



THE THING THAT PURSUED

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter I

THE small man must have been waiting for him, because when he paid off the cab at the airport and turned, there the small fellow was.

“Hello, Lew,” the small man said.

Lew could not think of an answer, and in a moment the taste of danger was in his mouth. For him it was a burnt taste, dark brown. He had been a photography fan at one time; he always thought of danger as having a taste like developing solution for film.

He looked about him nervously, but he could see none of the small man's usual companions, which was not quite reasonable, but not reassuring, either.

“Let's have a small talk, Lew,” the little man said.

“I haven't got time,” he said. He had difficulty with the words. “I'm due to take off right now,” he added, weakly.

“Let's have a drink, anyway.”

“There's no bar at the airport.”

“Cup of coffee, then.”

He opened his mouth to say nothing-doing — the-hell with-you — I-don't-want-any-part-of-you — keep-away-from-me. But what he said was the only thing he dared say: “Well, okay.”

The restaurant, in the west wing of the airport administration building adjoining the passenger waiting room, had large plate glass windows which overlooked the loading ramp and the runways, and the tables here were crowded. They took a booth along the north wall.

They sat there looking at each other, wordless. Lew Page was wordless because of fright, and knew it. The small man—Lew had never heard him called by any other term except the small man—probably felt no trace of fear. Lew believed the little fellow had something psychologically wrong with him so that he was incapable of experiencing emotions. At any rate the small man was sitting there unconcerned, like an imbecile of a mouse deviling an elephant.

“Coffee, black, and only half a cup,” the small man told the waitress. “And a glass of water.”

Lew mumbled that he wanted coffee with cream and sugar, and the waitress went away.

“All right, say your say,” Lew growled, with a sound like loose leaves in his throat.

The small man nodded.

“Are you going to see Newsome?” he asked.

Lew Page didn't answer, because no answer was needed.

“Don't,” the small man said. “For your own good, don't. You are still in the ATC, but you are on leave, and you've rented a plane and you plan to fly to Kansas City and talk to Newsome. That I know. This I also know—the smart thing for you to do is get your leave cancelled and go back to flying the Atlantic with the ATC. What do you think of that?”

“You can't scare me out,” Lew said.

The waitress brought their coffee, Lew's with sugar and cream, the small man's cup half full, and a glass of water. The small man used the water to finish filling his cup. He drank. The waitress left. She was a leggy, sullen-looking silver-blonde.

“No, I guess not. You won't scare out,” the small man said. “You're scared right now. Probably as terrified as you will ever be. But not scared enough.”

“That's right.”

“I'm sorry . . . No, I'm not. I just think you are a fool.”

“We'll see.”

“We sure will.”

“That all you've got to say?”

The small man drank more coffee. "Yes."

"Doesn't Mants want me to tell Newsome anything?"

"No. Mants knows you will never see Newsome."

Lew Page had not touched his coffee. He knew he could not drink it now, knew that his throat would not let anything pass. But suddenly he drank it all.

He hit the small man, hit him as hard as he could with his fist, lifting slightly and leaning over the table to do it. Lew Page was big and burly and the blow could have killed an ox; but it only dazed the small man, driving him back against the booth seat where he remained staring at Lew Page from loosely-lidded evil eyes.

Lew Page left in a hurry.

PRESENTLY the leggy, silver-blond waitress came over to the table under the pretense of picking up the cups. She was showing a certain amount of hard-faced anxiety.

She said, "The big bum! I saw him slug you! Are you all right?"

"Get the hell away from here!" the small man said as violently as his sickness permitted. "Want to queer the whole thing, you dope?"

The blonde looked relieved and picked up the cups.

"I was just worried, honey," she said.

She went away.

The small man had been hit hard on other occasions and he could judge the effects. He began testing his legs for strength, found them weak, and remained where he was for a time, until he was sure he could walk without seeming more than mildly drunk. Then he arose and walked outside.

He made his way to a sedan in the parking lot where three men were waiting, and climbed inside.

"Did it go through?" he was asked.

"My part did."

"What about Flo's?"

"Ask Flo when she gets here."

"What's the matter with you?"

"He hit me." The small man lay back against the cushions and closed his eyes. "If I had been the least bit sorry, I wouldn't have been after he hit me," he said in a low voice.

The three men looked at each other, wishing to grin at the idea of the small man being sorry for what he

had just done; but at first they didn't grin because the horror of the thing they were doing was a sobering force, until finally one did grin, and then they all grinned like apes.

Flo, the leggy, sullen-looking waitress, came to the car about five minutes later. "Let's get out of this place," she said, and got inside.

"Your part go all right?"

"Yes," Flo said.

"How much of his coffee did he drink?"

"All of it. At first he didn't touch it, and then all of a sudden he drank every drop. That was just before he hit my sweetie."

The small man grimaced violently, for he hated being called sweetie and honey before others. To that extent, Lew Page had been wrong about the small man. The little fellow could be embarrassed.

"Let's go," he growled.

The driver said, "Wait a minute," for he was listening to an airplane engine, the sound of which was rising to a snarling howl of power in a take-off run. Presently a plane, already off the runway, flashed between the buildings and passed on.

"There goes the last of Lew Page," the driver said.

He had spoken to be facetious, but it sounded surprisingly unfunny and after he had spoken he became a little pale. The mood caught the others, and they were all silent, their thoughts busy with what they had done to Lew Page.

Chapter II

FROM La Guardia Field, Lew Page did a climbing turn in traffic and lined out, still climbing, on the route the airliners followed, passing across Manhattan Island above Central Park, crossing the Hudson, then swinging a little south to catch the N side of the Newark radio beam westward.

It took him some time to get back to breathing normally, and to take his mind off his dry skin and the brown taste in his mouth which the coffee hadn't erased. He must have still been in somewhat of a daze, though, because he passed Allentown and State College without really seeing them, and presently the Pittsburgh beam was beating at his eardrums. He settled down and flew steadily then, and eventually passed Columbus, Ohio. His stomach felt unsettled, he thought as a result of the horrible experience of meeting the small man, so he decided to set down at Indianapolis for something to eat.

Indianapolis was pleasantly quiet, but it didn't seem to soothe his nerves; he was by now aware that a sense of foreboding plagued him, but he was at a loss to account for the feeling. The threats of the small man were of course the direct cause of it, but they did not account for the present grim bite to the feeling, because he had been threatened before without having this almost ill sensation.

From Indianapolis he took federal airway Green Four to St. Louis, and he felt no better when he crossed the Mississippi, Missouri and Illinois rivers at their merging points. He was flying high, sixteen thousand, and he decided he had a good tail wind, about seventy miles an hour, and didn't need fuel to make Kansas City. He was anxious to get to Kansas City, more consumingly anxious by the minute, to talk to

Newsome.

Newsome was a competent guy in a two-fisted way. Carl Newsome might not have received an overdose when they were dishing out brains, but when they added the guts and aggressiveness, they spilled quite a lot extra.

Lew Page picked up Columbia, Missouri, then lined out over farming country where the section lines were laid out in neat panels, north and south, east and west, with a country road marking each panel. It was easy to keep a course in such country.

SOME time later—he didn't know how much later—he saw the thing. He gave it what Hollywood would call a double-take; he saw it and looked away, and then he raised himself as far out of the seat as the safety belt would let him lift, and he looked again.

He kept looking and danger crawled over him like hotfooted ants; he could feel it begin in his feet and his hands simultaneously and creep, and the sick taste of it was in his mouth.

His next movements were natural ones. Aimed at escape. He slammed his palm against the throttle and began changing the mixture control; he nosed down the ship so suddenly that he left the seat for a while and was pulled along by the safety belt. The airspeed needle started moving, and presently it passed the redline point, the speed placarded as being the highest considered safe for this ship.

The airstream began to lift a banshee howl around the ship. Lew Page was a good pilot, and it was probably the instinct of this, rather than conscious will, which made him watch the airspeed and come back slowly on the stick so as not to shed the wings. The pull-out was sharp. But he didn't black out. The average man doesn't black out until a pull of around seven times the force of gravity, and this ship wasn't stressed for much more than that. He pulled probably five *g*'s, and came up in the beginning of a loop, rolled out at the top.

He looked, and the breath ran out of him in a horrified rush, for *it* was still with him. He did a snap roll, a stall, kicked off in a spin, let it spin until he became sick, neutralized everything and pulled out of the spin.

He wasn't going to be able to escape. The terror in him was now a physical violence, making him do wild, mad things. The speed in his dive had been near three hundred, and he tried that again, watching the airspeed, watching also the thing that was pursuing him.

He thought of the title of a story he had once heard; he hadn't read the story, only heard the title, which was *The Damned Thing* . . . I must be going nuts, he thought. This can't be happening to me.

He pulled out of the dive, got out of it successfully, but then he did a snap roll which took the right wing off. A rending roar, and the wing was gone.

He pulled the red handle and the escape hatch flew off, then he went out headfirst into space.

It was not a particularly good jump and he somersaulted for a while. Each time he went over he could see the falling ship gyrating off into space, and he felt better, because the thing was pursuing the ship, not him.

He hauled the parachute ripcord out of its sheath and set himself for the opening shock.

Chapter III

THE ringing of a telephone penetrated the afternoon stillness in the rich and well-bred offices of Graphic Mutual Insurance on Grand Avenue in Kansas City.

T. Nedden Page looked up, and in a moment grinned in derision at the idea that even the telephone bell at Graphic Mutual was a little golden sound. This joint, he thought, is saturated in dignity, and sometimes it gets in my hair. What hair I've got left, he thought wryly. He was not old, unless thirty-two was old, but he had become bald in what he considered a very ugly way. In front of an imaginary line over the top of his head from one ear to the other, he had no hair whatever.

It was his telephone ringing. Deliberately, he let it ring. Today he was gripped by the suspicion, which he frequently had, that he was a wild mustang trapped in a pasture with the plow-horses. A fine rich pasture, true, but not much fun for anyone to whom excitement was a spice. I'm old and getting bald and missing life, he reflected. Which probably was his mood rather than the truth.

Reluctantly, he picked up the telephone, said, "Renewal Department, Page speaking."

"Are you the brother of Lew Page, ATC flier?" a crisp voice asked.

"Yes."

The crisp voice stated it was speaking from Sunflower General Hospital. A patient named Lew Page had been brought to the hospital quite recently for treatment. In his possession had been two names, a Mr. Carl Newsome and T. Nedden Page—hence the call.

Ned's first stricken thought was: Lew has crashed.

"Is he—badly smashed up?" Ned asked tensely.

"Not exactly physically," the hospital voice said. "However his mental condition is very bad. I suggest you come at once."

"Where did it happen?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Page, but I haven't the details."

"All right," Ted said thickly. "I'll be right out."

Leaving his desk, Ted Page's manner was something near normal, and his voice steady as he told the supervisor, "My brother has been hurt, I understand, so I am leaving early."

In the rich walnut-paneled reception room, he met Sethena Williams. Seth was talking to the receptionist, Mrs. Kessing.

"Ted!" Seth exclaimed. "What's wrong?"

Rather dully, Ted Page explained, "My brother, Lew. The hospital called. Something's wrong."

"Are you going out there now?"

"Yes."

"I'm going along," Seth said. "Poor Lew."

SETHENA WILLIAMS did some thinking during the long cab ride to the hospital. She wouldn't truthfully be surprised if Lew Page had a bullet in him, and not much more surprised to hear it was from a policeman's gun. She considered Ted's brother, Lew, a little more wild and adventure-loving than a man should be, with a little of the unscrupulous tossed in.

Actually, Seth was afraid of the thing in brother Ted. She believed she could see it in him. Ted was in love with her, he said. Certainly he had asked her to marry him numerous times. She was not entirely sure why she hadn't, or whether she would in the future, the reasons probably being that she had a good job and was happy as it was, and also that strain of pirate spirit which Ted's brother Lew had, and which she thought she could see in Ted. Pirates didn't make good husbands.

Sunflower General Hospital was in the Swope Park Section, a large rambling pleasant building, impressively built in the modern shiny motif. There was some red tape until they found who had called them; Ted had forgot to ask the caller his name. It had been a Doctor Howard, they eventually found.

Doctor Howard was a stout, middle-aged, serious man who said, "There are some things I would like to tell you before you see your brother."

"What's wrong with Lew?" Ted asked uneasily.

"Ah—to tell the truth, it's an unusual case," the doctor said. "Here is the background as I heard it: your brother was found by a farmer south of Lake City about two hours ago, after the farmer noticed an airplane behaving queerly and saw the occupant jump out of the ship after a wing broke off. Your brother was the one who jumped."

Ted heard this only vaguely. "How badly is Lew hurt?"

"He has a few bruises."

"That's all?"

"That seems to be the extent of the physical damage."

Ned Page let out a long breath and said, "Thank God! The way you called me, I thought he might be in bad shape."

The doctor looked uncomfortable, his expression showing that he had been misunderstood, and that Lew Page wasn't all right. It was Seth who pinned the doctor down with a question.

"Doctor, you said the case was unusual. What did you mean?" she said.

"Yes, exactly. I'm afraid I didn't make that clear," the doctor said. "By unusual, I meant both the patient's condition, and certain circumstances related by the farmer who saw the parachute jump. You'll see the patient in a moment and will understand what I mean by his condition. So I'll pass that by for the moment, and tell you what the farmer reported as to the accident." The doctor hesitated, pulling at his jaw, fishing in his mind for words, and finally burst out with: "The thing sounds silly any way you could say it. Fact is, the farmer said something fantastic was pursuing the plane."

Seth was puzzled. "You mean Mr. Page's plane was being chased by another plane?"

"Not at all. Chased, yes. But by some fantastic luminous monster. Mind you, that's the farmer's version. What I'm inclined to believe is that this agriculturist must have seen fire or smoke from the disabled plane instead of anything more novel."

Seth studied the doctor's uncomfortable face, then asked, "If you believe it was an error on the part of the farmer, why take such pains to tell us the story?"

The doctor fell to rubbing and pulling his jaw again.

"I suppose I did so because I'm puzzled by the patient's condition," he said. "Here, I'll take you in to see him."

THE first thing Seth noticed was that the nurse in Lew Page's room wasn't looking as if she enjoyed being there. She'd apparently been having a difficult time.

"Hello, Lew," Ted Page said.

He had been fooled by the calm way his brother was lying in bed. Lew Page seemed all right, except that his color wasn't good, and there was a naturalness about his eyes that was reassuring, but he did not respond to Ted's greeting.

"Hey, bub, don't you know me?" Ted demanded.

Lew Page did not reply, did not look at his brother.

Ted asked the doctor, "What'd you people do, shoot him full of morphine?" Ted was not looking at his brother now, but he whirled to stare at Lew after Seth leveled an arm, pointing at Lew, and gasped, "Look! Oh, Ted, how awful!"

Lew Page's body had started to stiffen under the sheets. The stiffening became an arching of the man's full length, and they could see the sheet moving where the muscles trembled with strained rigidity. This posture held for a moment; then the patient's mouth opened, a scream tore out of his throat, and simultaneously he squirmed sidewise, first with his head, then with his whole body. The squirming turned into a violent struggle, an effort to escape from something imaginary. The attempt dislodged the sheet, which permitted Ned and Seth to see that Lew was encased in a straightjacket.

"Oh, my God, Lew!" Ted cried, and leaped to the bedside to lay soothing hands on his brother and say, "It's me, kid, your brother. Cut it out, Lew! You're going to be all right."

The man on the bed continued to wrench himself about and scream. Seth was horrified by the indications that Lew Page was endeavoring with every muscular effort he could summon, trying with an absolutely insane frenzy to escape from something which simply wasn't there. The nurse and doctor helped restrain Lew, and between them they managed to keep the patient on the bed, although his wild struggles persisted. Frantic, Ted Page cried, "Can't you do something for him?"

The doctor looked at the nurse and asked, "How much morphine has he been given?" Seth failed to catch the nurse's reply, but evidently it was a large amount, because the doctor told Ted, "There's nothing

more we can do.”

The patient had continued to scream, mew, whimper and moan, most of it incoherently, but toward the end, just before he collapsed into that strangely peaceful calmness again, Seth heard him cry distinctly, “You can't outrun the damned thing! Three hundred miles an hour, and it's keeping right up with me!”

The silence in the room was shocking.

“You had better step outside for a while. You look a bit shaken,” the doctor told Seth and Ted.

When Seth turned to the door, she saw a small man standing there, looking into the room. He had an expression on his face that arrested her attention, for the expression was pleased and knowing.

“I'm sorry. I was passing by and heard a noise and thought something was wrong,” he said.

“A mental patient,” the doctor told him. The doctor was disheveled, and he added, “Incidentally, this is a private room.”

“My apologies,” the small man said, withdrawing.

Seth and Lew went into the hall, and Seth watched the small man departing.

THE man, while small, wasn't diminutive enough to be a dwarf, and there was a razor-like neatness about him. He didn't look, Seth thought, as if he'd just heard a noise and put his head in the room. He'd seemed pleased and knowing, which weren't the natural emotions for a passerby who had witnessed such a thing.

A queer idea hit her. Had Lew Page's seizure been brought on by seeing the small man in the door?

“Doctor,” Seth said, going back into Lew's room. “Doctor, is that the first spell like that he's had?”

The nurse answered the question. “He has them every few minutes.”

Then it hadn't been the small man's appearance that brought it on.

“The brother looks rather shaken,” the doctor said. “I suggest you take him down to the cafeteria and have some coffee. I'll join you presently.”

Ted Page heard, and nodded dumbly when Seth joined him. The cafeteria, high-ceilinged and extremely plain and antiseptic, was not a particularly cheering place, but they got coffee and sat at a table. Presently the doctor joined them, carrying a cup of coffee for himself.

“Doctor, what's wrong with him? Shock? Is that what it is?” Ted asked anxiously.

The doctor, stirring sugar into his coffee, examined the table gloomily, an unpleasant task before him. “It's more than shock.”

“What else?”

The doctor turned his gaze to Seth and asked, “Are you Mrs. Page?”

“No, I'm a friend of Ted's. And I know Lew slightly—I've met him twice.”

The doctor, who had used the question to delay the grim job of telling the truth, looked at the table. “We are not definitely sure about the condition yet. Further diagnosis will be necessary, and a specialist is

coming later in the evening. Also, as is usually true with psychiatric cases, the condition may be temporary and subject to improvement at any time, although in this particular instance I do not wish to arouse hopes which may later be disappointing.”

Ted cleared the tension out of his throat and asked, “What are you trying to say?”

“That your brother is suffering from a mental collapse.”

“A nervous breakdown, you mean?”

“The term, nervous breakdown, is ambiguous. The terminology I would use is primary dementia brought on by neurotrosis.”

“What does that translate into?”

“Madness,” the doctor said, then watched Ted Page intently to see whether he was taking it all right.

Ted jerked his breath inward hoarsely and clenched his hands.

After a few moments which none of them enjoyed, Seth asked, “Doctor, what does neurotrosis mean?”

“A wounding of the nerves,” the doctor explained.

“What caused it?”

“We haven't found out yet. That is why the specialist is coming.”

Seth had more questions, but they recoiled back into her mind at sight of the small man, who had entered the cafeteria and was picking up a tray, sauntering along the counter, selecting a salad, a meat dish, and coffee. Seth, watching the small man, knew that his presence alarmed her, although she did not know exactly why.

TED PAGE now unclasped his hands. The act seemed to require a considerable conscious effort, and the act of speaking even more. “Doctor, does that—wounding of the nerves, you called it—mean that my brother is hopelessly crazy, and can't recover?”

The doctor's hand went over and clamped reassuringly on Ted's arm. “Not necessarily. Wounds heal, you know.”

The small man presently took a table, and proceeded to eat with birdlike despatch and evident relish. Seth, still watching him, was sure that he was eyeing their table frequently, and that he had come into the cafeteria for that purpose.

“Doctor,” Seth said, “do you see that small man over there?”

The doctor turned his head. “Yes, of course.”

“Have you seen him around the hospital before?”

The doctor pondered. “If so, I don't recall it. Why?”

“Oh, he's so small, I was curious,” Seth said evasively. “Do you happen to have the name of the farmer who found Lew?”

The doctor, nodding, took a small notebook from his pocket, consulted its pages, and said, "Jonas Baldwin, R.F.D. 3, Lake City, Missouri."

Seth asked for a pencil and wrote down the name and address. "Did I understand you to say the farmer claimed he saw something weird attacking the plane?"

"I wouldn't put too much stock in such a story," the doctor said.

When, a few minutes later, the small man arose and left, Seth said, "Excuse me, Ted, while I telephone the office I won't be back."

She had lied so as not to alarm Ted, for she intended to investigate the small man. Just how she would investigate him, she didn't know, but she felt that her suspicions about the fellow were strong enough to warrant action.

The small man was not in sight, but she surmised he had turned right toward the hospital entrance, a guess which proved correct. He was standing in front of the hospital, adjusting his necktie.

Two men got out of a car parked across the street. They entered a drugstore.

The small man crossed the street and disappeared into the same drugstore.

Seth turned some thoughts over in her mind. Maybe this isn't my business; possibly I'm being imaginative. But I believe there's something strange going on here. She looked at the drugstore, fascinated, and presently she was crossing the street.

THE place was more nearly a pharmacy than a neighborhood drugstore, one of those establishments which locate in the neighborhood of hospitals and deal heavily in drugs. But there was a LUNCH, SOFT DRINKS sign outside which meant a fountain inside.

Seth entered boldly because she could think of no way of doing it furtively. The three men, the small one and his two companions, were standing at the fountain, and Seth went directly to the fountain herself. They didn't seem to notice her.

"—trying to hold him down, both the doctor and the nurse," the small man was saying. Seth could understand him clearly, but when one of the other men spoke, she did not get what he said.

"He told them exactly what happened to the plane, but it sounds so nutty they won't believe it," the small man said.

The other evidently asked about the farmer.

"Nobody will believe the farmer, either. I don't think we've got a thing to worry about. His brother and some girl were there, and I learned that the hospital called them. It seems he had two names on him, his brother's, and Newsome's."

In an excited voice, one of the men demanded, "Was there any address with Newsome's name?"

"No."

"Hell, I wish we could get our hands on that guy," the other grumbled.

That, as it happened, was all that Seth overheard. She stood at the fountain, her back to the men, and

drank the lime phosphate she had ordered. Unreasonably lucky, she thought herself, to have heard that much. She finished the phosphate and left, intending to watch the front door.

The three men remained at the fountain after she had gone. The small man was contemplating the fountain mirror with a wooden-faced ferocity. He said, "You guys notice the babe behind you?"

Their backs to Seth, the other two hadn't noticed.

"She's the girl who was with Lew Page's brother," the small man said, rage grinding deeply behind his words.

Sickly, one of the men said, "God-amighty!"

"I didn't see her until she had stood there a while," the small man said, and he began hammering the marble fountain top gently with a hand clenched so tightly the ligaments were pale with strain. "I think she maybe overheard something."

He ceased beating the marble with his fist, made himself relax and put both hands in his pockets.

"We'd better go after that girl and the brother after all," he said. "Sandy, see where she is."

Sandy, a lean man with a face made in sharp angles and hair a colorless shade of brown, moved to the front door, but did not go outside, and shortly he returned with information. "She's taken a plant across the street."

"That tears it. Now we've got to take care of her and the brother," the small man said bitterly. "Let's see if this place has a back door. We'll get out of here, camp on her trail, and catch the first chance at her and the brother."

As they were moving away, the fountain clerk called out sharply, striking them with fright. But they'd only forgotten to pay for their drinks.

Chapter IV

FIVE minutes of watching the drugstore was all Sethena Williams' patience would stand, after which, not understanding why she hadn't seen the men come out, she crossed the street and entered the pharmacy. She was genuinely startled at finding the men not there. She hurried back to the hospital, where she found Ted Page alone in the cafeteria. The doctor had gone.

"Ted, there's something queer going on," she said, and then told him what she had done and overheard.

Ted's expression turned blankly dumbfounded before she was near the end of the story, then he moistened his lips and rubbed the tip of his nose doubtfully.

"You must be imagining—but of course you wouldn't stir up something that wild."

"Ted, we've got to do something. What about the police?"

"The cops? They would laugh."

"I suppose they would," Seth admitted. She looked at Ted, surprised at the discouragement and dullness in his voice. He sounded as if he didn't want to do anything, although he was probably right about what the reaction of the police would be.

Seth was uneasy. She remembered the small man, decided that she was afraid of him, that he had some quality of viciousness that had reached her although he hadn't spoken directly to her . . . Suddenly she soared on excitement, and exclaimed, "Ted!"

"Yes?"

"I have an idea, a marvelous idea."

Ted's eyes were heavy-lidded and unenthusiastic. "If it's something about a strange thing attacking Ted's plane, I'm afraid I'll have to tell you I think that's all tommyrot."

"No, listen to me. I know someone who is interested in this sort of thing, in the unusual, that is. A man named Doc Savage."

"Who?"

"Doc Savage. I've told you about him."

"Oh, that guy," Ted Page said unhappily.

"Savage is a remarkable man."

Ted Page scowled. "Sure. Big and handsome and bronze and the most remarkable flake-gold eyes. Yeah, I heard all about him and it made me sick."

Seth's eyes narrowed. "What's wrong with you, Ted?"

"I don't like you ringing in your pet crush at a time like this. I think it's damned idiotic."

Seth felt anger picking at her nerve ends. She was frightened of the small man anyway, in a mood where her temper quickly burned to a hot flame.

"Stop being silly!" she said. "Savage is a marvelous surgeon, too, and he might be able to help Lew. It's Lew I'm thinking about—"

Ted Page looked at her darkly, fiercely, said, "The hell it's Lew! It's your bobby-sox yen for this bronze guy—"

Seth jumped up. She was very angry. She left the table without speaking.

THE hospital did not have pay telephone booths, but there were phones, and you placed your call through the hospital PBX operator, who sat behind a railing at the entrance to the room where the phones were.

Seth, rifling her purse to make sure she had enough money, told the operator, "I want to talk to Doc Savage, in New York City. The New York operator should be able to locate him without a telephone number, because he is quite well known." Her irritation with Ted Page made her speak crisply.

"Take number three," the operator said, indicating the numbered telephones in the other room.

Seth went to the designated instrument, seated herself and waited.

Presently a man leaned over the railing which fenced off the PBX operator, an average-looking man with

a whiskey-colored skin and dark hair and black eyes. He dropped a bit of colored paper in front of the telephone operator. A twenty-dollar bill.

He waited until the operator, looking at the bill, had realized what it was. Twenty dollars.

He said, "Want to make that in five minutes, no questions asked?"

The operator looked at the twenty dollars and her eyes became hungry. "Who are you?"

"A private detective."

"What do I have to do?"

"Plug me in on that girl who just placed a call."

"I'll get into trouble," the operator said.

"No, you won't. Nobody will know. We'll both keep our mouths shut."

"She placed a call to Doc Savage, in New York," the operator said. The man did not answer, and they looked at each other calculatingly for a few seconds, then the operator shoved a plug in a jack, said, "Take number ten."

The man went to number ten, picked up the instrument, and went through the behavior of a man placing a call and waiting for his party to come to the phone. When Seth began talking he could hear all she said, and all that Doc Savage said.

Doc Savage had a deep voice, a controlled voice, one which had obviously received considerable training. "Miss Sethena Williams?" he said. "Yes, I recall you. I believe we met at the insurance convention in Kansas City, where I was on the program with a talk exposing new types of insurance frauds."

Seth was amazed that he remembered her, because she was sure that on that night alone at least two hundred people had, like herself, been introduced to him in rapid succession.

"I'm calling because I understand you are interested in unusual or fantastic crimes," she said.

"That is correct."

"I've got a fantastic one for you," Seth said.

She told her story, managing, she thought, to put it very lucidly, leaving out nothing that was important. It was possible that she bore down too heavily on the menace she had felt exuded from the small man, so she finished, "I don't believe it was intuition that made me think he was bad, either. I think he's dangerous. You could tell it by looking at him, the way you can almost tell a poisonous snake by the way it acts."

Doc Savage asked, "The name of the farmer was Jonas Baldwin, RFD 3, Lake City, Missouri?"

"Yes."

"Has he a telephone?"

"I don't know. But maybe I can find out—"

“No, I’ll place a long-distance call to him, and if he seems to verify the fantastic business about something attacking the airplane carrying Lew Page, and if the farmer sounds rational, you can expect me out there. Say about eleven o’clock tonight. The Regent Hotel lobby. Eleven o’clock.”

“How will I know if you decide not to come?”

“Where can I reach you by phone?”

Seth gave him her apartment number. “I’ll probably be there after six o’clock.”

“Good.”

“I’m very grateful to you, Mr. Savage, for showing an interest—”

The bronze man’s pleasant laugh stopped her thanks. He said, “You needn’t be obligated. If this thing is as screwy as it sounds, I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

TED PAGE had changed his mood, Seth saw when she returned to the table in the cafeteria, because the grin he gave her was sheepish. “I’m ashamed of myself,” he said. “What do I do? Buy your dinner?”

“No, but you can reimburse me for a telephone call to New York,” Seth said, seating herself. “My working girl’s budget doesn’t stand up under those, at least the person-to-person ones, very well.”

“Telephone call?”

“I phoned Doc Savage.”

“The hell!” Ted’s eyes narrowed, and she thought he was going to get mad again, until he smiled crookedly and asked, “Didn’t get him, did you?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“New York.”

“Well, at least you had the experience of calling him,” Ted said, then turned a little nasty and added, “I hope you got a bang out of talking to him.”

“But he’s coming out here, Ted,” Seth said.

Ted Page’s face became completely blank. “My God, the man must be nuts! All the way from New York on a girl’s say-so! My God!”

“Oh, stop it,” Seth said wearily. “I don’t want to fuss.”

Ted looked contrite, was silent a moment, then said softly, “You’re surprising me, angel-face. I’ve asked you to be Mrs. Page, and been turned down, half a dozen times, and each time you as much as said the reason was that there was an unrest inside me, a hunger for excitement, a kind of dissatisfaction that you figured kept me from being a good bet for a husband.”

Seth winced. This was true, although she didn’t recall having put it quite that baldly.

“Now excitement comes along,” Ted added, “and you jump right in the middle of it with great

enjoyment.”

“I’m not enjoying this,” Seth assured him, and, thinking of the small man, she shuddered.

“Verve, then. Anyway, you piled right into the excitement.”

“I guess I did.”

“Bit inconsistent, don’t you think?”

“I hadn’t thought about it.”

“Anyway, now that you’ve proved yourself wrong, why not consider being Mrs. Ted Page?”

Seth didn’t say anything. The proposal somehow didn’t get to her, didn’t touch her heart, as some of the others had. It seemed a strange time for such a thing, with Lew Page lying stricken so weirdly in the same building. “You’re upset. Let’s not talk about it now,” she told Ted gently. “Is there anything more we can do for Lew?”

“Not right now, I guess,” Ted muttered. “We might as well go downtown and have dinner, then come back later.” He seemed sourly discouraged.

They left the hospital and walked toward the bus stop two blocks away, moving under overhanging maple trees, past neat houses and pleasant shrubbery, walking silently until a man came suddenly from behind a bush, confronting them. It was the small man. He showed them the gun he had. It was small and black, but also frightening.

“It wouldn’t be smart to get killed right here, do you think?” the small man said.

PRESENTLY an automobile, a sedan, pulled in quietly to the curb, stopped. The driver and the man in the seat with him Seth recognized as the pair who had been in the drug store, but a third man, riding in the back, brought a gasp of recognition from her. “You were in the hospital when I telephoned!” she exclaimed.

The man, looking more dark-skinned inside the car, said “*Si, Señorita,*” and pushed open the door. “Get in, baby. You too, pal,” he added in English.

Ned Page blurted, “You can’t kidnap us in broad—”

“Damn, maybe you’d rather get murdered right here!” the small man said.

The small man’s tone, his utter conviction and a noticeable willingness to do just what he said, kill them right there, sent them into the car, sick with shock. The small man followed them inside, closed the door and told the driver, “Take the shortest way out of town.”

They rode in silence. Seth gathered no assurance from watching the men, for the fellow who had been present when she telephoned was tight-muscled and thin-lipped and visibly nervous, as was the driver and his companion. The small man alone seemed relaxed, but this wasn’t encouraging for his looseness was that of a man who knew exactly what he intended to do.

“Take the next left turn,” the small man said.

The road proved to be a little-used country lane.

A hurting in Seth's lungs reminded her that she wasn't breathing. I'm scared, she thought. More terribly scared than I imagined it was possible for me to be . . . They're going to kill us.

“Okay. Pull up,” the small man said.

They stopped and there was rural loneliness about them, trees, a meadow, weeds, brush, and nowhere a sign of life, not even grazing cattle or horses.

In a tone that was terrifyingly conversational, the small man said, “I don't know whether it makes it any tougher not to know what you're dying for than it would be otherwise. I don't think I'd like it.”

Seth had the weird experience of being unable to do anything but stare at him. She wondered if she were going to faint, and immediately the thought of fainting was in her mind, she had to fight against it. She glanced at Ted, and wondered if she looked as terrified, as helpless.

“We're putting you away for calling Doc Savage,” the small man said. “When you did that, it was the one worst thing you could do to us. It was bad. So we're going to shoot you both, after which I trust you will make us no more trouble.”

It was a long speech and he seemed to like long speeches, for he was rounding and projecting his tones like an orator.

“The matter of disposing of Savage will come next, and I do hope it will be no more difficult than this,” he added.

SETH spoke then, the words breaking loose from the cement of fear in her throat. “Mr. Savage said over the telephone that he would meet me in the Regent Hotel lobby at—”

“Spick overheard that,” the small man said, and nodded slightly at the dark man.

Seth's words rushed on, a shrill tortured flood. “—eleven o'clock. Mr. Savage will be expecting me and when I'm not there, he is going to become suspicious. It would be much better if I was there.” Hysteria took her voice tones and changed them, made them sound shrill and hoarse, quick, breathless, at times almost took away the sound. “It would be better, wouldn't it?” she said wildly. “If I were there, he wouldn't be alarmed. He would be expecting me, and you would have an easier time getting him, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you? Don't you understand—I don't want to die? I'll help you?”

“No one wants to die,” the small man said, coldly unmoved.

He sounded as if he was going to shoot any moment, and the driver turned hastily, said, “Hold it, the babe may have something.”

“She has a very nice figure,” the small man said, with humor that was as funny as a skeleton rattling.

“No, wait. Savage, from what I've heard, is tougher than the United States Marines. She may have something.”

The small man nodded emotionlessly. “She undoubtedly has. But do we care to take the risk?”

Seth said, “Ted, here—you'll have to spare Ted, too.”

Ted hadn't said anything and he didn't say anything now.

“It might pay off,” the driver said.

The dark man said, “I favor anything that helps us get Savage.”

The third man nodded. “Me, too,” he said.

The small man leaned back, neither relieved nor disappointed, and said to Seth, “Baby, you talked yourself out of that one.”

Seth did not respond, the will to do or say anything having gone out of her, leaving her with the certainty that presently she was going to faint. She had promised to decoy a man to his death, and she hadn't meant the promise, had no intention of keeping it, knew she would not keep it. If she could—

Chapter V

DOC SAVAGE reached Kansas City at 21:29 Central Standard Time, which was not exactly according to his advance estimate, but neither was it off enough to worry about. The plane he was flying was not his own. It was an experimental fighter model on which Doc's friend, the engineer Colonel John Renwick, had done some radical re-designing, and Doc had been promising to test-hop the ship on a cross-country at fairly high altitude. He had used this Kansas City trip to keep the promise.

He had radioed ahead and army men were on hand. He turned the plane over to a technical sergeant and two corporals, passed through the administration building, and caught a bus, impressed, as he imagined most air travelers were, by the delightful fact that the Kansas City Municipal Airport was almost in the business district.

He soon regretted taking the bus; a cab would have been better, giving him more privacy. When not seen at close range, he did not seem a particularly large man; but here in the cab his size made him quite conspicuous, and he was stared at, but not recognized. At least he didn't think he was recognized.

There was a three-block walk to the Regent Hotel, and he used the interval to turn over in his thoughts what Sethena Williams had told him, and what the farmer had told him. He had telephoned the farmer. The man seemed perfectly rational, understandably embarrassed about telling such a fantastic story.

The fantastic assailant of the plane, the farmer had said, had been comparatively small, about one fourth the size of the plane. It had not seemed to be flame or smoke coming from the ship. The plane had not appeared to be afire. Had the thing, whatever it was, continued to pursue the plane after Lew Page jumped? Yes, as long as the farmer had watched the plane, it had; but he hadn't kept an eye on the ship until it crashed, because anxiety over the falling man had held his attention. Lew Page hadn't opened his parachute until he was dangerously low, and the farmer had then raced to him, finding an obviously demented man who was mouthing gibberish, together with phrases about the thing chasing him.

As for the plane, it had crashed into a small lake, and preparations were being made to drag the wreckage to shore where the CAA could look at it. It had been ascertained there were no more bodies in the plane, by simple diving, for a part of the ship projected above the water.

The whole thing fascinated Doc Savage. It was the sort of an affair he liked to investigate, taking his pay in excitement. This chasing excitement had, he realized, gradually become his career; but he did not like to think of himself the way the newspapers referred to him, as a man who went around righting wrongs and punishing evildoers in the far corners of the earth, whenever the law was ineffectual. That sounded a little too Galahadian.

But he was intrigued by this, and he suspected something mysterious. His suspicions made him cautious when he reached the hotel, and he did not enter the front way. He used the service entrance.

THE lobby was crowded. He studied the place through a partly opened door for a while, observing at least a dozen young women, any one of whom might be Sethena Williams. The obvious thing to do was have her paged.

Not because he saw anything out of the way, but because he had only lived as long as he had by being abnormally cautious, he decided to be devious. So he withdrew and found a bellboy in the working innards of the hotel.

To the bellboy he talked at length, and five dollars changed hands. Fifty cents or a dollar might have done, but where his neck was concerned he believed in asking for good service, and paying for it. The arrangement was: The bellhop was to page Miss Sethena Williams. He was to have a note on a tray; Doc wrote the note: He would be delayed half an hour. But the gimmick in this was that, on the tray in chalk would be the question: *Is it safe?* Signed, Doc Savage.

The bellboy was concealing mirth. He thought it was a man and wife affair, with someone else's wife. Doc did not disillusion him; he merely held back three of the five dollars to insure service. He watched the bellhop through the crack in the door.

"Call for Miss Sethena Williams," the bellboy droned, and the fifth time he said it, he got action.

A girl near the west side of the lobby came up straight out of a chair where she had been sitting. The tightness of fear was inside her, it was plain to see.

A small man came out of another chair, easily and quietly, but with purpose, and approached the girl, reaching her while she was still staring at the bellhop. He whispered to her. A command, evidently.

"Here, boy," she called.

It was the small man who took the message when the bellboy came. The bellhop was good; he lifted the message off the tray and handed it to the man, and then he stood, so deliberately that it was unbelievable, like a good magician fooling an audience, letting the girl observe what was written on the tray.

She shook her head. Quickly. Instantly. Meaning emphatically that it was not safe there.

I'm a lucky guy, Doc Savage thought. Once in a while I have an idea that pays off. The bellboy told him the same thing when he returned.

"You're a lucky guy, if that little gink's her husband," the boy said. "Whoee! That little fellow looks like the canary that swallowed the cat."

“A very worth-while observation,” Doc said, and bestowed the remaining three dollars on him.

For three or four minutes, he watched through the door, decided the situation was going to remain like it was for a while, and left the look-out spot, lest he be discovered. He occupied the next five minutes obtaining and consuming a sandwich in the service section of the hotel, noticing that there was some grinning, so that he surmised the bellboy had peddled around the wife-with-husband story. He ignored the grins.

When next he looked into the lobby, the situation was unchanged, except that the small man was picking lint off his trousers and eating it. Evidently he was worried. It was no surprise when the little fellow signalled to another man, who nodded grimly, and the small man then headed for the door.

DOC raced toward the service entrance, throwing gleeful convulsions into a porter who thought he was in flight from the supposed husband. By keeping speed, Doc got around to the street in time to spot the small man. The rest was a pushover. The small man looked into a parked car where two other men were waiting, the two got out quickly, all three headed for a bar, and Doc Savage happened to be standing in front of the bar. There was nothing to do but go inside. He did.

Inside the bar it was murky and noisy and the place smelled of stale beer. There were two booths empty. Doc took one, surmising the men would not talk, if they had come here to talk, at the bar. In the booth, he slumped over and slapped the underside of the table, then hastily moved to the other booth, where he made some apparently aimless motions with his hands in the air, then put his head on his arms and did his best to resemble a citizen with one too many down the hatch.

What he had done was plant a microphone to the underside of the table in the next booth, a contact mike for which the table would serve, after a fashion, as a diaphragm to pick up the sound. The mike was in turn attached to a pocket amplifier, much like one of the hearing aids so popular with the deaf, except that the circuit in this one was productive of an ungodly amount of magnification. The device was one of a number of gadgets which Doc usually carried, somewhat self-consciously, when he expected trouble. The gadget was really remarkable; he could use it to eavesdrop directly, as a radio receiver, as a pick-up for a conversation over a telephone merely by placing it near the phone wire. The latest use which he had incorporated into it was that of capacity burglar alarm; attach it to a wire, a fence wire for instance, and anyone coming within a couple of feet of the wire would cause the gadget to whistle in the tiny ear-plug receiver.

The three men slid into the other booth, the only other empty one. They spoke across the table in very low voices which would have been entirely inaudible except for the hearing gadget.

“About the time Savage is due, along comes a bellhop paging the girl,” said a voice, evidently the small man's. It was quite audible. “This grip-buster's got a note. It says Savage will be a half hour late, and it's signed with Savage's name.”

“Well, he's coming, then,” another said.

“Who wrote that note?” the small man said bitterly. “I sat there like a dope for ten or fifteen minutes before that hit me. Who wrote the note? Savage? Then he was around there, gave this bellhop the note, and either left or is still around.”

“Godamighty!” a man gasped.

“Yeah, it's a little upsetting, something like waking up fifteen minutes late to the fact that you may have

been run over by a truck.”

“What'll we do?”

“Keep our eyes open, and do the best we can.”

“Hell, are we going to stick around here?”

The small man asked bitterly, “Why not? Maybe Savage isn't suspicious.”

A WAITER came. The small man ordered a daiquiri and the other two asked for bourbon. The waiter moved back to Doc's booth and stood scowling until Doc, to avoid being thrown out, said, “Coffee and a ham on rye.” Satisfied, the waiter went away, the small man calling after him “Hurry it up!”

Doc hoped they would not fiddle around in the booth until they noticed the tiny microphone wire, about the size of a black sewing thread, which was strung against the wall from the microphone back to the booth where Doc sat.

“I wonder,” pondered one of the men, “if Alfred Mants heard from Newsome?”

The small man snorted. “He had not when I telephoned him. But Newsome is supposed to contact him tonight or tomorrow.”

“You think there'll be trouble?”

“Hell yes, probably. If Newsome scares out, there may not be. What happened to Lew Page was pretty effective, and it may frighten Newsome into either getting back in line with us, or dropping his idea of hijacking the whole project for himself.”

“Think he'll scare?”

“How would I know? I don't know Newsome.”

“Does any of our outfit know him by sight?”

“Not that I know.”

“He could be one of us, for all we know, couldn't he?”

The small man laughed bitterly. “He'd better not be, is all I can say.”

The waiter came with their drinks, the liquor for the men, Doc's coffee and sandwich. To avoid waiting for the check, Doc had the correct change ready. He pretended to eat, leaning his head on a palm, the palm covering the ear which did not hold the hearing-aid receiver, that he might better understand the talk in the booth.

But the three drank quickly, the small man offering, “To the downfall of Newsome, whoever he is.”

“Yeah, and here's to somebody getting a look at him,” another said.

Presently they got up and left the booth. Doc Savage bolted the rest of his sandwich, retrieved his microphone and wire, and re-wound the wire on its tiny spool as he made for the door.

He watched the small man go back into the Regent, the other two climb in their car to resume waiting.

Doc himself didn't return to the Regent at once. He headed for a drugstore.

THE bronze man worked as fast as he could, buying what he needed in the drug store cosmetics and prescription department, getting to a hotel, not the Regent, and renting a room. He lost some time when the bathroom light over the mirror proved to have, hotel fashion, a twenty-five watt bulb which gave not much more light than a respectable match.

But it was almost a half hour later before he finished and left the hotel, walking toward the Regent. Now he was no longer the bronze man, at least in coloring. He had used stuff from the drugstore to give his skin an unhealthy grayish cast, had grayed his hair at the temples, blackened it elsewhere, and tucked paraffin in his cheeks to give himself somewhat the look of a pocket gopher. His eyes were the same; there was a way of changing his eyes, by using tinted contact eye lenses, but he didn't have the lenses available.

He walked into the Regent lobby.

He went directly to the small man.

He asked, "Mants around?"

The small man had self-control; he hardly changed a muscle, but he did seem to rise bodily a couple of inches off the floor and remain suspended for a few moments.

"Beg pardon?" the small man said, when he had control.

"You heard me."

They scowled at each other, and Doc wondered if he had put too much trust in the drugstore makeup and the subdued lighting in the hotel lobby. He kept his eyes narrowed, hoping the shadow would conceal their unusual flake-gold coloring.

"I don't believe we know each other," the small man said finally.

"I know you."

There was more looking and thinking. The little fellow decided to get tough. He said, "Take a walk!" and made it sound ominous.

"But you don't know me," Doc said. "So keep your shirt on, pint size. I happened to be passing through the lobby and saw you, and I thought: Why not now? Well, why not?"

"Better take a walk, brother."

"Is Mants around?"

The small man did not say anything more about walking. He was confused, but the only sign of his confusion was a nervous swipe he took at his lips with his tongue. He demanded, "Who the devil are you?"

Doc decided to shake the man more, and said, "You are making a sucker move, waiting around here for Savage."

The drawing of the small man's lips began to make wrinkles around his mouth.

Doc said, "You know what I thought when I saw you a moment ago? I thought: Well, Newsome needs to talk to Mants sometime, so why not now."

"You Newsome?"

"What do *you* think? And how long do we have to stand around here and make faces at each other?"

The small man moved his shoulders uneasily. Two other men, the one Doc had spotted previously and another whom he hadn't, had now arisen from chairs and were standing poised. That made three. He wondered if there were more.

Doc said, "I don't think it is half smart to be around here when Savage shows up. What are you fools trying to do, stir up a hornet's nest? Savage doesn't know what it is all about, so instead of getting him excited, why not let him stay ignorant?"

"He won't be excited, he'll be dead," the small man said.

"Suppose you didn't get it done?"

One of the other men came over and asked, "Who's this monkey?" He sounded scared.

"Newsome," the small man said.

"Goddammighty!"

"He wants to talk to Mants."

The other man looked relieved. "Why not? Maybe we can get our civil war settled and go ahead with the project."

"Worth trying." The small man jerked his head toward the door. "Come on." He indicated the girl. "We'll take our bait along, in case we want to fish again."

Chapter VI

SETHENA WILLIAMS sobbed softly in a strange dry-eyed way, leaning back against the car cushions, her eyes open and tearless. She was crying from the effects of sheer terror, and a let-down from the strain of waiting in the hotel lobby.

The driver, without turning his head, said, "For Pete's sake, shaddup!" To no one in particular, apparently, he added, "Can't you make her cut that out?"

No one answered him. No one said anything to the girl about stopping.

The car, a sedan, had two fold-down jump seats in the rear, but it was crowded anyway. One other man rode in the seat with the driver, sitting sidewise so that he could watch the rear seat. He had a gun. The two men who had been in the lobby rode the jump seats, while Sethena Williams was in the rear between Doc and the small man.

"Have you got a name?" Doc asked the small man.

"Call me the small man. That's enough," the little fellow said. He had regained his composure and his hard

urbanity, and if he were nervous now, he was hiding it well.

He was probably nervous, Doc thought. They were all nervous.

“How did you know we had set a trap for Savage?” the small man asked finally.

“Observation,” Doc said.

“That right? You've been keeping tab on us, eh?”

“Don't you think it was a good idea?”

The small man laughed, said, “It would have been a good idea for Lew Page, too, wouldn't you say?”

He obviously expected this statement to deliver an unpleasant punch, so Doc gave in return what he hoped was the proper amount of sulky silence. Lew Page, he now surmised, was working for Newsome, and he guessed further that these men were responsible in some way for what had happened to Lew Page. Someone named Mants was their leader. There was a split between Mants and Newsome, a civil war, they had called it.

Doc was pleased with the nearly complete little part of the picture these facts made. He had hardly expected to gather much that made coherent sense this early in the game; rather, he had thought the facts he got might be unrelated, as meaningless as the first pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, pieces to be picked up, examined, then laid aside in his mind awaiting the later appearance of other pieces which would fit with them to begin making a picture.

Sethena Williams by now had subdued her sobbing. Suddenly, in a controlled voice, she said, “I'm glad you didn't get Mr. Savage. I'm glad I didn't have to betray him.”

“Maybe you'll get another chance, sister,” the small man said.

Doc asked, “What kind of threats did they use on you, Miss Williams?”

“They were going to kill Ted Page and me,” she said, and horror crawled into her throat and made it squirm, made her sound very ill and distraught.

THEY were driving, Doc Savage reflected, toward what was called the Country Club district of Kansas City, the pleasant residential district to the southwest. He was familiar with Kansas City, enough versed with the town to know that they were on Ward Parkway now, having just turned off Warwick. He used part of his attention to keep advised where they were going, and the rest he turned to Sethena Williams, careful to keep his interest from being obvious.

He had not been particularly impressed by the girl when she telephoned him, not even enough to be conscious of curiosity. Her news had been interesting; the girl only background. She was more than background now, because she had, of her own will in response to threats, served as bait for a trap that was intended, he was sure, to be his death.

Presently he was surprised to discover he didn't feel resentment, didn't blame her. She had an inner honesty which seemed to show through the garments of terror she was wearing. This, he thought, described her. She was not hard to look at, either. She was not brittle or flashy or artificial, and he approved of that.

He wished that she knew his identity, and he pondered ways and means of informing her, deciding in the end that it was too much to risk.

She was watching him. She said, "You're one of them, aren't you?"

The small man laughed at that, coldly and violently, and Doc said, "Not exactly."

"But wasn't Ted's brother, Lew Page, working for you, Mr. Newsome?" she asked.

Doc did not answer. The men were watching him, and he did not want to venture into any exchange of direct statements where he might betray himself. So he said nothing.

The small man spoke to the one in the front seat who had been facing the rear throughout. "You been watching the streets back of us?"

"Yeah."

"See anyone following?"

"Not yet."

The small man pondered this, then told Doc Savage, "You have got a nerve."

"In what way?"

"We might knock you off."

"Kill me, you mean?"

"Sure."

"No, you won't," Doc said.

"Confident, aren't you? Why not?"

"Mants will explain that to you," Doc said.

That finished the talk about who was going to get killed, and Doc was glad to get off the unpleasant subject. He was glad to stop talking, to wait in silence and study the five men, calculating his chances, and pondering his wiseness in getting involved in such a desperate situation. He was learning a little, it was true, but he was becoming concerned over the risks.

They stopped at a neighborhood drugstore that was vast and gaudy.

"Go call the boss," the small man ordered one of the others. "Ask him where he wants us to bring Newsome."

In not much more than three minutes, the man was back with the information: "Bring him out to the house."

THE house was not in the Country Club section after all; they had driven out there as a blind. It was a farmhouse farther south and east, beyond Hickman Mills, far enough out that the country was rural. The farmhouse, tall slim-jim of a thing, stood behind a grove of maple trees, flanked by a barn, chicken house, a tool shed, none of which looked very prosperous, as nearly as Doc could learn from looking at the

place in the darkness.

“Wait here,” the small man growled before he got out. He disappeared into the house, which was quite dark.

Doc Savage moved over to the car window, where he gave all of his attention to watching the house. There was just one thing possibly wrong with the situation, but if it were wrong, it would be plenty. The house lights came on.

He didn't know whether Mants knew Newsome by sight.

Presently three men came out of the house. The small man, another man, and a third man, younger, who was holding his hands clasped on top of his head. A porch light flashed on.

“Ted!” Sethena Williams cried excitedly. “Oh, Ted, have they hurt you?”

The young man with his hands on his head, Ted Page obviously, gave her a sick grin. “I'm fine,” he said bitterly.

The small man nudged Ted Page, demanded, “is this guy Newsome?”

Doc Savage, examining Ted Page, thought: here's a man who was born to be an adventurer. He's scared now, but it isn't the terror of reluctance; he isn't nauseated and weak; he's excited and on edge, and if he sees the need of action, he is perfectly capable of moving fast and using his head.

Ted Page, without taking his hands off his head, moved his elbows angrily. “I don't know anybody named Newsome. I've told you that.” He had been squinting at Doc in the murk.

“Ever see this man before?”

“Of course not!”

The small man smiled a slow smile that took hold of Doc, froze him, shocked him with an electric awareness of danger. His eyes jumped at the house, at the particular windows from which he had already decided that danger, if it came, would come. And danger was there. A rifle barrel. A rifleman, obviously awaiting a signal to fire. At a lighted window.

He moved his eyes only enough to learn none of the others had guns in their hands, then he lunged at the car door, the one on the side away from the house, knocked it open, shoved the girl through.

“Run for it!” he said, and hit the driver of the car under the ear with his fist. The man collapsed.

The man on the jump-seat was cursing by now, trying to get out of the car and produce a gun at the same time. Doc seized him with his left hand, struck him with his right fist, not doing as much damage as he had hoped to do. The man's gun came into view, a revolver, and they fought over that. It was frighteningly dark in the car.

There was a report, violently metallic. A rifle bullet. The man at the window was shooting into the car, and the bullets were going through the car body without much difficulty. Sethena Williams was out of the car, had started to run away into the night.

Doc was trying to get out on the other side of the machine with the man he was fighting, but having no luck. Presently he did get the revolver, crushing the man's fingers and tearing the weapon from him.

“Ted! Make a break!” Doc shouted. “Run for it!” He did not know whether Ted Page could manage to

escape, but it would further muddy the situation for the enemy if he tried.

The man Doc was fighting straightened out convulsively and exchanged cursing for screaming. He screamed, "I'm shot!" With his next scream, crimson spray left his lips; one of the rifle bullets had passed through his chest.

The rifleman stopped shooting. Doc heard him yell, "Turn out these lights, dammit!"

The lights immediately went out, all of them, including the porch light. The rifleman was dissatisfied.

"Get that porch light on, you fool!" he screamed. "How the hell can I do any good with no light!"

But the lights did not come on immediately.

Chapter VII

THE darkness, now that the lights had suddenly gone off, seemed solidly black. A stillness, lasting for a moment, was quickly changed into the noises of men running, of the girl running, of profanity and hard breathing. Someone slammed into something that sounded like a metal rain barrel.

Doc Savage crawled out through the car door. This had been his intention in the first place, but it seemed that it had taken him a long time to do it.

Lying beside the car, he began shoving hands in his pockets. . . . At first, he didn't find what he was seeking. Then he did. Inside coat pocket. A flat case, four glass bottles, little more than phials, inside. He explored with a finger, selected the phial farthest to the right when the case lid was away from him. The correct one, he hoped.

He twisted out the cork, half lifted, and listened. There was no movement in the car. He went to the back, to the end of the machine, listened again; this time he spotted breathing nearby. Two men, it sounded like.

He flung, with a swinging motion, the contents out of the phial, threw the liquid toward the spot where the men seemed to be.

He heard one of them change the regularity of his breathing, then another slight sound, a scraping as if the man might have felt of his face or clothing to see what the wetness was.

Now, suddenly, the porch light blazed on.

Doc Savage dodged wildly behind the car, went flat on the ground. He was sure, for a moment, that they must have seen him, and waiting for them to begin firing, wished heartily that he had used the moment of darkness to take flight, instead of remaining to use the gadget, the liquid in the phial.

He looked under the car, suddenly aimed his captured revolver at two pairs of legs he could see there. One set of feet belonged to the small man, he felt sure, so he shot the fellow in the left leg.

It was the small man. He didn't fall, although the shock should have knocked him off his feet. On one leg, the man went hopping toward the house.

Doc fired again, missed. The tall grass and the weeds were in his way.

A voice, hoarse with emotion, cried, "For God's sake, don't shoot me!" It was Ted Page.

Astonished that Page had not used the darkness and the excitement to escape, Doc called out angrily:

“The next time the lights go out, run for it, you idiot!”

He shouldn't have yelled. Because the sound of his voice brought rifle bullets hunting through the car body for him. He crawled ahead, to get the protection of the motor; while doing this, he made a discovery, one that gave him a feeling of being a damned fool. The ground, and the driveway on which the car stood, sloped sharply, and he had not noticed it previously. It was an important matter, and he changed his plans immediately.

He reached up, jerked open the front door of the car, reached in, loosened the emergency brake. The car, fortunately not in gear, began rolling. There was not much running-board, but he managed to cling to what there was.

Gathering speed, the car began to buck over ruts, and grass whipped the chassis. The rifle, silent for a moment, began slamming its noise against the soundboard made by the grove of maple trees, and a moment later Doc felt a shock and sting in his right leg. He had been hit, and he was wondering how badly when the car left the driveway and sideswiped a tree, fortunately on the other side. The sideswiping changed the course of the machine slightly; it left the path, knocked over a bush, took a ditch, began to pitch down toward a gully. Doc rolled off.

He kept low in the weeds and crawled. The car dived into the gully on its nose with a considerable crash. Doc went into the same gully, turned left, and ran to intercept the girl. She was his link with the whole thing and he didn't want to lose her.

Shot sound was gobbling around among the trees in echoes. A man in the car was screaming. The small man was talking in a loud, profane voice, telling his men to rush the car. A slight shrillness in his voice was the only sign that he was suffering from the leg wound.

Doc heard the girl, traveling fast, making noise, thinking of nothing but getting away from there. He put on speed, intent on overhauling her. He had not forgotten his own wound; it was not hurting yet, but his leg felt slightly numb. Exploring with his hand, he found a wetness the size of a small plate.

He caught Sethena Williams finally. Somewhat irritated, he said, “If you're going to run, try not to sound like an elephant herd! Take advantage of the darkness.”

She stopped running, then asked, “Will they kill us?”

SHE was over the edge into terror, he felt, so frightened that she would put into action almost anything she thought of, which was acting without thinking. It was no state of mind for an emergency. Realizing he must give her self control, he put aside the things he urgently wanted to do and spoke quietly.

“We're safe now,” he said, which was not true. “We will move quietly, taking a different direction in case they heard us. There is no danger—” He stopped, realizing his reassurances were not soothing her. He was afraid, violently afraid, that she was going to scream and have hysterics. He wished there was light enough to see her face.

In a moment, while he was wondering what earthly thing he could do to help her, she got hold of her control. The thing that brought her back out of hysteria surprised him. It was his wound. She brushed her hand against the bloody stain on his trouser leg in the darkness.

“You're hurt,” she said, and suddenly she was normal.

He breathed outward heavily with relief, said, "Let's get going."

They moved in a semi-circle perhaps a hundred yards, and he saw through the trees perhaps half a mile distant, a light. He pointed at the light.

"Go there," he directed. "Go quietly. If they have a telephone, summon the State Police. If they do not have a telephone, get to one."

Worried by his wound, she asked, "Did they shoot you?"

"It's nothing serious. I am going back and see what can be done for Ted Page. But under no circumstances, no matter what you hear happening, do not come back here."

To his relief she left without an argument.

Turning, he worked back through the trees and darkness toward the farmhouse. The shooting had stopped. There was still some shouting. The man had stopped screaming in the car. Doc broke the revolver he had captured and found it contained three unfired cartridges.

He moved slowly, watching everywhere. By now the strain and excitement had made his mouth dry and his skin numb, as if it had no capacity to feel; also he had the sensation of being detached from the whole thing mentally. As long as he was feeling that way, it was not hard to go forward, but he knew, from experience, that the state of mind would not last long. Presently he would be feeling every danger, calculating each move.

Suddenly he heard an automobile. It was at the farmhouse. The motor roared for a moment, then there was noise of tires sliding to a stop, and the small man shouting at the others to get in the car.

Doc dropped some of his caution, and ran forward. He heard the car begin moving; it was traveling fast down the lane when he saw it. He halted, rested the revolver against a tree, fired twice at the tires. Both were misses, and he did not try again. It was too dark.

The car fled from sight, and, presently, from hearing.

For some time, fully ten minutes, Doc Savage watched the farmhouse from the concealment of the trees, then he entered by the back door. There was no one there.

He approached the car which had plunged into the gully, waited a while, then struck matches.

The man who had been shot accidentally in the chest by the rifleman was there. He was dead. He had been shot through the brain at close range. The skin around the head wound was dark with powder burn.

Filled with violent feelings, Doc contemplated the body for a while. He was dumbfounded at the brutality of what he saw, a man coldly murdered so that his care would not be a burden, for the explanation could hardly be anything else. It was direct, shocking violence, and he had to exercise strong effort to make himself search the dead man's clothing. He brought to view successively a passport, a document folder of credentials, five hundred dollars in large bills, cigarettes, keys, matches, handkerchief and somewhat less than a dollar in silver.

The passport gave the man's name as Iturbi Sanchez, citizen of a South American republic. The documents in the folder were war correspondent's credentials, credited to the same South American country, identifying the man as representing the newspaper *El Estrella*, and the *New York Express*. There was a lot of other stuff, age, weight, birthplace, next of kin, the latter listed as José and Maria Sanchez, South America. The name of Sanchez was about the equivalent of Smith and Jones, Doc reflected, but it might be genuine. He struck another match.

He examined each object as he found it, then returned it to the man's clothing. The passport names, ages and weight, the passport number, the numbers of the war correspondent's clearance papers, he memorized. The business of memorizing such things, a little startling to anyone who had not taken the trouble to master the trick, was one he did well, one of his secret prides.

The house came next. It belonged to the small man, and the small man's name was Pansy Orchid Heather. Doc looked at the name, startled, thinking what an embarrassment such a name would be to a man. He tried the light switch, and the lights came on.

This was a farm. The small man didn't look like a farmer, and he wondered about that, only to find the answer presently in the form of some carbon copies of Agricultural Conservation Program forms. The farm was being operated by a man named Worth, a tenant.

There was no telephone. He went out into the night.

THE light which Doc Savage had pointed out to Sethena Williams, indicating she should go there and find a telephone, proved to be a reading lamp in a small house standing near a concrete highway. As Doc approached the place, Sethena Williams suddenly appeared, came running toward him. She was wildly glad to see him.

He asked her if she had called the police.

"I guess I'm a fraidy-cat," she said. "The folks who live here aren't home, and I was afraid to go anywhere else."

"There must be a telephone. That looks like a telephone wire." He pointed out a thread of wire against the night sky.

"Should I have broken in and used their phone?" she asked uncomfortably, then flushed, adding, "That's a silly question, isn't it? Men trying to kill us, and me worrying about breaking in to use a telephone."

Doc was saying something about it being hard to know what was wise and what wasn't, when the owners of the cottage arrived. They were a plump young man and his dark-haired wife, and they said yes, of course they would loan the use of their telephone, would be glad to.

They were polite and didn't go inside where they could hear what Doc had to say. He was glad of that. He got the police on the telephone, said, "There has been a murder." He described the location of the small man's farm, and gave the small man's name, Pansy Orchid Heather, and the victim's name, Iturbi Sanchez.

Doc further gave the impression that the small man had murdered Sanchez, and gave an extended description of Heather and all of the men associated with him.

He finished with the information that the group had kidnapped Ted Lewis and were hauling him around with them, a prisoner, providing they hadn't murdered him by now.

Without directly lying, he was convinced he had filled the police with the idea the small man was a murderer, and that the police would give action. He hung up hoping they hadn't had time to trace the call. Despite the prevalence of telephone-call-tracing in fiction, it was actually not a common police practice, took time, and in the case of dial telephones was not an easy matter. He didn't think they would trace this one.

He went outside and engaged the owners of the place, who proved to be a Mr. and Mrs. Rinehart, in conversation about the Heather farm. Mr. and Mrs. Rinehart had been residents of the area a long time, and they were free with gossip.

The older Heather, Jacob, had died about five years ago of natural causes, according to their information, a fine old man who had lived an exemplary life, so exemplary that he had years ago banished his no-account son, Pansy Orchid Heather. The youngster had been a no-good, a coldly vicious boy, probably a mental case in some respects. At any rate, the boy had not been around in years, until he had turned up some eight or ten days ago. Paying a visit, and bringing along some friends, he had said.

The Rineharts had obtained their gossip about Heather junior and his visiting friends from Sam Worth, the farmer who had operated the Heather farm on a share-crop basis since the old man's death. Sam Worth had been quite surprised when the son and his friends dropped in for a visit, had not welcomed the idea, but felt he could hardly throw them out. Tonight Sam Worth was in Kansas City, visiting an uncle with his wife.

Doc Savage thanked the Rineharts for their information, and insisted on paying them for hauling himself and Sethena Williams to the nearest point where they could catch a bus into town.

His leg wound drew some comment. He explained, hoping he sounded frank and convincing, that he had accidentally hurt himself, but that it was not serious. En route from the Heather farm to the Rinehart cottage, he had made a temporary dressing of his handkerchief, sterilizing the cloth Boy Scout fashion with flame from burning twigs, and this had stopped the bleeding. But it was beginning to hurt, and he did not trust the sterility of the handkerchief bandage.

The bus stop was a drug store. They were informed the next bus was not due for thirty minutes. He bought some antiseptic and surgical dressing, also some cold cream, and did a makeshift job on his leg wound, using the men's room.

The bullet hole was through the flesh, as he had known. Lucky, he thought, that it was a jacketed slug that had not expanded. Not that the wound gave him any pleasure.

He used the cold cream to remove his makeup, and cleaned the bloodstains off his trouser leg as best he could.

Sethena Williams looked at him strangely when he rejoined her.

"You're Doc Savage!" she exclaimed.

He realized, astonished, that he had forgotten to tell her who he was, and that she hadn't known. His disguise must have been better than he had thought.

Chapter VIII

DOC SAVAGE went to a tall, yellow, apartment house on Armour Boulevard and studied the call buttons in the lobby.

Puzzled, Sethena Williams asked, "Who are you looking for?"

Doc said, "A fellow who might do us some good," and selected a button marked Mr. C. B. Fay, on which he rested his thumb end.

Presently a discontented voice demanded from a speaking tube, "What the hell is this, a parade of the owls?"

"What will you bet you don't get any more sleep tonight?" Doc asked.

"I'll be damned!" C. B. Fay said. "It's a good thing I'm not a man who trusts his ears, or I would say this is Doc Savage."

"How about letting us in?"

"I do believe it *is* Savage!" Fay yelled. "For God's sake, come on up! I'll roll out the purple carpet, the one I use for blondes and kings."

Mr. C. B. Fay was a buoyant young fat man with a corkscrew mass of blond hair, a yellow bathrobe and a way of bouncing from one place to another instead of walking.

He greeted Doc Savage with considerable noise and respect, and said, "I guess I had better kiss sleep good-bye for the night."

"Mr. Fay operates a detective agency," Doc advised Sethena Williams. "On occasions in the past he has handled matters which my organization was unable to handle."

Fay grinned. "Don't kid her. All I ever did for you was kindergarten stuff that you didn't have time to do."

"Want to take on a job for me?" Doc asked.

"When?"

"Tonight."

"Sure. But this was the one night in the week I had reserved for my sleeping. What do you want done?"

"I want you to get a lot of operatives together," Doc told him. "I want you to contact every doctor in the city and within a radius of fifty miles of the city, and have them tip you off at once if they get any patients suffering from poison ivy. Do the same with the drugstores, asking them to immediately report anyone buying ointment for poison ivy. Offer a small reward, say ten dollars, to get action."

"This isn't the poison ivy season," said Fay.

"That should make it easier."

"Where in the hell—begging your pardon, Miss Williams—would anybody get ivy poisoning when there isn't any ivy? Will you tell me that?"

"It would come, I hope, out of a bottle which I emptied where I hope certain fellows came in contact with the stuff."

"Oh. A shenanygin."

"You might call it that."

"And what do I do after I find this victim or victims of ivy poisoning?"

"Get on their trail," Doc said. "And report everything they do."

C. B. Fay pulled the telephone toward him. "This job is going to keep me pretty busy," he said. "If you want me to have any more information, you'd better give it to me."

"That should be enough information," Doc said. "Except, if you find the ivy victims, be careful. They're bad characters."

"I'll remember that."

SUNFLOWER GENERAL HOSPITAL was deep in the peace of the early morning hours, and the staff didn't seem inclined to have this placidity interrupted if they could help it. The attendant at the receiving desk endeavored, without success, to persuade Doc Savage and Sethena Williams that they should depart and come back at a more convenient hour, then she went to ask someone with more authority what she should do. Doc Savage's name meant nothing whatever to her.

While they were waiting, Seth said, "I don't think I understand that poison ivy business. Where would they get ivy poisoning?"

"They wouldn't," Doc said. "The chemical, in liquid form, produces a reaction so nearly like very serious ivy poisoning that it would fool a doctor."

Seth asked, "You scattered the stuff around while they were making that attempt to kill you?"

"Yes."

"What made you think that would do any good?"

"If you had some of the stuff on you, you would understand," Doc assured her. "It isn't funny. It is as painful as anything, and anyone who has it is going to see a doctor about it in a hurry."

"Oh."

"There aren't as many doctors in Kansas City as you might think, and they're all listed in the directory," Doc added. "That makes them one of the easiest groups of professional men to contact." He hesitated, added self-consciously, "My name means something to the medical profession, and Fay will use that fact to get cooperation. He will tell them I want the information. That means we'll be fairly sure to get it."

"I guess it's not as wild as it seemed," she said.

"It was fantastic, if that is what you mean," Doc said. "But you'll find out I have a weakness for gadgets of any and all shapes and variety. Gadgets are my principal vice. I get a kick out of them. I would rather use a gadget, even a complicated one, to get a result than any other means."

“Do they always work?”

“Frequently,” Doc admitted, “they don't. They often backfire, making things much worse than if I had used ordinary methods and common sense in the first place.”

He went to a telephone and called C. B. Fay, who said, “Keep your shirt on. What do you expect, magic?”

Doc said, “I'll call you when I leave the hospital. I'll be here until I do call.”

The receiving desk attendant now returned, embarrassed and flustered. She was followed by a short, gray-haired angry doctor who yelled, “Goddam it, hasn't anyone around this hospital the sense of a goose? They should have gumption enough to coöperate when they hear the name Doc Savage.” He shook Doc's hand vigorously and said, “I'm sorry you were kept waiting. This thimble-head says you wish to examine the parachute jumper, Lew Page. Of course you can.” He turned around, winked at the desk attendant he had been berating, and said, “This man is probably the world's greatest surgeon, in case you want to know why I'm raising hell.”

LEW PAGE was in a stiffly arched position, the back of his head, shoulder blades and both heels touching the hospital bed mattress. No other part of his body was in contact with the bed. Intermittent tremors, like the waves of a fever chill, seized parts of his body at intervals, and the taut flesh and strained sinews would quiver violently. He was sweating freely, the straightjacket canvas being damp from the perspiration.

Doc said, “The perspiration should be a good sign.”

“I don't know whether it is or not,” said the doctor, whose name was Rusek. “I don't know anything about it. It's the most mysterious case I have ever encountered.”

“He is your patient?”

“Every doctor in the hospital has taken a crack at him,” Rusek said. “Frankly, the case has us buffaloesd.”

There was a nurse and a male attendant present, and Doc glanced at them, asked, “Has there been any decrease in the violence of the seizure?”

“They seem to become worse,” the nurse told him.

Doc noticed that Sethena Williams was pale and showing signs of discomfort. “You had better get some sleep,” he advised. “I am sure the hospital has a bed where they can put you up. I'll call you when I'm ready to leave, if you wish.”

“I couldn't sleep.” She shuddered. “I—I'll be all right.” She looked determined, so he did not press the issue, but he didn't think standing around watching Lew Page was going to improve her peace of mind.

Doc began a diagnosing examination.

“This I want to see,” said Rusek.

“Don't expect miracles,” Doc advised.

“That's exactly what I'm looking for,” Rusek told him. “Anything in the way of equipment we can furnish you?”

Rusek was so impressed, in spite of his free way of talking, that Doc was embarrassed. In the course of his examination, he began to call for what he needed. One thing he asked for was the diagnostical file on the patient, which included X-rays, the laboratory routine, the reports of the other examinations. Rusek produced everything eagerly, bustling around and making some confusion. Two other doctors came in to watch the diagnosis, and then others began to appear. Seth, noticing the interest with which they were observing, was impressed.

Doc finally scribbled on a prescription pad, which he handed to Rusek. "Can you get that stuff for me?"

"I think so," Doctor Rusek said. He eyed the prescription doubtfully. "I must say that if you plan to use this, my expectations of something unusual are going to be fulfilled."

"How long will it take you to get the stuff?"

"Half an hour, probably." Doctor Rusek left.

MOST of the doctors who had come in to watch, Doc learned while waiting for Rusek to return, had either examined Lew Page, or had heard of the case. They were completely puzzled, they freely admitted, and the unusual background had whetted their interest, for they had all heard the story about the fantastic *thing* attacking Page's plane. None of them quite believed the story about the *thing*, however. They were sure there was a sensible explanation; actually, they were more intrigued by Page's unusual condition, since none of them had previously seen a patient with such a combination of symptoms.

Rusek returned with the drugs. He said, "If this cures that guy, I'll eat my hat."

Doc said it was a deal, and began his treatment. He began with the administration of saline solution intravenously, explaining as he worked that the increased salinity was to accelerate distribution of the next drug and, it was probable, reduce the latent period, the interval between application and the manifest result. He was not self-conscious now; he did this sort of thing, lecturing to professionals, often enough to be used to it.

Seth listened, wide-eyed, and was able to follow the gist of things for a while. But when the explanation got into things like amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, hyaline degeneration, tonic spasms, emprostotonos, pleurothotonos and opisthotonos, she dropped out of it, not sure whether Lew Page had all those things, or didn't have them.

The concrete results she saw.

The miracle came in about half an hour.

Lew Page relaxed, the horror left his face to some extent, and he looked at them sanely, asking, "Where am I?"

Doc Savage told him he was in a hospital in Kansas City, and added, "The small man kidnapped your brother, Ted, and if you want to save Ted, you had better tell the whole story."

The doctors were giving each other funny looks, and Seth got the idea they were about as confused by the bronze man's treatment as she was.

Lew Page's voice was very weak. He said, "They got Ted?"

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Doc said, “Carl Newsome.” He spoke the name because, on the spur of the moment, he couldn't think of another answer. The result astonished him.

Lew Page was violently shocked. Horror made his lips creep and twist, and he closed his eyes quickly—trying to hide, Doc thought, how intensely he was affected.

Doc asked, “What was that thing that downed your plane?”

He saw immediately that Lew Page would not answer that.

“Lew!” Sethena Williams gasped. “Lew, it's me, Seth. Don't you know me?”

“Sure, Seth.” Lew Page said quite lucidly. “So old Ted's in it up to his neck. That's tough.”

“Lew, you've got to help us find Ted,” Seth said pleadingly. “You will, won't you?”

“I don't know,” Lew said, hiding the expression in his eyes again by closing them. “This is a strange business, Seth. I'm kind of in a spot.”

“But your brother, Lew! For your brother.”

“I know.” Lew Page was thinking. He pointed, very weakly, at Doc Savage. “Who's this big guy?”

“Doc Savage,” Seth said, before Doc could stop her.

“Oh, Christ!” Lew Page gasped, and Doc thought he had fainted. But presently the man opened his eyes, stared at Doc, said, “This is going to be rough on everybody, with you in it.”

Doc assumed more confidence than he felt and said, “The smart thing for you to do, Page, is give us the whole story.”

Lew Page closed his eyes again. He didn't like the idea. It was some time before he said, “How long am I going to be laid up?”

“If I told you the truth, you would think I was trying to scare you.”

Page's eyes narrowed. Doc got the idea he didn't disbelieve the statement, but that Page wanted to think. Wanted desperately to think, probably; and by now Page would be getting frightened of the return of the spasms. He must be feeling a return of his earlier condition.

“Donald Gulick,” Lew Page said suddenly. “Talk to Donald Gulick about it. Tell him I sent you. You'll find him at the Gulick Radio Company. He owns it.”

Lew Page closed his eyes and was silent.

Doc Savage did not press the matter further. He knew that this was about as long as Page's interval of lucidity would last.

Doc told Seth, “We'll talk to Gulick.”

He moved toward the door.

Doctor Rusek accosted them in the hall. Rusek had his hat, a grin, and the question: "Do I get to use catsup on this, or eat it plain?"

Doc said, "The deal was that Page was to be cured, wasn't it?"

"Isn't he?"

"No," Doc said. "He will lapse back into a spastic condition very shortly, within ten minutes, probably."

"What can we do for him?"

"Nothing." Doc Savage's tone was heavy with gloom. "Page is not going to get over it. He is going to die."

Chapter IX

SETH was painfully silent during part of the ride downtown. There were no tears in her eyes, but there was a great deal of sadness. Finally she said, "Are you sure about—Lew."

"No doctor should ever be completely sure about such things," Doc said. "But I'm reasonably certain."

"Do you know what is wrong with him?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"His nervous system has been so badly damaged that he is going to die from it."

He didn't think she quite believed that, because she asked, "Then how did it happen that he could talk to us so lucidly after you treated him."

"What I did wasn't really a treatment, as Doctor Rusek knew," Doc told her. "It was what you might call an anaesthetic job, a blocking off of the injured part of the man's nervous system from the part of his brain that was unaffected. It could only be temporary. But he was able, during the interval, to think clearly and talk."

She thought about that.

"What injured him? Was it that mysterious object the farmer saw chasing the plane?"

"That was a part of it, no doubt."

"What was the other part?"

"That happened earlier, perhaps."

She frowned. "You aren't being specific."

He didn't say anything.

"Don't you want to tell me what happened to Lew Page?" she asked.

"That's right," Doc told her. "No, I don't want to discuss it."

"Why not?"

"For various reasons which I also do not want to discuss," he said.

She was silent then, and indignant.

She's angry, he thought, and she's suspicious. With some reason, at that. She thinks I know a great deal more than I do. She would probably be surprised to know the strongest reason for my not discussing the thing was a lack of knowledge about what was really happening. He should, he reflected, merely have said he didn't know, which was the truth.

The cab let them out on Baltimore Avenue, well downtown. He indicated an all-night drugstore. "I think I'll telephone C. B. Fay from there."

C. B. Fay said, "I thought you were going to telephone me when you left the hospital. I just phoned out there and you were gone, so I got worried."

"I forgot it," Doc said.

"You must be slipping," said C. B. Fay with the easy manner of an old friend. "It wasn't important. I just wanted to report that I have a line of traps set, and so I may catch our animal any minute."

"Have any difficulty obtaining cooperation from the doctors?"

"Not from the doctors, but I don't guarantee all the drug stores," said C. B. Fay. "But maybe, this not being the season for ivy poisoning, they won't know what it is and will go to a doctor first to find out."

"Let's hope so."

"Where can I get hold of you?"

"I'm moving around," Doc told him, "so I will have to telephone you."

They walked two blocks and looked at a store front with a sign on it that said *Gulick Radio Company*. There was stuff in the windows that radio stores usually have in their windows.

Doc said, "I wanted to see what the place looked like. Now we'll see if Donald Gulick, proprietor, is in the telephone book."

Gulick was in the book, listed at an address on Main. Doc estimated the distance, and decided they had better take a cab. While they were hunting a cab, he passed a newsstand that was open, and bought a morning edition.

It was on the front page:

WAR CORRESPONDENT DIES

IN SUBURBAN MURDER

Doc took time out to read the story, learning that the victim, Iturbi Sanchez, had been a war correspondent of some importance, a man with important South American connections. Among these

connections was a certain political standing in his South American nation; the man had formerly occupied the position of Assistant Secretary of War with the regime in his country which had been defeated in the last "election." Doc recalled the election. It had been more in the nature of a revolution, although with little bloodshed.

The fact that Iturbi Sanchez had been a man of some importance was the only fact he learned that he hadn't already known.

They found a taxi.

They got out two blocks south and one block west of Donald Gulick's address. This was Doc's idea. "Caution never got any cats killed," he explained. "By the way, ever hear Ted Page mention this Donald Gulick?"

Seth said she hadn't. "Ted wasn't mixed up in this," she said. "That is, not until I got him into it with my idea of calling on you for help." She sounded as if Ted Page being kidnapped was her fault.

She also sounded as if she didn't think so much of the progress Doc Savage was making, and was wondering if she had done the smart thing in calling him into the case.

"Maybe this Donald Gulick will clear up the mystery," Doc said.

She said she hoped so.

Doc had another idea. "Maybe you had better go home and get some sleep."

She said nothing doing. "I'm scared," she added. "I don't think I would be safe at home. And I want to be around to help."

Doc did not think she would be much help, but he kept the thought to himself. They walked to a point from which they could look up the dark, still street at Donald Gulick's house. They saw nothing alarming. Doc said he thought he would try the alley before they tried the front door, just to be on the safe side.

They moved toward the alley, but a moment before they reached it, he gripped Seth's arm, leading her on past. To her startled question, he answered, "There seems to be a fellow over there watching the place. That car yonder, the parked one."

About all they could tell, in the darkness, was that there was a parked car and one figure inside it.

Doc told Seth, "He's probably suspicious. We'll pretend you are a young lady I'm taking home. I'll leave you on a front porch down the street. Stay there. And if you decide I need help, send for it."

She said she would. She sounded scared. Doc left her on the porch of a house up the street, going through the formalities of a young man leaving his girl, minus the kiss. He was embarrassed about the last, but not until he realized he had overlooked it, and that it might be why Seth had looked surprised.

He strolled back along the sidewalk, moving over to the curbing so he would pass close to the parked car. He reached the car, stopped, said conversationally, "Hey, how about a—"

He was going to say "match." He let it go. He jerked the car door open wildly. The man inside tumbled out, awkwardly because he was busy trying to get a shotgun into operation. The same shotgun, as far as Doc could tell, which the man had carried at the small man's farmhouse much earlier in the night.

THE shotgun was unwieldy for close quarters; the man must be armed with it, Doc thought, because parked here at this hour, the police were likely to question him, and possession of a shotgun was legal. He could say he was going hunting, waiting for a friend to join him.

They were on the ground, on the grass between curb and sidewalk, fighting violently for a moment. Then the man kicked Doc's wounded leg. The result was exploding agony, driving Doc to his knees. He was gripping the shotgun, which he had obtained.

The pain from his leg made him helpless for a moment. He had treated the wound carefully, using an anaesthetic very slightly to allay some of the pain, and it had not been bothering him greatly. But now, suddenly, the peace was gone from the hurt. He was momentarily helpless.

The man got up and ran.

Running, he bellowed, "It's Savage! Take him!"

Doc, on his knees, tried winging the man with the shotgun. The gun noise blew the silence apart. The man changed his sprint to an antelope loping, and kept going.

Once more, Doc fired. The man screamed, still kept going. He was too far away for birdshot.

An automatic pistol began talking from some distance down the alley. A man who must have been posted at the alley opening on the far side of the block, was running forward, firing.

Doc moved behind the car. His leg hurt like the devil. He wondered if the kick had broken it, and with the same thought, knew better. But the pain was startling.

The pistol slammed itself empty. The man stopped to reload.

There would be one more shell in the shotgun. Doc waited, watching the alley. The man with the automatic was too far away for shot. But he might come closer.

Crouching beside the car, Doc could see the length of the alleyway. The machine must have been parked carefully to give that view, he decided.

Presently a second man appeared in the alley. This one, moving furtively and fast, went the opposite direction. He was in flight. He was obviously endeavoring to keep out of sight of the man with the automatic.

At the far end of the alley, where there was a streetlight, the man was for a moment fairly discernible. He wore, Doc saw, a gray topcoat of flowing, almost cape-like, shape.

The man turned north and disappeared.

Doc Savage aimed at the other man, the one with the automatic, fired. The shot at that range must have stung the man badly, because he cried out and sprinted a few yards and dived behind a garbage can.

Doc was already in the car. He turned the switch, tramped the starter; he sent the car lunging forward in low gear, kept it rolling, pulled over to the curb in front of the house where he had left Seth, put his head out of the window and yelled, "Come on. Quick!"

She was in the car in a moment.

He got the car moving again. In the street behind them, there was a banging noise; in the back window, also in the windshield, small holes appeared. The bullet made enough noise to cause Seth to gasp and slide down on the cushions.

“Hit?” Doc asked.

“No,” she said nervously. “No. What—what happened?”

“Our small man's friends were watching Donald Gulick's place,” Doc explained. “And Gulick seems to have known it, because when I distracted their attention, he made a break for it. He dashed the other way up the alley.”

“Can we overtake him?”

“We can try.”

DOC turned left, and immediately assumed normal driving speed. About halfway down the block, he kicked out the clutch and let the car coast as silently as it would.

“Watch the street both ways,” he said. “Watch for the man in a gray topcoat.”

The car rolled out into the street intersection.

At the far end of the block, Doc saw fast movement. A man was disappearing behind some shrubbery in a yard.

Doc let the clutch pedal out and fed the engine gas.

“See him?” he asked.

“Wasn't that him, at the end of the block?” Seth asked.

“I think it was.” Doc drove slowly, and opened the door on his side of the machine. “I'm getting out. Drive over about four blocks, down four, and then come back, but do not get anywhere near those men who were shooting at us. Just try to find me, but not too conspicuously.”

“What if I can't find you?”

“Go home and wait for a call.”

Doc swung out of the machine. The girl took the wheel, and drove on. Doc cut across a yard and passed around a house, between two garages, down an alley, across more yards, through a garden. Presently he detected movement ahead of him, a man in a gray topcoat.

The man was watching and listening. After a little of that, he began cutting across yards, heading toward a street car line.

Doc turned sharply to the left, and presently he was watching Seth drive down the street. He stopped her.

She said, with relief, “I didn't think I would find you.”

"It worked out just right," he said. "Gulick, if it is Gulick, is heading for a streetcar stop. The one north of here, I think. We'll pick him up there."

She drove north, turned into the street where the car tracks were, and Doc said, "There he is. Keep going. There's no car in sight, which will give us some time."

At a taxi stand five blocks down the street, Doc said, "Swing around the corner and stop." When she had done that, he explained, "Gulick is undoubtedly on his guard, so we had better be as foxy as we can. I'll take a cab. The first five blocks, I'll follow him. You follow the next five. Then I'll take up the trail again, and we'll continue to alternate."

"I see. If he spots one of us, he'll see us leave and think he was mistaken."

"We hope."

The scheme worked, as far as Doc could tell, with success. Gulick, if it was Gulick, took a downtown car, and they kept on his trail without trouble.

Doc Savage felt dissatisfied. Thinking about it, he wondered if he shouldn't have tried to catch one of the small man's aides. He was sure they knew what was going on. He had Lew Page's word, nothing else, that Gulick knew anything. Given the choice of having Gulick in his hands, or one of the small man's aides, he would much prefer the latter.

He suspected he had made a mistake, and made it with his eyes open, in order to avoid a good chance of being shot. He knew that, if he had tinkered with the gunman in the alley, he stood an excellent chance of getting shot. That was the reason he had chosen trailing Gulick. He hadn't thought it out at the moment, but he did now, and he knew he'd picked Gulick as the less dangerous. He scowled. His leg was hurting.

In the light from a street lamp, he eyed the leg gloomily. The rapid movement had started it bleeding again, and the pain was bad enough to be a taste in his mouth. If the leg hadn't been hurting so, he suspected he wouldn't have chosen Gulick.

Donald Gulick went to the *Gulick Radio Company* and disappeared inside.

Doc joined Seth, dismissing his cab. She said proudly, "We got away with it, didn't we?"

He grunted. "It isn't over with."

Puzzled by his sourness, Seth looked at him, then asked, "Your leg hurting?"

"Enough to give me a bad temper," he admitted. "So don't pay too much attention to my barking."

She said she wouldn't. They waited, and he pondered the advisability of sending her home, which was the sensible thing to do. On the other hand, he knew his leg was going to discourage any galloping about, and there might be some errands she could run.

Donald Gulick came out of his store, walked two blocks, and stood on a corner near a sign that said BUS STOP. Doc was now sure the man was Gulick.

Shortly Gulick climbed into a bus marked AIRPORT, and they followed, crossing the bridge, swinging down to the municipal airport terminal. Gulick did not enter the terminal building, but walked toward the group of hangars which serviced private planes.

Doc Savage, suddenly animated, said, "We'd better work fast. You trail him. In case he plans to leave in

a plane, I'll have a ship ready to follow him. As soon as you're sure he's leaving in a plane, come back to the administration building and go up to the control tower. They'll tell you what to do.”

She went on.

Doc went into the terminal, got the army hangar on the telephone, and ordered his plane brought across the field without delay. It was a pleasant surprise when he got hold of an officer who knew his voice, and secured promise of immediate service.

He climbed, clenching his teeth against the ache in his leg, to the control tower.

The control tower was a green-windowed, intense place with radio equipment, clicking teletypes and a young man busy with an air traffic control light. Doc showed some credentials, then put a question. “Anyone taking off will first clear with the tower, won't they?”

“They'd better,” said the young man with the light.

“Does a fellow named Gulick keep a plane here?”

“Donald Gulick? Sure.” The young man named the type of plane, a five-passenger job with a three-hundred horsepower engine.

“I want to know if he gets a clearance.”

“Okay. He'll telephone in.”

Doc seated himself, and spent the next ten minutes wishing he hadn't missed this night's sleep, that his leg would stop aching, and that he knew what this was all about. He saw his plane being taxied across the field, saw it halt in front of the terminal and an army man alight and wait.

It was breaking daylight, the cumulous clouds in the eastern sky were smeared with crimson, and on the field it was noticeably lighter.

One of the control tower operators looked up from the telephone. “Gulick just turned in a flight plan. He is clearing for Little Rock.”

A moment later, Seth arrived. She was breathless. “He's having them get out a plane for him.”

“Did he see you?” Doc asked.

“No, he didn't but—” She hesitated. “I thought there was another man watching him. I wasn't sure but what the man was just someone who was curious.”

“Ever see the fellow before?”

She hesitated again. “There was something familiar about him, but I couldn't place him.”

“What did he look like?”

“Tall, rather dark, a blue suit and gray hat. A round and rather Spanish looking face.”

“Did he speak to Gulick?”

“Oh, no.”

Doc hesitated. There was not much chance of Seth finding the man if he sent her back, and if she did find

him, she might be in danger.

He asked, "Afraid of airplanes?"

"Oh, not at all!"

"That's good," he said. "Come on." He told the tower operator, "I'll call you on the Army frequency, and you tip me off when Gulick's ship is on the runway."

"Okay."

THE Army man who had brought Doc's plane over reported, "Fuel and oil okay. I gave her a run-up check, and she's sweet."

They were taxiing toward the north end of the runway when the control tower reported, "Gulick's ship in take-off position. Shall I give him the green light?"

"Give it to him," Doc said.

Presently he followed Donald Gulick into the air. Gulick took off with his position lights on, obeying regulations, but after he was ten miles beyond the traffic pattern, he switched them off. And he wasn't, Doc Savage decided, heading for Little Rock. St. Louis was a better bet, from the course he was setting.

Doc got out a pair of binoculars.

"Keep your eye on him," he told Seth.

He kept well back of Gulick, and flew low, because it is much harder to see an airplane with the earth as a background than to see one in the sky. His ship had an army camouflage job, which would help. The only difficulty was that his cruising speed was probably two hundred miles an hour greater than Gulick's top speed. He flew with his flaps down to the last notch, which helped, and the rest of the surplus speed he frittered away by making wide S-turns.

Chapter X

IT was a short chase, and the end was unexpected and horrifying. Perhaps it should have been neither, but it was.

He was trying different ways of moving his leg to learn whether there was a way of moving it that wouldn't hurt, when Seth cried out and fastened both hands on his arm.

"Oh, my God!" she said.

It takes very little pressure, hardly more than the weight of a mouse, to control a plane in flight, and the jerk she gave his arm sent a wing tip down and put them in a slip. He brought the wing up instinctively, then looked; by some strange oracular jump of his mind, he already knew what he would see. He was correct.

The sun was now above the eastern horizon, just ahead of Gulick's plane and to the left, and the thing attacking Gulick's plane looked a little like another sun, except that its color was slightly different, and its shape, too, because it kept changing shape slightly.

The resemblance to the sun was purely illusion as far as the size was concerned, because it wasn't that large; it was hardly as large in diameter as the fuselage of Gulick's cabin ship.

He hit the throttle, driving it to the dash, wide open, and the airspeed started crawling. Sending the plane toward the ship ahead was instinctive; in a moment, reason took hold, and he wondered if he wanted any part of whatever was harassing Gulick's ship.

Gulick, it was evident, was being harassed. A plane is a sensitive thing which, to a man who has flown a lot, will respond to his emotions, becoming easy and gentle with his quietness, quick and violent with his fears. Gulick was sideslipping now; he came out of that, did a short dive, a sharply banked turn to the right.

Seth's hands were still fastened to Doc's arm.

"What is it?" she gasped.

Her clenched fingertips felt like teeth in his arm. He didn't answer, but watched, fascinated.

The object might be called a fireball, but it wasn't flame. It was a luminosity, the edges of which were not too sharply defined. Once, when it was between himself and Donald Gulick's plane, Doc was sure that he could see through it and distinguish the outline of the plane stabilizer. Therefore it was, in its thinner moments, at least, semi-transparent.

The shape of the ectoplasmic horror was not stabilized, he noted. It had been roughly an egg when he first saw it; later it stretched, became a weird pennant. The pennant in turn shortened, and it was a ball; it became a flat blade, then a sheet; suddenly it seemed actually to touch the trailing edge of the wings and run along the rib ends like a macabre, disembodied tongue.

Seth cried out then; horror was as harsh as an animal in her throat. Because the luminous mass had suddenly plunged against the cabin windows, gathered itself there, as if trying to get inside. It grew smaller, as if part of it had managed to enter.

Now the plane pulled up, hung by its nose, stalled out, fell off, began to spin. It corkscrewed downward dizzily.

The luminous object left the plane, deserted the ship as a killer deserts a corpse. It drifted up in the sky, gathered itself, became a drifting ball, for a moment without purpose; then suddenly it became definitely direct in its progress.

Doc said, "Not so good."

Seth was less composed. She shrieked, "It's coming after us!"

DOC SAVAGE thought: Curiosity kills more than cats. And he jerked his ship around sharply, set it in a dive, and did everything he could with prop pitch and mixture and trim tabs to get the ultimate in speed. The airspeed needle presently moved to four hundred, then beyond.

The plane, while a fighter model, was two-place; it was probably, thanks to engineer Renny Renwick's designing, as fast a two-place job as there was extant. When they were past five hundred, Doc pulled out of the dive slightly, and examined the rear-view mirror.

Relief shallowed the deep grooves at the corners of his mouth.

“Discouraged the thing,” he said.

He eased the throttle out, pulling up to regain his altitude, doing a climbing turn.

“Don't be an idiot!” Seth cried excitedly. “Don't go back!”

“I don't think the thing is interested in us,” Doc said.

The statement he decided, was not exactly true, because a few moments ago he had been batting everything out of the plane, convinced they were going to be assaulted.

“Let's see what happens to Gulick's ship,” he added.

“Where is it?” Seth asked, bewildered.

Doc pointed.

Gulick's plane was quite low, and had stopped spinning. The whole thing had started at about six thousand feet. Gulick's plane was now below a thousand, still stalled, falling off to right and left in the maneuver called a falling leaf. As they watched, the ship straightened out, did a sloppy slipping turn, and lined out on an approach to a large pasture.

“He's able to make a landing!” Seth gasped.

Doc brought his own plane around, headed for the pasture, which was nearly three quarters of a mile long and looked quite level. He set his flaps and ran down the landing gear.

Gulick's plane made a landing that was hair-lifting, on one wheel, bouncing; then it settled, kept going, tail up, prop turning over fairly fast.

Watching, straining with the effort, Doc realized he was growling, “Cut that engine! Cut that engine!” over and over.

The engine of Gulick's ship finally stopped, but too late. The plane piled into brush at the end of the field, stopped, half buried in the vegetation.

There was no fire.

Doc did a pattern approach, a wheel landing, watching for obstructions in the pasture. He closed the throttle, let the tail settle, then taxied toward the Gulick ship. Fifty yards from the piled-up craft, he swung the nose around so that he could take off downwind in an emergency.

“Better stay in here,” he told Seth. “The cockpit is armored.”

The morning sunlight was a fresh young brightness about him as he walked toward Gulick's ship. Far away, at the other end of the pasture, a small pickup truck appeared. It was coming toward them.

GULICK'S plane, to a layman, probably would have seemed a complete wreck. Doc Savage eyed the damage critically, and decided the ship had not hit the brush hard; damage to an airplane structure has the property of looking much worse than it is.

The safety belt was holding Donald Gulick in the seat, and the man was doubled forward, arms and head hanging loosely, a thin thread of crimson crawling from the tip of his long, sharp nose.

Doc felt for, and found, a pulse.

“Gulick!” he said loudly.

No response.

He did not move Gulick immediately, nor did he at once examine Gulick farther. Instead, he clambered back into the plane cabin, his eyes busy, hunting. He saw nothing that told him anything of interest. He looked at the instrument panel, which was undamaged, noting the control settings.

He climbed out of the ship, looked upward, and saw that the luminous mass was gone from the sky.

He called, “Seth?”

She put her head out of his ship, asked, “What is it?”

“When did that thing vanish?”

“I don't know. I was too excited to keep watching it.”

That had been Doc's trouble, also. He glanced at the pickup, which was drawing near. Some farmer, probably, coming to investigate the excitement.

Suddenly Doc wheeled, began exploring Donald Gulick's head, searching for what had caused unconsciousness. He found it, a bump of some size over the temple. Over the right temple.

Doc unfastened the safety belt carefully, and lifted Gulick out of the seat. Gulick had been flying from the left side.

The pickup arrived and two men in overalls jumped out, one demanding, “Somebody get hurt?”

“He's still alive,” Doc said.

The man pointed overhead. “What the hell chased that plane, anyway?”

Doc shrugged expressively, said, “it was strange, wasn't it?”

“The thing chased you, didn't it, or tried to?” the man demanded.

Doc admitted that he had thought it was, for a moment, and, to the man's demand as to whether or not they wanted a doctor, said that he was a doctor. Then Doc called Seth.

“You had better telephone the Civil Aeronautics Authority in Kansas City and report this,” he told Seth. “Also notify the State Police. Ask the State Police to bring along a fingerprint man.”

Curious, Seth asked, “What do you want a fingerprint man for?”

“To take fingerprints.”

“Oh, all right, don't tell me anything,” she snapped, and departed.

One of the farmers was scrambling around in the brush, looking at the plane. “Don't look like it's burned nowhere,” he reported.

“Mind watching the injured man for me?” Doc asked.

The farmers were agreeable. "Anything we can do for him?" one asked.

"Call me if he begins to revive," Doc said.

DOC circled the plane himself. The brush was thick, red oaks and buck-brush growing out of soft, moist, fertile earth. Doc gave most of his attention to the ground, and finally he stopped and called one of the farmers.

"This your footprint?" Doc asked when the man came.

The farmer tried to remember where he had walked when circling the plane.

"Nope," he said. "Don't think it is."

Doc nodded, the flake-gold in his eyes glinting with excitement. "Does anyone around here have bloodhounds?" he asked.

"Bloodhounds?"

"Yes. Dogs that will trail a man."

"Shucks, I ain't heard of nobody using bloodhounds in fifteen year," the farmer said. "But the sheriff would know. Want me to call him and find out?"

"Will you do that?"

"Sure." The farmer climbed into the pickup, eager to be doing something, and, when his companion demanded where he was going, said, "Bloodhounds. There must've been a second feller in the plane, and got away."

Doc didn't comment on this. He was examining Donald Gulick again, more intensively this time. He drew Gulick's eyelids back, and inspected the eye pupils; he felt of the man's skin, which was getting a film of perspiration, and tested the pulse again. The pulse wasn't right.

"Let's see who he is," Doc said.

"Don't you know?" The farmer who had remained was surprised.

It was Donald Gulick, a driver's license and an old Airman's Identification Card proved, for the latter had Gulick's photograph, passport size, and the fingerprints of his right hand.

He was carrying a surprising amount of money, twenty-two hundred dollars.

"Holy mackerel!" the farmer exclaimed. "Well heeled, ain't he?"

There were a number of checks, evidently payment for radios or service, made out to Gulick's radio company. Conceivably, Doc reflected, Gulick had visited his store to pick up all the cash he could lay his hands on in a hurry. That might indicate Gulick had been taking flight, or it might mean nothing like that.

"Who's that feller?" the farmer asked suddenly.

A man was crossing the field toward them, a tall man who was immaculate even at a distance, in gray tweed topcoat and black Homburg hat.

During the last hundred yards of his approach, the stranger looked steadily at Doc Savage when he wasn't glancing down at the ground to make sure nothing soiled the mirror shine of his black shoes.

"Aren't you Doc Savage?" was his first statement.

Doc admitted this.

The man shoved out his hand heartily. "My name is Alfred Mants, and I'm delighted to meet you."

Doc Savage hoped he didn't jump more than a foot at the news. Alfred Mants! This was the fellow the small man and his friends were supposed, according to what they had said, to be working for. Mants was the leader of the gang which had kidnapped Ted Page and Seth, and still had Page; the same outfit which had done their best to murder Doc the night before.

Doc pretended the news meant nothing to him. But after that he was careful not to turn his back on Mants.

"See the accident from the highway?" Doc asked.

"That's right." Alfred Mants had a loud, clear, carefully enunciated voice; each of his sentences was spoken as if he was delivering it to an audience whom he did not wish to miss a single word.

"Did you see it happen?" Doc inquired.

"Yes, I did," Mants said. "And I'll confess I was dumbfounded."

Doc made a note of Mants' glistening black shoes. Those shoes hadn't tramped around in the soft earth where he had found the footprint a few moments ago; also he decided the shoe was a larger size than the one that had made the print.

"Know this man?" Doc asked, indicating Donald Gulick.

"Naturally not," said Mants.

"Positive?"

"Good God, why should I know him?" Mants demanded.

Doc asked the farmer, "Is there a highway near?"

"Sure, a gravel one. Just across the field yonder," the farmer said, pointing. "Farm to market road."

Doc was about to remark to Mants, in hopes of jolting the man's well-dressed composure, that it was rather early in the morning for a city man to be driving over an out-of-the-way gravel road, but he saw Seth returning.

Seth was breathless. "I called the Civil Aeronautics people and the State Police," she reported. "They're coming right out."

"What about the fingerprint man?"

"I didn't forget that," she assured him. "The State Police promised to bring one."

Doc, watching closely, decided that Seth and Alfred Mants didn't know each other; they gave absolutely no sign of recognition.

Mants turned to Doc Savage, said, "Mr. Savage, could I speak to you, privately?"

The well-dressed man had something on his mind.

Chapter XI

DOC moved about sixty feet away, careful to follow Mants, not precede him; he halted and waited for the man to speak.

Mants lowered his tone, although he still spoke with the same distinct, audience-impressing care.

"I did not want to talk in front of the yokel and the girl," he said. "I intended to tell you this later, but since the police are coming, there may not be a more favorable opportunity."

"There may not be," Doc said dryly, keeping his eyes on Mants' hands warily. "I take it you didn't turn up here by accident, after all?"

Mants nodded uneasily.

"Most peculiar circumstances brought me here," he said. "It was, as a matter of fact, a call. A telephone call, a very threatening voice. This voice told me that, if I knew what was good for me, I would be driving on that road yonder and watching the sky between dawn and eight o'clock this morning. At first, I had no intention—"

"What time did you receive this call?" Doc interrupted.

"An ungodly hour. Four this morning."

"Know the caller?"

"No, I didn't."

"This story doesn't hold water," said Doc, his patience getting thin. "A man receiving such a call would naturally think it was a practical joke, and wouldn't consider falling for it."

Mants held up a manicured hand. In a hurt voice, he said, "You are leaping at conclusions. You don't have the whole story."

"Let's have the whole story, then."

"Certainly. I am Alfred Mants, an importer. That is, I still call myself an importer, but during the war there has been precious little importing. Particularly since the goods in which I deal come from Europe. I deal in wines and champagnes, from France and Germany. It was while buying German wines, about a year before the present war started, that I met a man named Iturbi Sanchez, a foreign correspondent."

A car turned into the far end of the pasture. It was the pickup returning.

Mants continued, "I met Sanchez in a social way, becoming barely acquainted with the man. I did not see him through the ensuing years, until about one week ago, when he paid a call on me here in Kansas City, where I had recently come to live."

Removing a billowing snow-white handkerchief from a pocket, Mants used it to dab at his face nervously.

“This Iturbi Sanchez behaved mysteriously,” he went on. “He seemed to think that I knew a man named Carl Newsome, and demanded that I take him, Sanchez, to Newsome at once. Naturally, I couldn't do that.”

“Why couldn't you take Sanchez to Newsome?”

“It was impossible. I don't know anyone named Newsome.”

“Certain?”

“Absolutely. I wracked my memory, even went through my business records, but found no Carl Newsome. I told this to Sanchez, who didn't believe me. He became abusive. We—I threw him out of my apartment.”

“You mean you had a fight with him?”

“Well, yes, a sort of a fight. I grabbed him by the collar and the slack of the pants and pitched him out.”

“And then . . . ?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all, until I got this telephone call last night,” Mants said. “The caller said Iturbi Sanchez was dead, that he had died from the effects of an injury I had given him in tossing him out of my place. He said that if I knew what was good for me, I'd be out here on this road and watch the sky this morning.”

Doc looked at Mants with hard-eyed intentness. “The first time you told about that telephone call,” he said, “you didn't mention Sanchez.”

“I'm telling you now. At first, it wouldn't have meant anything to you because you didn't know who Sanchez was.”

“Sanchez,” Doc said, “died last night. He was shot.”

“Shot? You're sure of that?”

“Yes.”

Alfred Mants blew out a tremendous breath. “What a relief!” He folded the handkerchief and restored it to his pocket. “I actually believed I had caused the man's death.”

“What else do you know?” Doc demanded.

“That's all.”

“You mean it's all you're going to tell me?”

“I mean it's all I know.” Mants smiled an unfriendly sort of a smile. “You're being rather discourteous. I don't think you believe me.”

“Is what you've told me the truth?”

“Yes.”

“It had better be,” Doc said.

THE State Police arrived presently, and while Doc was identifying himself, the county sheriff put in an appearance. He was a heavy, kind-faced man who seemed intelligent, and he was accompanied by another man who had two dogs on leash. They were hounds, but not bloodhounds.

“Pike, here, says his dogs can trail a man,” the sheriff said. “Who you want trailed?”

“I found a footprint in the brush,” Doc explained. “I want to know what became of the man who made it.”

Pike wasn't too sure. “Oughta have somethin' of the feller's to let the dogs smell,” he said.

They went into the brush, Doc pointed out the footprint, and Pike shoved the noses of his dogs into the track, urging them excitedly. The dogs immediately headed through the brush, baying.

“By golly! They're gonna make it.” Pike was suddenly enthusiastic.

Doc would have liked to follow the dogs, but his leg was hurting. He asked the sheriff—Wickling by name—if he would go, and the officer was agreeable. He and Pike and the dogs disappeared in the brush.

Two young men from the Civil Aeronautics Authority arrived shortly, and listened, with the State Police, to the farmers telling about the luminous object which had pursued and attacked the plane.

The fingerprint man was busy inside the cracked ship.

A State Policeman turned to Doc. “That about the way it happened?”

“That *is* the way it happened, as far as I could see,” Doc told him.

“You were following this plane in your plane?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I believe the man in the ship, Donald Gulick, was in some way connected with the murder of a man named Iturbi Sanchez last night.”

Astonished, the officer demanded, “How did you dig up a connection?”

Doc gave enough facts to make a complete story. He did not give all the facts, just enough to give the impression that he was imparting all of them.

He said that Lew Page had been attacked in the sky, apparently, by the same sort of a mysterious thing which had assaulted Donald Gulick. Lew's brother, Ted Page, and Seth Williams, had called on him, Doc, for help; for this they had been kidnapped, threatened with death, and Seth forced to attempt to decoy Doc into a trap. Doc said that he had evaded the trap, explaining how, and been taken to the farm of the small man, Pansy Orchid Heather—the police all laughed at the name—where a fight had broken out between Doc and the gang, during the course of which Sanchez had been killed. Doc explained that he and Seth had then gone to the hospital, where Lew Page had told them Donald Gulick might know something and be able to help them. He had trailed Gulick, he said, been trailing him when this happened.

“Sure you didn't kill Sanchez yourself?” a policeman demanded.

“He was shot by his own friends, I'm sure.”

“Why would they do that?”

“They probably didn't want to be burdened by a wounded man. I had wounded Sanchez.”

“They must be tough cookies,” the cop said.

Another officer asked Seth, “You're Ted Page's girl friend?”

Seth flushed. “Ted has asked me to marry him a time or two,” she said.

“No offense,” the cop told her.

THE State Police withdrew for a private discussion. Doc believed, from the glances coming his direction, that they were debating whether to arrest him, and he was concerned about the outcome. He had a special commission in the metropolitan New York police department, but the Missouri State Police weren't bound to honor it.

The fingerprint man was taking pictures. Alfred Mants was standing nearby, using his handkerchief on his face again. In the distance, the two hounds were *boo-wooing*, still on the trail.

“I'm afraid they're going to arrest you,” Seth said uneasily.

The State Policemen approached Doc. “We want to be reasonable, Mr. Savage,” one of them said. “But it is going to be difficult to avoid putting you under arrest. You see, you're a material witness.”

“He also didn't report the Sanchez killing to the police,” another officer said.

Seth gasped, “He did, too! I heard him!”

The officer demanded, “You make that anonymous telephone call that got the cops out to the farm where they found Sanchez?”

“Yes,” Doc said.

“Why didn't you give your name?”

“Because I was hot on the trail and didn't want to lose the time that would have been taken up explaining things.”

“What trail were you so hot on?”

“I wanted to get to Lew Page and learn his story.”

In a more reasonable tone, another officer said, “Mr. Savage, I understand you work with the authorities quite a lot. Don't you have some sort of credentials with police organizations?”

“The only thing I have,” Doc told him, “is a New York City commission, and another one that isn't much good, an authority as special investigator for the State Department, which isn't a police credential at all. Here they are.” He handed over the documents.

The police held another conference over the credentials. They reported their decision. “There should be no objection to giving reciprocity to a New York City police commission, Mr. Savage. In other words,

go right ahead, but we would like to know what you dig up on this thing.”

Pleased, Doc said, “You can have the crooks as quick as, and if, I catch them.”

THE fingerprint man withdrew his head from the plane and reported, “There’s a bunch of old prints in here, and two fresh sets. One of the fresh sets belongs”—he pointed at Donald Gulick’s Airman’s Identification card which he was holding—“to this guy here.”

“Mind showing me one of the other prints?” Doc asked.

“Take a look. Right here.”

The print had no immediate meaning to Doc. But he borrowed the print man’s magnifying glass and studied the print, classifying it mentally so that he would know it if he saw it again. He asked, “How long ago would you say this print was made?”

“Two or three hours ago,” said the print man. “Most people don’t know you can get a pretty good idea of the age of a fingerprint, but you can.”

“Then it could have been made in Kansas City before Gulick took off in the plane,” Doc remarked.

The C.A.A. examiners had finished their preliminary poking around the cracked plane.

“No immediate evidence of structural damage that would cause the ship to crash,” one of them said.

Doc asked, “Either of you fellows know anything about the condition of Lew Page’s plane which crashed yesterday under similar circumstances?”

“Yeah, we made that inspection ourselves.”

“Find anything wrong with the ship?”

“Well now, that was a lot more difficult than this,” the C.A.A. man said. “Lew Page’s ship crashed in that pond at full speed, and it was really stacked up. Actually, the first examination, which is all we’ve made, didn’t show the cause of the crash, if it was structural.”

“In both cases, then, it might have been pilot failure?” Doc asked.

“That’s possible.”

The sheriff and the man with the dogs, Peck, were returning. Doc awaited their report with interest.

“Dogs done right well,” the sheriff said. “Followed a trail to the road, and lost it, after following it down the road a ways.”

“You would say, then,” Doc suggested, “that someone in a vehicle picked up the man who made the trail the dogs were following.”

“If I was guessing, I’d say that,” the sheriff declared.

ONE of the farmers called, “This feller’s waking up.”

They gathered around Donald Gulick, and Doc affirmed something he had said earlier, that the best thing was to leave Gulick alone until an ambulance came. "There isn't a thing we can do for him, except take him to a hospital and give a thorough examination," he said.

Suddenly Gulick's eyes came open—So staring and abnormal that at least two of the onlookers gasped. The eyes had nothing of sanity. Nor was the sound the man now made sane, a whimpering, strained and animal like.

Gulick started what seemed a normal movement of one arm, then froze tightly. The arm grew tense, then his shoulder, his other arm, his entire body, became drawn and rigid; every muscle seemed to knot in utmost tension.

"Whoeee!" one of the farmers said softly. "What's the matter with him?"

Doc said, "Here, help me hold him. Four or five of you."

"Four or five . . . I can hold that guy and two others like him by myself," a policeman said.

He was wrong, and two or three minutes later, he was admitting it. It was all five of them could do to restrain Gulick's frenzied convulsions. They wrestled and perspired, and their eyes grew wide with horror at what was happening. Doc urged, "Careful! Careful! Don't put rigid force against any of his movements. Use firm restraint only, otherwise you'll cause his bones to break."

When the thing was over, perhaps ten minutes afterward, they stood up, breathing hard, giving each other queer looks, not knowing exactly what to think or say.

Finally an officer asked Doc, "You mean a man having one of them things can break his own bones?"

Doc nodded. "It happens frequently. In spastic seizures of this type, the muscles are controlled by an abnormal condition of the brain, so that their strength is often several times normal."

"He give us several times as much hell as I thought any man his size could," one of the farmers muttered. "Golly, is he crazy?"

"You might call it that general term," Doc said.

The ambulance came. They loaded Donald Gulick inside, and Doc said he and Seth would ride with the patient. "Wait a minute, though," Doc told the driver.

Doc confronted Alfred Mants, "You'll ride with us around to where your car is parked," Doc told Mants. "Then you will get in your car and accompany us to the hospital."

Displeasure riffled Mants' composure. "Are you giving me orders?"

"If you want to call that an order, yes."

"Why?"

"I want you where I can keep an eye on you," Doc said bluntly. "Your story doesn't hold water."

Mants' face darkened. "That's insulting. However, I owe you something for not telling the police I was involved in this, thus sparing me the embarrassment of being asked a lot of questions I don't know the answers to. So I'll do as you say."

"You don't owe me a thing," Doc said. "So don't get it in your head that you do."

He didn't like Mants.

Chapter XII

MID-MORNING sunlight was whitening the neat antiseptic walls of the hospital when Doc Savage finished with his examination of Donald Gulick, washed his hands, put on his coat and joined Sethena Williams and Alfred Mants, who were waiting with one of the C.A.A. men and a State Policeman.

Seth read the bad news in Doc's face. "Isn't there any hope for him?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," Doc told her wearily.

"What's wrong with him, really?"

"The same thing that is wrong with Lew Page."

"I still don't know what is wrong with Lew," Seth reminded him.

"I thought I explained that," Doc said, although he recalled that he hadn't, very clearly. "What it amounts to is something on the order of neuronophagy, which is the phagocytic destruction of nerve cells. In other words, the destruction of nerve cells by other cells. How these predatory cells were created or released is a technical matter, too complicated to go into here, even if I was positive about the method which I suspect was used."

"You mean Lew can't get well, and neither can Donald Gulick?" Seth demanded.

"That's about the size of it."

Seth asked wildly, "Can't you do something? I thought you were such a wonderful doctor!"

Doc's leg was hurting him, and his temper was short. He said sharply, "I'm not God Almighty; I can't rebuild what has been destroyed. To repair Page or Gulick, you would have to take half the brain out of their heads and put in a new one. Unfortunately, I'm not able to do that, regardless of the claptrap you've heard about me."

Seth put a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry," she said.

"I'm going to put a dressing on this leg," Doc said.

He applied the dressing in a private room, and had one of the hospital doctors look at the leg, whereupon he was told that he should go to bed for at least a week with the leg. He agreed that probably he should, but he had no intention of doing so. The young hospital doctor said, "Where most patients get in trouble is in not taking care of themselves. But I'm sure you won't make that mistake, because you know better."

Doc had told patients the same thing himself. Feeling sheepish, he rejoined Seth, Mants and the two policemen. The officers were preparing to depart, and one asked, "You think there's any chance of Gulick talking rationally?"

"None at all," Doc said.

"How come he can't talk, but Lew Page could?"

"Gulick is much more violently afflicted," Doc explained. "Gulick got a lot bigger dose of the thing. He's

finished now, mentally. His body may live several hours or a day, but that's all."

The officer shuddered.

"This is the damndest thing," he muttered.

AFTER the police had gone, Doc confronted Alfred Mants. "I want to hear that story of yours again," he told Mants.

"All right," Mants said precisely. "But I don't see why you want it repeated." He told the same story as before; that he had met Sanchez abroad; that a week ago Sanchez had demanded that Mants take him to Newsome; and the telephoned instruction early this morning to be driving on the country road, keeping a watch on the sky.

"Where did you meet Sanchez in the beginning?" Doc asked.

"Europe."

"What part of Europe?"

"Germany."

"Let's be specific about this," Doc said sharply. "Where in Germany?"

Darkening, Mants said, "In the Hofiz Hofbrau on the Friedrichstrasse, July 21, 1938. Is that precise enough?"

"You have an excellent memory."

"I do," Mants said, "and I'm not ashamed of it."

"You say Sanchez was a foreign correspondent. Just what kind of social circles did he seem to travel in?"

"The intelligentsia. Professors, engineers, economists."

"What about Nazis?"

"He had Nazi friends."

"Did he remain in Germany after the war started?"

"That I wouldn't know. I didn't ask him. He could have. His country was not at war with Germany."

"Where do you live?"

"Here in Kansas City. The Elldale Apartments on Troost."

"Mind if I look over the place?"

Darkening again, Mants said, "That's damned cheeky of you. But if it'll make you happy, go ahead."

"I will," Doc assured him. "Just as soon as I make a telephone call."

Doc drew Seth aside and whispered, "Keep an eye on that bird. His story is holding water, but I don't

trust him.”

Seth nodded.

Doc found a telephone and dialed the number of C. B. Fay, the private detective whom he had engaged to perform the sizable job of trying to get all the doctors and drugstores in the city to keep a watch for anyone wishing a treatment for a bad case of what would seem to be ivy poisoning.

“For God's sake, where have you been?” demanded the ebullient C. B. Fay. “You rush the pants off me to get a job done, and then you're not around to get the results.”

“I got sidetracked,” Doc told him. “What have you found out?”

“At five this morning two guys called a Kansas City, Kansas, doctor out of bed to treat ivy poisoning,” Fay said. “The doctor told them he didn't get many ivy poison cases this time of the year, and he'd have to go to the drugstore to get the stuff to make a lotion. Incidentally, you fed me some hokum.”

“What do you mean, hokum?” Doc demanded.

“About a season for ivy poisoning. There ain't no season. Some people get it and some don't. Them that do, some of them, can get it any time of the year by handling ivy vines.”

Doc chuckled. “I told you that for effect. A misstatement like that, coming from a man who is supposed to be a famous doctor, would make every doctor you called remember it. It would tickle their vanity to catch such a mistake.”

“Oh.”

“Go ahead with your story,” Doc suggested.

“Well, the doctor went to the drugstore, and he telephoned me, and then he killed enough time to allow me to get a couple of hot operatives out there to shadow the ivy poison victims.”

“Did they shadow them?”

“You bet they did.”

“Where are they now?”

“That's why I'm in a stew about your not calling me,” Fay explained. “I don't know. The guys are moving, and my operatives are hot on their heels, but I don't have any more idea than a rabbit of where they are right now.”

“I'll call you for a later report,” Doc said. “And I congratulate you on a fine piece of work.”

“Thanks. Mind me making a suggestion that you come to my place and wait?”

“Can't now, but I will later,” Doc said.

“If you don't mind the expense, I'll put some more operatives trailing those two fellows.”

“They tried to kill me, so I'm not critical about expense,” Doc said. “Put a regiment of operatives to work, if they will do a better job.”

“I'll add a third man, then.”

Doc rejoined Seth and Mants, who had been discussing the case, and were puzzled about the man the bloodhounds had trailed. Seth said, "I didn't see anyone leave the plane after it crashed."

"You probably wasted your time and the sheriffs having the bloodhounds trail somebody who went through there hunting squirrels, or something," Mants told Doc.

"Let's see where you live," Doc said.

THE Mants apartment was new, neat and expensive. It did not look as if it had been occupied long, and Doc commented on this. Mants said, "I told you I just moved to Kansas City recently."

"Where did you live before that?"

"New York."

"Can you prove that?"

"I can when it's necessary."

Doc searched the apartment, making no secret of the fact that he was suspicious. In a closet, he found three suitcases plastered with foreign labels, most of them European. He examined Mants' clothing; it was all new, some of the suits apparently unworn, but there was not as much of it as he had expected from the man's immaculate appearance.

He finished and was walking across the living room when there was a conglomerate blast of sound, a report, glass breaking, flying across the room, and a sort of a *whut!* of a noise made by a passing bullet. Doc dived for the floor.

Immediately, two more bullets entered the window, knocking out more glass. Plaster fragments jumped off the wall.

Mants cried out, lunged and dragged Seth to the floor.

Doc was holding his leg with both hands; the pain was almost distracting him from the obvious fact that he was being shot at. He had hurt the leg again in diving to the floor.

He tried to calculate the source of the bullets by estimating the angle from the holes in the window to the pits the slugs had dug in the walls. Across the street somewhere, and not too far away because he had heard the shot sounds distinctly.

He remembered a round mirror in the hall, crawled in and got it, brought it back, and, lying face up below the window, tried his luck with a periscope effect. It was not too effective, but he concluded the shots must be coming from a hill about two blocks distant, where there were two-family residences.

About the time he reached this conclusion, a bullet came in and smashed the mirror out of his hands. He did not see where the shot came from.

Doc crawled to the telephone.

He called the police.

NOT more than five minutes later, the neighborhood was full of policemen. But the bird, or birds, had flown.

There was no difficulty in finding where the shots had been fired. A resident of the neighborhood had also called the police, complaining that a man was firing a rifle from behind a bush in his back yard. This man had alighted from a car which had been parked for some time, nearly half an hour. After he had fired the shots, the rifleman had jumped into the car and driven off. It was believed there was another man with him.

“Which would indicate,” Doc said, “that the assailants didn't trail me here.”

Mants' temper was slipping.

“I wish you would get away from me,” he told Doc. “I don't like gunplay. Please go somewhere else to be shot at.”

“How do you know,” Doc demanded, “that the bullets weren't meant for you?”

Mants sneered. “You're crazy!”

A city policeman laid a hand on Doc's arm. “I think we'll take you in for questioning.”

“Why?” Doc demanded sharply.

“When people get shot at in this town, we want to know why.”

Another officer told the first, “Hold it, Charley. I've heard of this fellow Savage. I think we'd better call headquarters first.”

Doc said, “And let me talk to your superior officer. I don't want to repeat this argument about being arrested every time something happens to me.”

Presently the officer handed over the telephone, and an amiable voice in the receiver said, “The State Police gave us a report on you, Savage, and we got on the telephone and checked with New York. We're going to cooperate with you, and we'll let you run around loose as long as we can. Just don't do anything we can't very well ignore. And we'd appreciate knowing what you know about this thing.”

“I'll give it to you as soon as I can make heads or tails of it,” Doc promised.

“Thanks. Put the officer back on here, and I'll tell him.”

After the police had gone, Mants looked at Doc uneasily. “Do you really think the shots were meant for me?”

“What do *you* think?”

“I don't know why anyone should try to kill me. The idea is preposterous.”

Doc shrugged. He telephoned C. B. Fay.

“It's about time,” said C. B. Fay. “How did you enjoy being shot at?”

“Where did you find out about that?” Doc asked.

“I should tell you I saw it in my crystal ball, after the way you got me out of bed in the middle of the night,” the private detective said. “But I guess I’ll break down and tell you. The two ivy victims were the guys who shot at you. My operatives were trailing them.”

Doc asked sourly, “What kind of operatives have you got that would stand there and let those guys try to murder me?”

“Good operatives,” said Fay, unimpressed. “They follow orders. Their orders were to trail the guys, not to lose them under any conditions, and nothing else. That’s what they did.”

“Your men are still on the trail of those two?”

“Sure.”

“Where are they?”

“Eating a late breakfast in a restaurant on Troost about ten blocks from where you are, if you’re still where you were when you were shot at. Those birds don’t seem to be much afraid of the police.”

“I’m going to take over the job of handling those two,” Doc said.

“Need some help?”

“I hope not. By the way, has that pair of hoodlums contacted anybody?”

“Sure. Wait a minute; I took down the report of my operatives in shorthand. Wait until I get it.”

While he was holding the phone, Doc looked at Seth and remarked, “Don’t look so worried. I think we’re about to sew this thing up.”

“I NEVER can read my shorthand notes after they get cold,” Fay complained. “The pair made four telephone calls. One was to Sunflower Hospital, to ask how Lew Page was getting along, and they were damned pleased to hear he was about dead. The second call was to North 3836, the third to Westland 5001, and they only got an answer at the North number. The Westland number didn’t answer.”

“What about the fourth call?” Doc asked.

“That’s the one I’m ashamed of, because my operative wasn’t able to get either the number or what was said. And I think that’s the important one; I think it was through that call they got their orders to bushwhack you, because they went straight to that place where they took their potshots at you.”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Doc said. “I’m amazed that your men were able to learn the other three numbers that were called.”

“I told you I’ve got damned good people working for me.”

Doc asked, “What time were these calls made?”

“The first three between eight and nine. The last one about an hour ago.”

“All right. Now how will I recognize your operatives when I go to take over the shadowing of my two

friends with the ivy poisoning?”

“You don't. They'll recognize you.”

“Okay.”

“Listen, don't go and get yourself killed, because I've got a hell of a bill I'm going to send you for this job, and I want it paid,” said C. B. Fay gloomily.

Doc Savage ended the telephone conversation, and eyed Seth and Mants thoughtfully, finally asking, “Either of you recognize the telephone number, Westland 5001?”

Seth started violently. “I do! That's Ted's telephone number. Ted Page. His apartment.”

“Our ivy victims called the number, but there was no answer.”

Puzzled, Seth said, “I don't understand why they would do that. But naturally there wouldn't be an answer, because they have kidnapped Ted.”

“What about North 3836?” Doc asked.

Seth's lips parted. She lost color. “That's mine!” she gasped. “My apartment.”

“They called you, too,” Doc said.

She looked at him, apparently too shocked for speech.

“And they got an answer,” Doc added.

He watched her lose color. He didn't say anything more.

Alfred Mants made a hoarse noise clearing his throat. He was looking at Seth with horror in which fear intermingled.

“YOU two are going with me,” Doc announced. “But first, I'm going to make another telephone call. We haven't much time, but this is important.”

He got the police department on the telephone, and asked for the fingerprint department, then inquired, “Do you have the fingerprints of Ted Page, the young man who was reported kidnapped last night? He works for a large insurance company, and I happen to know that concern fingerprints all its employees.”

“Sure, we got them. Wait a minute.” Presently the fingerprint man was back with, “What about them? I've got them here in my hand.”

“Give me a description.”

Doc listened to the classification of the fingerprints with evident satisfaction.

He asked, “Is there a fault, apparently the result of a scar, in the upper part of the left thumb?”

“That's right.”

Doc said, “Here's a tip. Compare Ted Page's prints with those found in the plane that crashed in the country this morning. And while you're at it, have someone check the size of Ted Page's shoe against the

footprints made by a man the bloodhounds trailed near the scene of the plane crash. You may be able to find an extra pair of Ted Page's shoes in his apartment to make the comparison."

"You think Ted Page was around that plane this morning?" the fingerprint man demanded.

"It certainly would be interesting to find out," Doc said.

Chapter XIII

A RATHER sloppy looking middle-aged woman climbed, without being invited, into the automobile where Doc Savage was waiting with Seth and Mants, parked at a point from which they could watch the restaurant on Troost where the two ivy victims were supposed to be having their late breakfast.

"They're still in the restaurant," she said. "But now they're four. Two more came in a few minutes ago. They aren't friends with the first two. They're having an argument in a booth. The second two are wearing coveralls marked Central Aviation Company, probably so they'll be inconspicuous because you see Central workmen all over town. There's a big plant here. C. B. Fay said we were to take your orders. What are they?"

She seemed to be crisp, efficient and intelligent in spite of her slatternly looks.

Doc asked, "What is the argument about?"

"I don't know, but it looks like the second two are afraid of the first two. Chick, who is working with me, sat down in the booth next to them. He heard one of the first two tell the second two that the only way they could save their necks was to drop the whole thing. Then they got up and moved to another booth which had empty seats all around. So that was all Chick overheard."

"That sounds like the second two men were having the terms of surrender laid down to them," Doc remarked.

"That's exactly what it sounded like."

"How good an actress are you, Miss . . ."

"Doyle. Mrs. Kate Doyle. If you're not an actress, you don't last long in this racket."

"Have those men seen you?"

"I don't think so."

"I'm going to tell you what I want you to do, and if it's too dangerous, say so," Doc said. "I want you to go in there, tell those men you're Donald Gulick's aunt. Speak very angrily, but not loudly enough to attract attention."

"Who's Donald Gulick and has he got an aunt?" the woman demanded.

"Gulick is a man they killed this morning, and I don't know whether he has an aunt. If they start asking you questions, be too angry to answer them."

"What am I angry about?"

"Donald Gulick is in the hospital dying horribly because part of his nervous system is destroyed, and

you're angry about that.”

“Good. That sounds like enough to be angry about. What else do I do?”

“Tell them,” said Doc, “that they are being tricked. Tell that to the second two men, the pair who are afraid. Look right at them, and ask them if they know Newsome has been bought off. Sound very angry.”

“I ask them if they know Newsome has been bought off. What else?”

“In a very nasty tone, ask them if they knew Donald Gulick was killed to scare Newsome's gang, and that Newsome helped do it. Newsome himself was in Gulick's plane.”

“Newsome doublecrossed them, eh?”

“That's the idea. Tell them part of the deal Newsome made was that he was to scare his own men into quitting. Call them suckers. Tell them their own boss is helping terrorize them into quitting so they won't have to be paid anything. Ask them if they're going to be made suckers of. Lay it on heavy.”

“Okay.”

“Then turn to the other two, the ivy victims. Ask them if they think everybody is a fool. Say that if you were a man, you'd know what to do. Then walk out.”

“What makes you think they'll let me walk out?” the woman asked dryly.

“After that bomb you've just tossed into the surrender conference, I think they'll be too surprised to stop you.”

“All right. I'll do it.”

“Who else is working with you?” Doc asked.

“Dan Gibney. There's just the three of us. Dan, Chick and me.”

“Pass the word to Dan and Chick to follow the second pair.”

“What about the ivy victims?”

“I'll take over there,” Doc said. “Those babies helped try to kill me last night, and I want to deal with them personally.”

The woman operative departed without another word.

ALFRED MANTS let out an astonished gasp. “Whew! I thought all private detectives were disappointed or brokendown cops. That one was a surprise.”

Seth had said almost nothing since Doc had informed her that the two ivy victims had telephoned her apartment and received an answer. The news had either frightened her into guilty silence, or puzzled her into silence. But now she said, “Mr. Savage, I don't understand what you are doing.”

“Lighting a bomb,” Doc told her. “And hoping the resulting explosion will blow enough pieces into our laps.”

She chewed her lower lip nervously, then asked, “Do you think I've been lying to you?”

“Have you?” Doc countered.

“No. But I think you have the idea that I'm guilty of something.”

Doc said nothing.

“I'm not,” she insisted.

Mants snorted. “You better explain how those guys came to call your place and get an answer.”

Seth fell to chewing her lower lip again, looking pale and frightened.

“I'm damned glad it wasn't my apartment they called,” Mants added.

“Lay off,” Doc said. “Seth has got enough trouble without you rubbing it in.”

Mants scowled. “I don't want to stay here. There may be shooting. You heard the detective say those are tough men. I don't like to be exposed to danger.”

Doc gave him a hard look, said, “You try to leave here, and I'll turn you over to a policeman who will throw you in jail so fast your ears will buzz.”

Mants flew into a rage. “By God!” he snarled. “I won't take that! I'm no crook! I haven't done anything to be thrown in jail!”

“How would you like to try explaining to the police that you didn't decoy me to your apartment so your pals could take a shot at me?” Doc asked harshly.

“That's a lie!”

“You might have trouble proving it.”

“Damn you!” Mants struggled to control his rage, finally did, and said, “All right, I'll stay here, but under protest, and only to keep you from lying to the police about me!”

Doc had been watching the restaurant entrance. “Shut up,” he said. “There goes the lady detective into the place.”

Private Detective Mrs. Kate Doyle was not in the restaurant more than two minutes, and the interval seemed even shorter than that.

She came out, walking fast, and, without glancing in the direction of Doc Savage, signalled them that everything was all right by making the okay signal with a circle of thumb and forefinger.

Doc said, “Unless I miss my guess, the kettle will boil over right in the restaurant. Scared crooks usually have short tempers.”

His prediction proved accurate. Inside the restaurant sounded a dull *bump!* noise. A shot.

Yells, footsteps, thuddings.

One of the ivy poisoning victims sailed out of the restaurant door, made a right turn on the sidewalk with his feet skidding, and began running, running with such frenzied effort that his fingers were splayed open as if reaching for something in front of him that he couldn't quite grasp.

DOC SAVAGE told Alfred Mants, "I'll drive. We're going to follow that fellow."

Mants snapped, "Well, be careful with my car!" and slid out from under the wheel. Doc Savage moved from the back seat to the front, and got the car rolling.

Presently two men wearing white coveralls marked Central Aviation Company came out of the restaurant, not exactly running, but not strolling, either. One casually pocketed a gun. They turned a corner.

Seth shuddered violently. "Those two must have killed one of the others."

Mants looked at Doc Savage disagreeably and said, "You are a cold-blooded customer. You killed that man just as much as if you had pulled the trigger yourself. Murderer!"

Doc Savage for the first time displayed genuine rage. His bronze skin became hard and metallic looking, his eyes narrowed coldly. His lips compressed, and for the next fifteen minutes he did not speak a word.

Mants, seeing the bronze man's rage, at first looked pleased with himself. Then his pleasure went away and he grew alarmed and seemed frightened.

The ivy victim they were following ran at headlong speed for four blocks, then discovered an empty cab, dashed into the street and climbed into the cab. Somewhere a police siren was wailing.

The taxi carried the man to a bus station downtown, and he stood around for a while, apparently to make sure he was in no immediate danger, after which he bought a bus ticket.

"Want me to go in and find out where he bought the ticket to?" Seth asked.

"The fellow might recognize you," Doc said. "No need of taking chances. If he rides a bus, we can keep up with it in this car."

The man boarded a bus marked Winnwood Beach, which proceeded across the North Kansas City bridge over the Missouri River, passed a few factories, turned right, keeping Number Ten highway, and finally reached the end of the run, where their quarry alighted.

When the man struck out at a fast walk, Seth breathed. "He must be near where he's going, because there are cabs he could hire, and he's passing them up."

"Or he has a car parked," Doc said.

Which was the case, for the man got in a coupé. They followed him about twelve miles over highway and country road. The man drove very fast, fast enough that he couldn't be spending much of his time looking back, which Doc thought accounted for his not discovering them following him. If he hadn't.

They got a break when the man stopped. They saw him, from a distance, turn into a house on a hill.

Doc didn't like the looks of the road; he thought it was a one-way lane leading to the house. In a small valley, he discovered a gate that led into a corn field. "Mants, open the gate," he said. "We'll pull into the corn far enough to get out of sight."

"Probably get stuck," Mants said, but they didn't. If anyone came looking for tracks, though, theirs would be easy to find.

"Come on," Doc said. "I don't think we have much time to waste."

THE house stood on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River and its valley, a tall house, old, but with age that was cloaked in pre-Civil War dignity. It was not elaborate; just a fine old house.

“A lovely place,” Seth said, “but somehow it has a hard, foreboding look.”

“If it were not for your imagination,” Mants said coldly, “the place would have no aspect of hardness. It is a pleasant place as your American”—He changed himself hurriedly—“or rather, our American styles of architecture go.”

Having made the slip—referring to American houses as if they were foreign houses—Mants looked at Doc Savage suspiciously. Unfortunately, Doc had hurt his leg a moment before, and he couldn't, try as he would, look innocent and dumb. He looked, he suspected, not only suspicious, but knowing and vindictive; he must have looked that way, for Mants suddenly made a grab for what was evidently a weapon concealed in his clothing.

Doc hit him, struck the man with great enthusiasm, putting into the blow the rancidness he had been saving up for several hours. Even at that, he couldn't hit Mants as hard as he wished, so he let the man have a left too, short and hooking.

Mants did get his mouth open, probably trying to yell, but Doc knocked the breath out of him, the outgoing air making a sound like a horse coughing. Mants was as tough as an oak post. Doc swung more rights and lefts, chopping the man down, and by that time he had hurt his leg so much that he had to sit down himself, and he used Mants for a chair.

Amazed, confused, Seth demanded, “What did he do? Why did you attack him?”

Doc Savage, getting his breath, was grimly elated. “Mostly, I think, it was because I can't stand the incredible delusion which some Germans have that every American is a fool. There were other things that griped me, but that was the biggest itch.”

Seth's eyes grew round and astonished.

“He's a Nazi?” she demanded.

“I don't know about the Nazi part, but probably he is, or was. But he's German.”

“How do you know?”

“It sticks out all over him. The look of him, the contempt with which he treated us. The careful way he speaks English—perfect English, too perfect for an American to be handling the language.”

Doc Savage fished inside his clothing and brought out a small flat case of the type which old-fashioned family doctors once employed to carry pill phials. He wrestled Mants around and forced about half the contents of one of the phials down the man's throat. After Mants had swallowed, he looked up, saw Seth's horrified expression, and explained, with a chuckle, “Oh, it's not poison. Just something to put him to sleep for a few hours.”

“Oh,” Seth said. “Oh, I see.”

Doc told her pleasantly, “As a matter of fact, you don't really see, do you?”

“I'm hopelessly confused,” she admitted.

“To get the answers,” he asked, “would you take a chance?”

“I certainly would,” Seth said promptly.

“Just remember,” Doc told her, “that what you're doing isn't as dangerous as it sounds. I am going to carry Alfred Mants back and put him in our car. You are going to drive him to that house and tell the men you have saved him.”

Seeing Seth's frightened expression, he smiled reassuringly. “As long as you tell them you saved Mants, and give them the impression you are quite a close friend of Mants, you will be perfectly safe. Tell them that. Tell them Mants has been attacked by Newsome's men, and you saved him. Tell them Mants directed you to bring him here before he lapsed into senselessness.”

“What if they don't believe me?” Seth demanded uneasily.

“Oh, they'll be glad to believe you. Act very confident and knowing. You might even lay it on a little, and act tough.”

“I'll be awfully scared.”

“That's fine. It's easy to act tough when you are scared.” Doc picked up Mants' limp form. “Come on. I'll put him in the car, and you can get started.”

Chapter XIV

DOC SAVAGE, moving fast, was concealed behind a grape arbor at the rear of the house when he heard Sethena Williams drive up to the front of the place with the automobile, Mants' car, containing Mants' unconscious body. He heard excited exclamations inside the house, listened to Seth call sharply, “Come out here and help me, you idiots! Mants has been hurt!”

By now, Doc surmised, any watchers who might have been at the rear of the house would have been drawn out front by curiosity. So he got going, doubled down beside a privet hedge, ran swiftly, reaching a rear door, which he found locked. But there was a window nearby, within reach of the ground, which was open. He climbed through it without hesitation, and was not molested.

He was in a kitchen; crossing hurriedly to an open door, he found a small hall, then a dining room, beyond which was a large living room with tobacco smoke odor and drinks on a table. Future talking, Doc decided, would be done in this room. Looking about for a hiding place, he discovered a small door on his left, opened it, and found a closet. He got inside, made sure there was a means of opening the door from the interior, and closed the panel partially.

There was not much talking outside. But presently an alarmed man dashed into the living room, jerked a cushion off a divan, and snatched two automatic pistols which had been concealed under the cushion.

The man yelled, “Whatcha want me to look for?”

“Get out back and keep a look-out, dammit!” he was told.

The man raced past the closet where Doc was hiding, vanishing into the rear of the house.

The next speaker was Seth. She said angrily, “That's no way to carry an unconscious man, you idiots!”

Doc was relieved at her tone; she seemed to be in command of the situation. He watched men come into

the living-room.

He knew some of them. The small man was there, and the fellow who had fled from the restaurant, the men they had trailed out here. Some of the others had been at the farm last night; some hadn't been. Three of them were carrying Mants.

“Put him on that couch there,” Seth directed sharply, pointing at the divan.

While they were doing that, the frightened man who had fled the restaurant said loudly, “I told you guys! I told you I thought I saw Mants' car on the road behind me!”

“Of course I was behind you,” Seth told him coldly. “If you hadn't driven like a crazy man, I would have overtaken you and had you help me.”

The men scowled. “Who are you, babe?”

Seth laughed in his face. “A little surprised, aren't you? There's a lot you don't know, wise-guy.”

The man darkened. “Come on, answer my question.”

Seth nodded at Mants. “Why don't you ask him when he wakes up? He'll tell you I've been working right with him all along.”

The statement had a much more pronounced effect on the men than Doc had expected. It hit them, for a few moments, with stunned silence. Then one of them—Spick, he had been called last night—began to laugh. With a roar, the laughter spread through the room.

The mirth unnerved Doc Savage; he wondered what had gone wrong, and he set himself to do what he could to save Seth. He saw Seth was alarmed, too; saw the loss of color in her face, the frightened shift of her eyes toward the door.

And then—and both Doc and Seth seemed to realize it about the same time—it dawned on them that the laughter sprang from admiration. The men were delighted, genuinely delighted, over something they thought very clever.

Doc carefully wiped nervous perspiration off his forehead. He had been more concerned, for a moment, than he believed possible.

ELATED, Spick chortled, “By God, Mants had a pipeline right into the enemy's camp the whole time! What do you know about that! No wonder Mants was one jump ahead of them all the time!” He turned to Seth and said admiringly, “Sister, you're good.”

Seth looked tough and said, “Not good. Clever is the word.”

That got another roar of laughter.

Seth said, “You guys had better cut out the funny stuff. This isn't a vaudeville show. They jumped Mants, and beat him up, and if I hadn't pulled a gun on them and driven them off, no telling what they'd have done to him. Killed him, probably.”

“Where'd this happen?” the small man demanded.

The small man's face was bandaged. He had, Doc surmised, fallen a victim to the ivy-poison chemical the

night before. That accounted for his disappearance from activities; he had probably been in too much misery to take part in anything during the day.

"It happened in town," Seth said.

"That's where it happened to me," declared the man who had fled the restaurant. "Right in town, in a restaurant. They knocked off Jiggs, damn them, and I barely got away. We had them sewed up, but some old dame came in and spilled the works, told them the straight of it. And they cut loose on Jiggs and me with guns."

The part of the small man's face that was not bandaged was very happy.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I want Newsome to hear this."

The small man went into a hall; Doc could hear him climbing a stairs, heard the murmur of voices, low and indistinguishable. And after a time the small man came back downstairs. He looked even more pleased.

"Newsome's afraid to come down," he said. "He saw the girl from an upstairs window, and he won't believe that she's been selling him out."

"You really got him fooled, sis," Spick told Seth.

"And why not?" Seth asked casually. She had seated herself beside Alfred Mants and was stroking his hair.

The small man grinned at Seth for a few moments, then asked, "When did you get in this, Miss Williams?"

"Early in the game," Seth replied.

"In Germany, you mean?"

"No, no, when the American part started," Seth said.

Doc Savage stiffened. Apprehension made a knot in his throat. This was dangerous questioning, and Seth might trip herself at any moment.

The small man frowned, "Oh, you got in it when Mants contacted Lew Page in occupied Germany with the proposition that Lew Page smuggle Mants and his apparatus out of Germany in an A.T.S. plane."

Seth shrugged. "During the dickering, that's when I came in."

"Sure. Sure, I get it now. Lew Page said he had to get somebody with better connections than he had here in the States to handle the thing, and so he ran that Newsome thing in on us. That's when you came in—when Newsome did."

Seth didn't answer that. She just smiled coldly.

This seemed response enough for the small man, who asked, "Did Mants approach you first? Or did you go to Mants with the proposition to keep him posted?"

"Mants isn't a fool," Seth said. "The point is that we're all in a tight spot."

"I don't see nothing tight about it," the small man said.

“Newsome's outfit isn't going to take it lying down,” Seth told him. “You've already seen an example of that. What they did to Mants and”—she pointed at the man who had fled the restaurant—“the shooting they started.”

“Who was the old babe who tipped them off?” the small man pondered.

“Some relative of Donald Gulick's.”

“How'd she get wise?”

“Gulick probably told her some. The rest she figured out. Newsome wasn't as slick as he thought.”

Still satisfied, the small man grinned. “Reckon we'd better get a doctor for Mants?”

“It would be all right,” Seth said. “But I doubt if it would be safe.”

“Why not?”

“Savage,” Seth said.

It gave Doc satisfaction to note that his name had an effect. But the satisfaction, he thought grimly, was about all that would come of it. He listened to the small man's swearing, heard the small man mention several things which he, personally, would do to Savage if he got the chance, none of the things being pleasant.

Seth, possibly to get the conversation on a subject she knew something about, said, “You knew Savage put some chemical in the car last night, and it caused what you thought was ivy poisoning, didn't you?”

The small man hadn't known that. He clenched his fists and thought of new cusswords and new violence he would commit on Doc.

Doc scowled and made a mental note to work on the small man first of all when the end of this thing started; he was thinking that when a bullet went through the closet over his head, smashing loudly, knocking a shower of plaster down on his head.

DOC came near bursting out of the closet then, to fight singlehanded. It was a miracle he didn't. He thought he had been discovered.

Then a voice, the lookout from the back, yelled, “Some guy shot at me!”

Confusion filled the house for a few moments. The men were grabbing guns, hunting vantage points. It was Spick who identified the attackers.

“Newsome's friends,” Spick said. “I just saw that one they call Slim.”

Seth put in her bit by saying loudly, “You should have been doing something instead of standing around listening to me talk!”

“Are they all around the house?” the small man demanded.

“Must be,” someone said. “I don't see . . .” He didn't finish, for another bullet came into the house, evidently confirming his conclusion.

“This shooting will have the law down on our necks,” a man said in fright.

He was advised this was unlikely; there were no close neighbors.

Two or three shots were fired from the house. They blasted like cannon reports.

The small man began yelling.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute! Let's use our heads!” he bellowed. “We got a way of running those guys the hell away from here in a hurry!”

He ran back into the front room, where Doc could see him through the thin crack of the closet door, and asked Seth, “Are Newsome's men wise to the gadget?”

Doc watched Seth's sick, bewildered expression with horror. He heard her say, “I—they don't know too much.”

The small man didn't notice her confusion. He demanded, “Do they know about the fake, about the dope we gave Lew Page and Gulick?”

“I don't think so,” Seth said. “But how do I know what they know?”

The small man was elated. He yelled, “Spick, come here. You, too, Ed. Let's see what the gadget does for them!”

Chapter XV

WITH intense interest, Doc Savage watched the production of three metal cases, two of them the size of steamer trunks, one larger, which were lugged in from another room. The cases, he noted, were painted an innocent gray on the outside, but the interior of each, when it was opened, was painted the field color of the German army.

One case contained electrical apparatus mounted on panels, radio transmitter fashion, although it obviously wasn't a radio transmitter. The second case contained a motor generator and amplifier; this the small man plugged into the electric lighting circuit of the house. The third case contained a metal framework with long insulated handles, operated by two men, about five feet long when it was opened; also a smaller similar device, about three feet in length, likewise equipped with insulated handles, for manipulation by one man.

The small man inserted plugs and turned switches. The motor-generator began whining, but not loudly, and indicator lights glowed.

“The same men handle the projectors as before,” the small man ordered. “You know how. Do it just like you did on Page's plane, and on Gulick's plane. Keep it in the air, see, over their heads. The thing won't have a damned bit of effect if it hits them, so the idea is to get it in the air over their heads and scare their pants off. Run them away.”

Doc watched the activity with interest. He had a pretty good idea of what the apparatus was, the theory on which it worked, because he had previously done some research on the subject himself.

He watched the men with the projectors move to windows on different sides of the house, which confirmed to some extent what he already knew about the thing—and what the United States Army knew, for that matter. The projectors had to work from separate points; where their beams met was

where the fluorescent discharge would appear. This device, when the Germans had first used it, had worried the Allies not a little—until they discovered it was a phony, of no value except to scare the devil out of high-flying American pilots. It had, as a matter of fact, damaged morale quite a bit, before someone had the simple and brilliant idea of putting out a story that it was just a natural effect, a peculiar manifestation of static electricity caused by the passage of airplanes at high speed. The newspapers had carried this explanation, and while it was not true, it had served the purpose of removing dread of the thing from the minds of Allied fliers.

“All right, all right!” the small man was yelling. “That’s it! Keep it over their heads. That’s the idea!”

At this point, something went amiss. There was a violent roar of gunfire, a light machine gun.

“Hell! Cops!” Spick screamed. Something went *plug!* rather loudly. Astonished, Doc decided it was a tear gas grenade. There was more shooting. Yells. Lead traveled around noisily.

Doc came out of the closet.

Seth was still in the front room.

Doc said, “If this place has a basement, let’s use it!”

A MAN ran into the room, holding both hands over a crimson fountain in his throat. He fell on his face on the floor. Seth looked at him in glazed horror.

In the hall, the small man bellowed, “Newsome! Newsome! Get the hell down here! We’re in a mess! We gotta beat off a lot of cops!”

From upstairs a voice demanded, “Where’s Seth?”

“Never mind the girl!” the small man snarled. “We got real trouble. Get down here and help, you fool!”

Doc heard footsteps descending stairs. He looked around and picked up the lightest chair he saw, hefted it, and went with the chair into the hall. It was not a wide hall, and the small man stood at the foot of a narrow straight stairway. Ted Page was coming down the stairway. Doc went toward the small man with the chair. Ted Page saw him, yelled, “God!” and pointed, and Doc threw the chair, which knocked the small man against the wall.

Ted Page was armed with a shotgun; he pointed the weapon over the stair bannister. Frantic haste made him awkward, and Doc leaped and closed his hands over the shotgun barrel. He jerked, then the gun exploded, heating the barrel in his hands. But his wrench hauled Ted Page partly over the rail; while the man hung there, Doc hit him in the face twice, and Page slumped back, went tumbling down the steps.

The small man had gone down on his knees, but not from stupor. He was after his gun, which he had dropped. Doc managed to step on the gun and the man’s hand; he put weight on the foot, felt the hand break, gravel-like, under his weight. The small man gave no cry of pain, but he did show his teeth and much of his gums in a grimace of agony. Then he hit Doc’s wounded leg with his fist.

The pain could not have been greater to Doc had the leg been torn off; the agony seemed to rack back and forth through his body like echoes, while the leg itself became completely numb. Falling, he managed to fall on the small man.

The small man was a terrible, an unbelievable opponent. He fought with madness, biting and clawing and

kicking, even clubbing with his broken hand, doing it all in silence, not even seeming to breathe. Doc, outweighing him by at least twice, felt foolish at first, then horrified. He had always hated to fight a little man, and this was the worst little one he had ever met.

He knew vaguely that the shooting had come closer to the house, then that it had come into the house, and with it the blinding sting of tear gas. But all his effort was bent toward overcoming the small man, until finally, by taking the fellow's head in both hands and beating it against the floor, he got relief.

He drew back, tried to stand, and found he could not, then discovered Seth's hands under his arms, trying to help him.

"Get in the basement," he ordered her. "One of these bullets may hit you if you don't."

She didn't answer, and, wondering why, he looked at her. Her eyes were fastened on Ted Page.

"Ted was Newsome?" she asked.

He hesitated, not sure how closely she had been linked emotionally with Ted Page. He was relieved when she added softly, "I think I knew it, toward the last."

He said, "I knew it a little earlier. Ted Page's fingerprints were in Gulick's plane. He was in the plane, and it was he who actually killed Gulick."

C. B. Fay appeared in the doorway.

"What's wrong with you?" the private detective asked.

"Nothing that the sight of you won't cure," Doc told him, with relief.

C. B. Fay said, "My operatives reported that those guys were organizing an army, so I thought I'd better organize one, too. My first enlistments were the police."

"Is it over?" Doc asked.

"The undertakers and the lawyers can take it from here," C. B. Fay said. "Was it okay, me calling in the law?"

Doc Savage, grimacing and trying hard, succeeded in standing. "That's a fool question," he said.

THE young man from Army Intelligence was quite pleased with the gadget. He said, "We never did capture one of these intact, you know. They destroyed them when we went into Germany, I guess, and we never could, or haven't yet, been able to collar any German technicians who will admit knowing anything about it."

Doc Savage looked at Alfred Mants, who sat, still groggy from the morphine Doc had given him, in a chair facing them.

"What became of the technicians who knew about this gadget, Mants?" Doc asked.

"*Sie selbst wissen am besten,*" Mants said.

"What's that?" the Army man asked.

“He says I'm telling it,” Doc explained. “So I'll tell it as I have it figured. Mants developed this gadget for the Germans. Probably they were trying to work out a secret weapon that would knock down Allied planes, but all they managed was to create an electrical phenomenon in the shape of a weird light which would appear near the plane and follow it. This they employed for what psychological effect it would have, which proved to be very little.”

C. B. Fay interrupted. “Hey, I remember reading about the fireballs following American fliers. The papers were full of it.”

“Yes, it got quite a play right before V-E day,” Doc said.

C. B. Fay frowned at the Army man. “I thought the story came out that the fireballs were natural phenomena, like static electricity popping off your finger after you scuff over a carpet, and the northern lights and things like that.”

“That's right,” the Army man said, and grinned. “You'll never get us to admit anything else.”

The private detective snorted.

Doc said, “Let's finish this. I want to go to a hospital and get patched up and get some sleep.”

“Yeah, give us a brief explanation,” Fay said. “I'm mixed up.”

“Mants hired A.T.S. Pilot Lew Page to get him out of Germany with his machine,” Doc said. “Then Lew Page got together with his brother, Ted, and they plotted to steal the thing. They thought it was really a secret weapon. Mants had sold them on the idea it was. He intended to build it up, make someone think it was really something terrific, then peddle it. His prime customer was a South American group of warmongers, represented by Iturbi Sanchez, who got killed last night.

“Ted Page, playing safe, never appeared as Ted Page, but under the assumed name of Newsome. Mants found out Page was trying to steal the thing, and so he killed one of Page's men to scare Page. That is, one of Newsome's men. The victim happened to be Lew Page, Newsome's brother, for Newsome was Ted Page. That got me called into the thing.

“They didn't learn Ted Page was Newsome until after they kidnapped him last night, and when Ted Page broke down and admitted it, following my appearance on the scene, they made a deal with him—they would pay him off if he would get rid of his gang. So, to get rid of his gang, he killed Donald Gulick, hoping it would frighten the others away. It would have, probably, except that I upset the scheme with that trick of having your operative go into the restaurant and spill the beans. After that, Newsome's gang came out here to clean house.”

C. B. Fay scratched his head. “If that gadget killed Page and Gulick, or ruined their minds, how can you say it's no good as a secret weapon?”

“A potent nerve poison, taken internally, did for Page and Gulick,” Doc said. “The poison was a mixture of drugs, among them stramonium, curare, and strychnine and some others.”

“When were they poisoned?”

“We've got that out of the small man,” Doc said. “Lew Page got it in New York, in his coffee. The small man gave it to him. Ted Page, or Newsome, gave it to Gulick at the Kansas City airport, a much larger dose which worked very quickly.”

C. B. Fay grinned. “Okay. Now, how does the gimmick work? That fireball stuff?”

Doc snorted.

“Go get yourself a diploma as an electrical engineer, and you'll be ready to understand it,” he said.

“It's complicated, huh?”

“Slightly more than somewhat,” Doc admitted.

“But it don't kill people?”

“Never has, and never will.”

C. B. Fay grinned. “This about winds it up, don't it? The police have enough information to hang everybody who needs hanging, so they're happy, and you've come across with a fat check, so I'm happy.”

“That should make it unanimous,” Doc agreed.

“What about Seth?” C. B. Fay asked, with a grin.

“She's a very lovely girl,” Doc said.

“That *does* make it unanimous,” said C. B. Fay, his grin spreading.

THE END

TROUBLE HAS A RED BEARD

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