchforks, listened for McKim's movements, then used the fork to dig up hay chaff and throw it several feet out and up. The stuff made a cloud of dust and hay particles in the air. Enough to mislead McKim in the dim light. McKim fired at it.

Doc came up. He had the fork gripped like spear, and he hurled it, wishing to God he had spent more time learning to throw such things. But he did fair enough. The fork tines impaled McKim's right shoulder and neck with eight inches of shining steel. Enough to make McKim lose interest in using his gun.

Doc got another fork, went lunging down the aisle, and tried to high-jump the mangers to get into the section where McKim lay, and where Chesler was trying to get something, undoubtedly a gun, out of his clothing. His jump didn't quite come off, for he hooked his toe and took a tooth-loosening fall on the floor beyond.

He got up from the fall feeling rather relieved. If McKim's bullet had really damaged his back, the fall

should have finished him off. It hadn't. He was merely dizzy. He stuck his pitchfork into Chesler's right leg.

Chesler screamed, began trying to pull the fork out of his leg. Doc set himself, yanked the fork free, and used the handle to whale Chesler over the head. The man was tough. Doc had to hit him twice more, then got Chesler down no farther than his knees.

Mrs. Fain was in the car.

“Get out,” Doc said.

She surprised him by obeying instantly.

He added, “Lie down.” He looked at Lys Smith, told her to lie down also. She complied.

Somebody in the hayloft shouted, “What the hell's going on down there?”

It was Monk.

DOC demanded, “Are you alone up there?”

Monk said he was alone, then changed it to say, “Ham and the Linsky girl are here.”

“Come down, then.”

“Can't. We're tied.”

Doc used the pitchfork handle on McKim and Chesler. He knocked McKim senseless, but he couldn't do anything with Chesler. The man stayed on his knees, but he was dazed.

Doc collected what guns were lying loose, and flourished them at the two women. “Stay right there!” he warned.

He went up the steps. The mow was about half filled with clover hay, and at first he saw no sign of Monk and the others. “Where are you hiding?” he demanded. Monk assured him they weren't hiding, they were covered with hay. Doc ran toward the voice sound, stopped when a yell of pain came from underfoot. He had stepped on Ham Brooks.

He hauled Ham out and used his pocket knife, then when Ham's hands were free, gave the knife to Ham.

Doc went back and looked down the aperture where the steps came up. The women hadn't moved. He hunted for a crack which would give him a view of the house.

“Hurry up and get loose,” he told Ham. “We have company coming.”

Four men were coming from the house. They were running, and one of them had a rifle. Nearing the barn, they became cautious.

Doc wondered if there were more, if they might be covering the rear of the barn. He looked suspiciously, and discovered how Gard McKim had happened to notice him doing his eavesdropping. A beam of morning sunlight, slanting in through a crack in the side of the barn, crossed the place where he had been crouching and passed on to make a plainly noticeable pattern on the floor where McKim could hardly have missed seeing it. Doc knew he must have crossed the sunbeam without noticing it. It was a dumb

sort of an error, but something that could happen under strain.

Monk joined him, rubbing his wrists. Doc indicated a crack, whispered, “Who are they?”

Monk looked.

“The two guys who were with Charlie, the one who was in New York with Chesler, and another lug,” Monk said.

Doc nodded. He had recognized the one who had been in New York. He thought the other man had been there, too. He thought the man had driven the car in which Chesler and his friend had escaped.

Doc raised his voice, made it shrill, and spoke, hoping the men outside wouldn't recognize him for an enemy. He said: “That's a damn fool mistake, shooting that gun by accident.”

Monk grinned, said, “I'm sorry.”

“What if John Fain heard it?”

One of the men outside called, “What's going on in there?”

“Ah, we had a little accident.” Doc tried to sound disgusted.

The deceiving was only half successful. Two of the men approached the barn door, but the other two hung back and one of the latter said, “Wait a minute, Bill. I don't like—”

Bill entered, and Doc slammed the pitchfork handle down on his head. Monk slugged the other one. They fell almost together, and Monk went over them, stooping to get the rifle Bill was carrying, going on to aim the rifle and shoot one of the remaining pair.

Monk jacked the bolt to get a fresh cartridge in the chamber, but the extractor didn't work. The fired shell remained in the barrel. Monk used his head, pretended nothing had gone amiss, pointed the rifle at the other man, and said, “Let's see them hands, buddy!”

Ham came scrambling down the steps. Faye Linsky followed him more slowly.

Ham demanded, “Where's a gun?”

Monk looked at him in disgust.

“You got here a little late,” he said.

WHEN Doc Savage entered the farmhouse five minutes later, he did so cautiously, harboring doubts. Monk and Ham had said this was all of the gang, but he wasn't too sure.

“Mr. Fain,” he called.

“In here,” a voice said. The voice was low pitched and nerve-tension crawled in it like snakes.

“You alone?”

“Yes. What happened?”

John Fain was in bed. He was propped up on pillows, but the covers were thrown back as if he had

started to get up, but had changed his mind.

"Oh!" He was astonished to see Doc Savage. "I wondered why you hadn't come, or answered my telegram."

Doc was looking at a medicine bottle on a stand beside the bed. He lifted the bottle, looked at the label, sniffed of the contents. "Who gave you this?"

"Why, it's what the doctor gave my wife to quiet my nerves."

Doc shook his head. "No doctor gave your wife this to soothe nerves. It's a prescription that would fray the nerves of an iron man."

Fain moistened his lips, pondered a while, and didn't like what he was thinking about. He said, "So there *is* something queer going on."

"Your wife and Gard McKim," Doc told him, "have been driving you into a nervous breakdown."

"My God!"

"What happened to set this off? What about the laboratory thing?"

"You mean—" Fain pondered again. "Oh my God! Was I that much a fool?"

"They probably rigged it cleverly."

Fain sat up stiffly. "Tell me one thing—was Lys Smith in with them?"

"Yes."

Fain nodded slowly. "That would explain it then. I was testing a new type of radar projector, and I wished to learn whether it would have an unpleasant effect on the human body. I knew it wouldn't be harmful, but I thought it might make burns at close range. I turned it on Miss Smith to test it, and an incredible thing happened. There was a burst of flame and some colored smoke, a lot of it, and afterward Miss Smith was gone. There was just her clothing there, and some tiny footprints on the window sill, and the way the dog acted . . ." He stopped his explanation to shudder violently.

Doc said, "Rigged."

"I—I guess so. Dammit, my nerves must have been shot at the time or I wouldn't have fallen for such a thing."

"How long have you been taking this nerve medicine?" Doc indicated the bottle.

"Several days."

"No wonder you believed it. You would have been in a shape to believe anything."

"They were trying to drive me crazy?"

"It amounts to that."

John Fain lay back. "They would have done it, too. When I heard about the horrible little dwarf being seen in town, and attacking people, I began to feel I couldn't stand it."

"They rigged that town stuff, too," Doc said.

"How?"

"Very simply. They have four or five men working for them, and the fellows merely got very busy spreading wild stories."

"Why?"

"To get the town to thinking a phantom—"

"I mean, why did my wife and McKim do such a thing?"

Doc asked, "Who would take over your factory once you were committed as insane? An insane man is considered legally dead as regards his property, you know."

"My wife," Fain said.

He looked sick.

CHIEF OF POLICE McGUIRE came bustling into his office about noon and grinned at Doc Savage, Monk and Ham. He said, "I think his wife is going to pop. I think she's going to spill the whole works."

"That would help," Doc agreed. "But we won't need it, probably."

McGuire nodded. "I know. But I want to hear her explain why the hell she did it."

"For money. The plant. Probably four million dollars, which is plenty of motive."

"I know," McGuire said. "But she was his wife. Hell, she had a wife's dowry in everything he owned anyway, plenty of money and all kinds of social prestige. What the devil kept her from being satisfied?"

"We think we're on the track of that now," Doc told him. "Ham Brooks is working on it."

McGuire scratched his head. "How'd you get next to his wife?"

Doc considered. "Two or three things," he said. "First, she was doing a lot of crying about her husband's disappearance, and shedding genuine tears by holding a piece of onion in her handkerchief. I found that out, found the onion on the floor after I purposefully shoved her around when the shadow of a hawk went past the window and caused her to drop the handkerchief. Then the note she told me came from her husband was a little far-fetched, because she claimed a messenger had brought it, and looked a little strange when she said that. That started me putting things together. Mostly it was that corny onion in the handkerchief."

"That would be hard to explain away," McGuire admitted.

Doc said, "They watched Fain send the telegram, slugged the telegraph office man and got a copy of the message. They came to New York to get me off on a wild goose chase, fell down on that, then put Faye Linsky in my lap. The Linsky girl lost her nerve after the killing and they made her a prisoner when she got out of the hospital and came to me. In the meantime they were keeping John Fain away from me by keeping him at the farmhouse. As soon as they disposed of me and my men, they intended to take Fain to town and finish driving him crazy. There's a lot of other detail, of course, such things as McKim leading my two friends into ambush and . . ."

Monk came in. He was pleased. "Got it."

“Got what?”

“Ham did it.”

Doc said, “Will you talk sense.”

“Ham'll be here in a minute.”

Ham Brooks did come in shortly. He said, “I was on the long-distance telephone to my law connections in Chicago, and they dug up the reason for this. I mean, the reason Mrs. Fain had to work it.”

McGuire hit his desk a fist blow. “Now that's what I want to know.”

“She isn't Mrs. Fain,” Ham said.

“Eh?”

“Mrs. Fain isn't Mrs. Fain.”

“The hell she isn't!”

“She's Mrs. McKim.”

McGuire was stunned. He didn't say anything.

Ham told him, “It was like this: She was McKim's second wife, and she didn't get a divorce before she married Fain. Fain applied for a heavy insurance policy on her about a mouth ago, and the insurance people were going to investigate, and she was afraid they'd uncover her bigamy. They would have too. The policy was so big they were going to go over her past from A to Izzard. So she had to get Fain committed to an insane asylum, which would make her his legal heir, and she could shut off the insurance investigation. It would stop anyway, because the company wouldn't issue the policy after Fain's legal death by insanity. He was going to pay the premiums.”

Doc said, “She probably thought the truth would come out some time anyway.”

Monk Mayfair was impressed. He said, “Whooe-e-e-e! You can't trust these women, can you?”

Ham eyed him bitterly. “I hear they're going to release Faye Linsky this afternoon and that you've got a date with her for tonight.”

Monk grinned. “Sure. They're releasing her in my custody.”

“Aren't you afraid?”

“Why?”

“You can't trust women,” Ham reminded.

Monk grinned. “They can't trust me either,” he said.

THE END