



DEATH IS A ROUND BLACK SPOT

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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DEATH IS A ROUND BLACK SPOT . . . and so it was. Doc Savage found that round black spot everywhere . . . in print, in life around him, and in uncomfortably close connection with plain, unadulterated terror. Pat Savage, Doc's gorgeous cousin, stumbled on it first . . . stumbled literally, we mean . . . and that was the beginning of the merry chase. . . . Read it for yourself in this issue, and if you like it, tell us!

Chapter I

IT was past sunset. Outdoors it had become nubian black as the last of the twilight faded. Shortly after sundown the air had seemed of a sudden to grow faintly warm and moist, like a baby's breath. This darkness, this warmth and moistness, filled the outdoors and, embedded in it, the many red and green marker lights of the airport glowed without winking. The night had assumed a mood, a mood poised and black. This humor prevailed everywhere except inside Three Hangar where the young man, seated in

an airplane, seemed to be kicking at a dog that wasn't there.

Patricia Savage watched him in horror. A few moments ago, Pat had drawn back until the west hangar wall had stopped her retreat; she now stood upright against the wall; the back of her head, both shoulder blades, were all pressed tightly to the hangar wall.

She knew he was near his end. His spasms, each of which began, and ended, with the violent kicking by

his right foot, as if he might be booting away at an invisible dog, were fewer.

Presently the dying young man threw a great chestful of air out of his lungs. It whistled past his parched lips. He was now done. He was dead. It was his last breath, his last pulse. He had proved that the young die hard, even the immoral young.

The hangar, which would now be described in all the newspapers, became a repository for cavernous silence. It was a vast building made of corrugated iron nailed to a skeleton of yellow pine two-by-eights, achieving a naked, horribly ugly effect. Large sliding doors in the south end were closed. A row of small windows dotted across the north end were unwashed and fly-specked, and the spider webs in them held a trapping of fly skeletons.

The English sparrows roosting high on the cross braces looked down now in fright, their eyes pin-pointed by the banana-yellow light that came from the string of a dozen fly-specked light bulbs down the middle of the slatternly cavern of a structure.

Six planes stood on the oil-spotted concrete floor, like rigid, frightened dragonflies, and at first glance they differed but slightly in size, color, minor details. Actually there was considerable difference in what they had cost their owners.

Patricia Savage began to cry. It was a dry kind of sobbing, the sound and movement were there, but no tears, for terror had frozen the tear ducts. Terror had dried them. And she cried, after a few moments, without sound either, only with strangled, frenzied heavings of breast and twistings of lips.

Finally she pressed both hands against the hangar wall, shoved, broke the grisly spell that held her, and thus got herself moving. Once started, she kept going all right. But she walked strangely. She looked down at her feet and placed one foot ahead of the other with infinite care as if just learning how.

She was a bronzy-blonde in her twenties, oval-faced, trim, with rather striking looking light brown eyes that, when they were less blanched by horror, were more gold than brown. Her figure had a good deal in the right places, particularly for slacks. Her slacks were sand-tan. Her leather flight jacket, the muffler of white parachute silk tied peasant style over her head and under her chin, was the sort of thing the younger set wears around an airport.

She moved with horrifying care, although all she was trying to do now was leave the hangar. Then she stopped. She did not look back at the dead man, but her attention went back to him, and, after a lot of awfully hard trying, she went back also.

The magazine on the dead young man's lap was open at an advertisement. It was merely an advertisement that happened to be in the magazine, but it featured a round black spot.

She took the magazine.

There was one small door in the north end of the hangar. She opened this. The ground, several feet below, was reached by a flight of wooden steps between two wooden handrails.

She prepared to go down the steps to the ground. The preparation consisted mostly of gathering together her jangling, flapping, screaming nerves, and of holding her teeth tightly together so they wouldn't clatter.

She held the magazine. It was still folded back, open at the advertisement with the spot. There was an arrow pointing to the spot, and the copy said: *This black spot represents the spot we were on when conversion began at the end of the war.* At the other end of the arrow was a group of pictures representing the company's present product, what it had achieved in, according to the advertisement,

such a short time. That was the sort of an advertisement it was. Just an ad. Except that it had a round black spot in it.

Patricia Savage began descending the steps.

She tripped on the second step. She fell the rest of the way, and, falling, screamed. The cork came out with that scream. It was a scream that sounded as if it had a fringe made of the lining from her throat. She went down bumpety-bump from step to step, landed on the cinders of a path.

Furtive, noiseless, a human-shaped shadow sprang from the thicker shadow under the steps. An arm, carrying a bludgeon, lifted, then fell. The blow sound was low and sharp, as if a stenographer had popped her chewing gum.

With a jerk, Patricia Savage upset, and with another jerk, her slender body straightened out on the cinders. She was unconscious. But the assailant, the human-shaped shadow, struck her again, not as effectively this time, however.

A moment was required for the assailant to feel around in the darkness and find the magazine. That was what he wanted. When the shadow had that, it closed the magazine carefully, rolled it tightly several times, the idea being to make it impossible to tell where the magazine had been open.

But that wasn't quite satisfactory, the assailant concluded, because the magazine still opened at the advertisement with the round spot. The attacker, on the point of tearing out that page, had a better idea.

Instead, out came another page. A page that meant nothing, one that had no round black spot—or it might have had at that. Round figures, round objects, are common enough in advertisements that this might have had one. But the assailant took a chance it didn't have one, and dropped the magazine back beside Pat, and kept the page.

The assailant moved a few yards, was swallowed by the darkness, and there was no movement.

Chapter II

PATRICIA SAVAGE'S scream had rebounded in echoes from the vast sides of the hangars. It startled the darkness. Amazed silence reigned, lasted for a few moments more. Then livestock on farms in the neighborhood began showing their outraged feelings. A dog howled, a horse snorted, a jack, the sire of mules, began braying like the honking of a horn on a Packard. The first dog was joined by at least two others and two hogs got in a fight, squealing as they fought hog fashion by chewing one another's ears. These livestock sounds, while far away, could be heard distinctly.

“What'n hell was that?” cried Mr. Ivey, the night watchman.

The old man seized his flashlight in fright. He had been sitting in a chair in the line-shack office, half asleep in the guilty way that old watchmen sleep when they're not supposed to be asleep.

“What was that?” he yelled. Cadaverous blue light from the fluorescent ceiling fixture made the old watchman look like a pale, wrinkled, purple ghost.

The distant livestock racket and the nearer deathly stillness mixed together in the line-shack and further terrified him.

“Hey!” he cried in alarm. “What could thata been?”

He sprang erect, upsetting his chair.

A man who had been lying on three other chairs sat upright. "For the love of Mike!" he said. He seemed frightened. "What's the matter with you?" He stared in alarm at the old watchman. His name was Doc Savage, but he had furnished the name of Stevens and he was supposed to be a bum. He had actually been asleep on the three chairs for some time.

Lying across his face, as if to keep the light out of his eyes, there had been a newspaper. It had now fallen to the floor, but it had landed on the floor with the same sheet uppermost that had been uppermost when it was over his face. There was an advertisement for an alarm clock on that page, and the face of the clock was perfectly round. Round, but not black.

"Didn'chu hear that noise?" Mr. Ivey demanded. He clutched his flashlight with trembling fingers.

Doc Savage was not concerned. "Huh?" he said. He was a very large young man with a skin of a rather distinctive bronze color, the result of too much exposure to too bright sunlight sometime in the past, and he had disguised its distinctiveness somewhat by rubbing a little dirt and grease on it. He had taken pains otherwise to look like a cheap bum. He wore a green-striped shirt which had become sweat-stained under the arms, and the coat of his pepper and salt tweed suit, badly worn, badly in need of pressing, and more in need of cleaning, was tossed over the back of one of the chairs. The pockets bulged as if they contained the remainder of his traveling wardrobe, which they did. The best touch, though, was the fact that his flake-gold eyes were somewhat bloodshot. This was genuine. He had been without sleep for quite a long time.

"Didn'chu hear it?" Mr. Ivey demanded excitedly.

"Hear what?"

"Sounded like somebody yelled."

Doc Savage yawned. "Never heard a thing." He loosened his green necktie preparatory to going back to sleep.

"We oughta see what it was." The watchman's moist potato-brown eyes were growing rounder with emotion. He didn't say he was afraid, but he asked, "How about you going with me?"

Doc Savage stretched out on the chairs. He said, "I don't live here." Then he masked another yawn by patting his lips with the back of a hand, and closed his eyes.

Mr. Ivey glared at him. "Don'cha wanna go with me?" he demanded invitingly.

Doc Savage feigned snoring.

Mr. Ivey said bitterly, "That's the gratitude I get for givin' a bum a place to sleep!" The old watchman departed unwillingly to investigate the female shriek he had heard.

DOC SAVAGE lay very still, not snoring now, but listening intently, until the old man's footfalls had gone well off into the darkness, whereupon he rolled off the chairs, quite silently, and, not standing erect so that he could be seen through the windows, in case the watchman looked back, crawled to the desk. He kept on the floor, almost flattened out. His hand made a quick snatch at the telephone, and brought it down.

He made a discovery that bothered him for a moment. The telephone was not the type which

automatically summoned the operator when the receiver was lifted. It had to be rung. There was a crank on a box beside the desk, fastened to the wall. The box had a bell that would doubtless ring loudly.

He finally solved the noise problem adequately, if not too successfully, by jamming a match in between the bells and the clapper-shield, thus keeping the clapper from more than buzzing when he spun the crank.

“The Traveler’s Hotel,” he said. Presently he said, “Mr. Mayfair, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair,” to the operator. . . . “Doesn’t answer? . . . Wait a minute. Try Ham Brooks. Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks. . . . That’s right.” Waiting, he listened for sounds that might show the old watchman was coming back, but there was none.

Ham Brooks had the deep, modulated voice of an orator and a smoothie, a man who liked to do things with words. Doc said: “Something cut loose out here. I don’t know what, but a woman screamed, and it didn’t sound as if she had seen a mouse. . . . Better come out. But under cover.”

“What do you mean, under cover?” Ham demanded.

“Pretend to be somebody you aren’t. . . . Think of something. It doesn’t have to be too good. Just something to keep your identity from becoming too public. . . . Yes, that would do. Bring Monk along. By the way, where is he?”

“In his room, I suppose.”

“I called there. He didn’t answer.”

Ham said bitterly, “They got a blonde waitress here at the hotel. I bet that’s where he is.”

“Find him.”

“He’s probably with that blonde, he is.”

“Don’t give me any office when you show up,” Doc said. “Pretend you don’t know me.”

“Okay, we don’t know you,” Ham said.

MR. IVEY, the nightwatchman, now crept around the end of Three Hangar. “Hey, there!” he called timidly. The old man was a-twitter with fears. He advanced a few cautious steps, which was the way he had been progressing—a few steps, a pause to listen, to shiver.

“Hey, there!” he called again.

He drew near the short flight of steps which led up to the small back door of Three Hangar. Suddenly his eyes flew wide, became in his old face like two boiled eggs lying on sand.

“Ooooooo!” he yelled. His flashlight had fallen on a human form, but he wasn’t frightened any more when he saw an exposure of curvaceous leg.

“D’ja fall, huh?” he gulped.

Patricia Savage was now sitting spraddled like a little girl playing in the sandbox with her toys, at the base of the steps. Her mouth was loosely open, her eyes loosely narrowed, her chin, all the muscles in her face were loosely held. All the muscles in her body were loose, flaccid, numb.

Mr. Ivey was puzzled by not getting an answer.

“Huh?” he said. He leaned down. “Wha’s matter?”

Pat Savage’s lips moved. They formed words without sound, words that were not even strong lip-shapings.

“Huh?” said Mr. Ivey.

Pat said, “Look—see—dead!” The words left her lips slowly and distinctly, with a painful separation between each word.

The old man didn’t seem to comprehend, acted as if he didn’t understand at all. His blank face remained blank for a moment, then changed slightly, as if he had decided she was trying to be funny. “Heh, heh, you’re not dead, lady,” he said. He thought she had made a joke apparently. He laughed at this joke. “Heh, heh, heh,” he laughed. He was seeing, however, that his flashlight beam didn’t wander from exposed thighs. “What’d you do? Trip?” he asked.

“Look . . . inside . . .” The rest of what she was trying to say stuck in the glue that horror made in her throat.

“Huh?” The bit of leg the old man was watching was the color of beer with a dash of cream in it.

“Please . . . go look!” She managed this just a bit more distinctly, more forcibly.

“Who? Me?”

“*Please!*”

“Where?”

“In the hangar.”

“Oh, in there!” said Mr. Ivey. He reluctantly changed the coverage of his flashlight beam, pointing it at the steps.

“Up here, huh? Up them steps. What’s in there?” He seemed about to become alarmed again.

Patricia Savage bowed her head in the bitterest despair. She was dazed, she had seen a murder, she had been struck over the head, she had been unconscious, and the old man was a silly old goon, an idiot, an imbecile. “You dumb old goat!” she whimpered.

The old man was quite startled.

“Ha!” he exclaimed. He was injured. He licked his lips, like an old dog licking a hurt.

Presently he climbed the steps. He mounted slowly and methodically, a step at a time, holding to the bannister with one hand and pressing down on a body knee with the other hand to get extra lift. He did not understand the situation, but he was thinking about it, and presently he changed his mind and went

back down the stairs again.

He picked up the magazine which was lying on the ground. He turned it around and around in his hands, put his flashlight on it, opened it, let it fall open in his hands. He did this two or three times in a stupid way.

“This your'n?” he wished to know.

Pat said nothing. But she looked at the old man in the way one would look at a sow that had just eaten her own pigs. The old man was startled again.

Mr. Ivey climbed the steps. He was not unduly excited. He went up as he had gone before, helping his knees with his hands. He even grinned a little, because, old though he was, he still liked a spicy female, one with a nice turn of leg.

He opened the door and went into the hangar.

MR. IVEY jumped out of the hangar a few moments later. He was perturbed. He tried to yell, but could only manage to blow a bubble of terror. He started down the steps and suddenly he was revolving in space and shrieking.

He had tripped on the second step. He fell quite hard. There was a crunching sound as he landed, and for a few seconds the awful shock of a broken leg—his right leg had broken—kept him utterly still.

Patricia Savage spent the interval staring up the second step. Finally she spoke, speaking largely to herself, so that she could get it clearly established in her mind as a fact.

“That's the step I fell on,” she said. “But there is nothing wrong with the step.”

Beside her, the magazine began to make fluttering sounds as if it were alive. As if it had animation, substance, reality, were coming to life and doing something for itself. Actually this was the work of a vagrant breeze, which was turning the leaves of the magazine rapidly, making the fluttering sound. This sound, the macabre voice of the magazine leaves, was so much like the dying rattle the young man in the hangar had made a few minutes ago that Pat Savage, from horror, shook as if she was having a malaria chill.

Finally the wind stopped turning the magazine which, undisturbed at last, settled itself with the leaves open at the advertisement that featured the spot that was so round, so black.

Chapter III

WALTER WEEM, the sheriff's deputy, heard footsteps approaching in the darkness. He became alarmed. His head, which had been bowed in thought and worry, whipped up, the cords which had been slack in his scrawny throat became tense, and he listened.

“Who's that?” he barked in alarm. He addressed the demand to Mr. Ivey. “Who could that be?”

“My leg hurts so!” the old watchman whimpered.

“Somebody's coming!” the alarmed deputy said. There was egg stain on the deputy's maroon necktie of cluster-striped wool.

He was Deputy Sheriff Walter Weem, and he was in charge, and he was wishing violently that he had never gotten in politics, never been appointed deputy sheriff. Because Doyle, the regular sheriff, was sick in the hospital and would probably die in a few days and he, Weem, was it. He and his pot-bellied deputy, Ike Davis. Ike was a nephew of Sheriff Doyle's. Weem had a very low opinion of Ike. As a matter of fact, Weem's opinion of the world in general was rather low, but it was particularly low of Ike.

The footsteps approached in the darkness.

"Who else is around here?" Weem barked. He was very alarmed.

"Nobody," said the old nightwatchman. "Nobody but me, the young lady, the other officer 'n' you." Mr. Ivey was lying flat on his back on a table, his bony fingers clasping the table edge in agony. He had apparently forgotten the bum—Doc Savage—who was pretending to be asleep on the chairs in the other room of the line-shack.

"It must be Ike," Weem said disgustedly.

It was Ike. Ike was short, very wide, and didn't look too clean. He wore a very new, very shiny, very large revolver which hung around his middle in an equally new and shiny cartridge belt. Belt and gun, so shiny, so new, looked as conspicuous as a diamond bracelet around his middle.

Ike examined Patricia Savage. His interest was active. Pat was still dazed; stupor made her face look slack.

"Some babe," Ike remarked.

Weem demanded, "You look at the body?"

"Heck, no," Ike said. "I was just looking around outdoors. I didn't see nobody."

Weem was disgusted. "I thought you'd gone to look at the body and see if he was dead."

Mr. Ivey furtively shifted his position on the table, gnawing his lips in pain. He was trying to get a better view of Pat's legs. The old man's right leg had been broken by his fall.

"We gotta get busy!" Weem said. He glared at Mr. Ivey. "You say the guy's murdered?"

"He didn't chop his own head half off with an ax," said Mr. Ivey. He pointed at Pat. "I think she done it."

"Huh?"

"I think she killed him." Mr. Ivey again pointed at Pat.

Pat stood with her back to a glass showcase. The showcase literally propped her up. Her flake-gold eyes looked washed-out, blank, as if she was not capable of hearing, seeing, nor was aware of anything in any way. Threads of blood had dried on the calves of her beer-with-dash-of-cream legs.

Weem became alarmed by the bloodstains. "She's hurt!" he exclaimed.

"She just skinned herself," the old watchman said.

The deputy's chivalry was aroused. "Where's a chair? Give her a chair." He looked around for a chair.

Suddenly the deputy stiffened. "What the hell!" He stood rigid with attention, like a Gordon setter that had gone on point.

He had heard a snore.

“What's that?” he yelled.

THIS room, the lounge room of the line-shack, was a large place, all pleasant windows on one side. One wall was papered with regional charts fitted together in a nearly complete aeronautical map of the United States. Tacked to a bulletin board were the late Weekly Notices to Airmen, CAR bulletins, Trade-A-Plane, local traffic pattern blueprint. Shelves held parachutes, some in bags, some not. Other furnishings included a pop cooler, gas heater, desk, bench, the table on which Mr. Ivey lay, chairs, spittoon, radio. A glass showcase contained charts, goggles, log books, license folders, Civil Aeronautics bulletins, computers these latter offered for sale. It was against this case that Pat leaned.

The snore had come from the other, a smaller, room, an office. This was obscured in darkness, although a door connecting the two rooms was open.

“What was that?” yelled Weem.

Mr. Ivey blinked. The old watchman's hair, stringy, faded, was the color of a used floor mop.

“That's the bum,” he said.

“What bum?”

“The bum in there.”

“What's the matter with him?”

“He's asleep.”

“Well, for God's sake!” the deputy exclaimed. His hand went to his coat skirts, where his gun was. He thrust his head into the room, found the switch, turned on the lights.

The deputy's teeth flashed in astonishment.

“Has he been lying there like that the whole time?” he demanded.

“He has been since I saw him,” Mr. Ivey said.

Doc Savage snored again. He did not quite achieve E above middle C, but he came close. He got F. The newspaper was again in place over his face, open at the advertisement which had the perfectly round design as a part of its illustration.

Deputy Weem's head came up; stretching made his young bull neck grow smaller. “He's not dead, is he?”

“Naw, he's snoring,” said Mr. Ivey.

The deputy blushed. He had realized that dead men do not snore. “Who is he, anyway?”

The old watchman, lifting his head off the table to speak, resembled a rooster with a crick in its neck. “Him?” His tone indicated he was no friend of Doc Savage's. “He was here when I came to work. I dunno who he is.” He licked his lips. “He coulda killed the guy in the hangar.”

The deputy jumped. "He could have—wait a minute! I thought you said he'd been lying here the whole time!"

Mr. Ivey blinked cunningly.

"He coulda went out and killed the guy without me seein' him," he said. "It's possible."

Deputy Weem hung his thumb in his vest armholes. "You think he did?"

"Did what?"

"Murdered the guy."

"Sure," said Mr. Ivey. "I bet he did."

IKE, the deputy's assistant, spit on the floor. He didn't think much more of the deputy than the deputy thought of him, and he could show his feelings because he was related to the sheriff and couldn't very well be fired.

"Why the hell don't you wake him up and ask him?" Ike said.

Excitement turned the Deputy's cheeks from Ben Davis apple color to Grimes Golden apple color. He laid his hand on his holster. "You wake him up, Ike," he said. His oak-brown eyes were cautious. "I'll watch him for you."

Mr. Ivey raised his head and malicious excitement turned the old man's eye whites the color of leghorn egg yolks. He watched.

"I betcha he killed him," he mumbled.

Ike strode to the three chairs. He was brave. His manner said: Hell, I'm gonna arrest the murderer now. He bent over the man on the chairs. Suddenly he emitted a cry of pain. He had been hit in the belly with a fist.

"What's the idea?" Doc Savage yelled. "What are you trying to do to me?" He was acting, sounding, like the bum he was pretending to be. The knot of his green necktie hung under his left ear, like a hangman's noose. The newspaper with the round advertisement illustration, not a spot, but round, fell to the floor.

Ike cursed. He swung a fist.

As brief as an affray between two strange dogs on leashes which had snapped at each other as their owners were passing, the battle was on, off again, in an instant. Ike picked himself off the floor. He held his middle. He could hardly breathe.

Deputy Weem was quite pleased. He would have liked to hit Ike himself, but this was the next best thing.

Doc Savage sat erect, pretending to experience some difficulty when it seemed his feet were going to be heavier than his head. However he made it erect. He saw the deputy's shining badge. "Oh, coppers," he said. He scowled. "What were you guys doing, picking my pockets?"

Deputy Weem lost his look of pleasure.

"Don't get funny," he said. "We want to know who you are."

"You picked a funny way of finding out," Doc Savage said. He was keeping an eye on Ike, lest Ike attack him. Ike was making a series of unsuccessful gagging efforts, suffering from the blow he had received in the stomach, and drops of sweat had appeared on his forehead.

Deputy Weem shouted, "Give me your name, address, business references and reasons for being here!"

Doc Savage pretended to yawn, said, "I don't think a further discussion just at this point would be very productive." He scowled at the deputy. "You're in a bellowing bad humor, if you ask me."

"Bust him over the head!" said Ike. "He's dangerous. He tried to kill me."

"Aren't you gonna give your name?" shouted Weem.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I wasn't asked nicely." Doc eyed the chairs longingly. "Why don't you fellows go on off and bother someone else. I'm sleepy."

Weem yelled, "There's been a murder!" He drew his gun. "Get your hands up! I'm gonna search you."

He was not satisfied with the results of his search, the most dissatisfying feature being that he unearthed several hundred dollars in paper currency in Doc's pockets.

"With that dough, we can't book him for vagrancy!" Ike complained.

Weem snorted. "I wasn't figuring on booking him for vagrancy," he said. "Murder suits me better."

Mr. Ivey threw up his head painfully. He listened. "Somebody's coming," he said.

NOISY and hurried, gravel grinding under its tires, an oncoming automobile traveled a road skirting the airport border lights to the north. It turned into the airport lane. It briefly plastered hangars and line-shack with the glare from its headlights then swung in behind the hangars where for the ensuing few moments it was only a threatful grinding noise.

"I'll bet," said Deputy Weem, "that's the coroner."

Ike spat. "That dope!" he said.

The automobile appeared. It was a large machine, heavy, and its weight on its tires made them grind the gravel with a sound that had substance and care-free abandon. It stopped nearby. It was a rented car. Two men alighted.

"That," gasped Weem, "ain't the coroner!"

The newcomers were Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks, who were aides of Doc Savage. They were quite an unlike pair. Monk was short, wide, long-armed, hairy and had an amiable face that was so remarkably homely that it was fascinating. He was dressed flashily enough to be a carnival barker, and carried a row of pencils in a vest pocket and a notebook sticking out of another pocket. The final touch was a card sticking in his hatband labelled PRESS.

His companion, Ham Brooks, was thin-waisted, wide-shouldered, wide-mouthed, and as alert looking as a fox-terrier. He was neat, absolutely impeccable, and dressed in exactly what the well-dressed man should wear for this particular time and occasion. He had one of the cards reading PRESS and a camera.

"We're from the *Planet*," Ham said loudly. "Good evening, Sheriff. What's the story?"

Deputy Weem scowled suspiciously. "There's no newspaper named the *Planet* in Kerrville," he said.

"The *New York Planet*," Ham said airily. "Stand right over there, Sheriff. We'll want pictures of you, and we might as well get them now." He turned to Ike, demanded, "Move that chair so the Sheriff can stand there, Mr.—what are you, the janitor?"

Ike glared. Weem grinned, but only briefly. "Who tha hell told you there'd been a murder out here?" he demanded.

"Get right over there and pose, Sheriff!" Ham urged hastily.

Weem said, "I'm the deputy, not the sheriff. And who told you?"

"We never," said Ham indignantly, "reveal the source of our tips."

Weem was not satisfied, but didn't know what to do about it. He said they would go into it later. His tone said that he would not mind throwing the two newspaper men in jail if he thought they were pulling anything.

"No pictures!" Weem growled. "I got a murder to investigate."

"Your first one?" Ham asked innocently.

Weem flushed. "Okay, ride me while you can," he said.

Ham Brooks caught Doc Savage's eye, and Doc was shaking his head slightly, indicating it might not be wise to antagonize the deputy just for the pleasure of doing so.

Ham's nod, showing he understood, was barely perceptible. He had not glanced at Doc, nor had Monk, and neither of them had given Pat Savage any more attention than was normally due a dazed, pretty, shapely stranger.

"We're going to look at the body!" announced Deputy Weem. He leveled an arm at Monk and Ham.

“You two stay with me, understand!”

Monk and Ham nodded. The Deputy's tone said loudly that he didn't trust them, and that they were probably headed for trouble, but this didn't seem to alarm them.

Each of them—Ham in his left side coat pocket, Monk in his right one—carried folded newspapers, copies of the *New York Planet*, a particularly noisy tabloid. As if by chance—which it was not—each paper was folded so that a perfectly circular figure, part of an advertisement, showed. In one case, Ham's, the figure was a ladies' compact. In Monk's case, it was an archery target.

The deputy was pointing at Doc Savage.

“You, too!” he ordered. “You go along. Ike, keep an eye on the girl.”

Ike said, “That'll be easy to do.”

Chapter IV

DOC SAVAGE stopped suddenly at the foot of the steps leading up into Three Hangar.

“Keep going! What's the matter with you?” Weem growled.

Instead, Doc Savage picked up the magazine lying in the loose cinders of the path, lifting it in his hands and holding it in the same position, the same pages open, as when it had lain on the path. His object was to call the attention of Monk and Ham to the black spot in the illustration.

Ham said, “What's he got? A magazine? Yeah, a magazine.”

Monk came over and looked and said, “So what?” Both of them had noticed the circular spot.

“Listen, get on into that hangar!” Weem yelled angrily.

Stumbling up the flight of steps, they entered Three Hangar. The door, on a spring, slammed violently behind them, causing a cannonading of echoes in the cavernous interior of the hangar. Sparrows roosting high in the hangar ruffed their feathers in alarm, lifted their tails for flight, but finally remained where they were reassured by the sleepy dragging of feet on the concrete floor as the party made their way toward an airplane. The footsteps of the party, Weem, Doc Savage, Monk, Ham, sounded like small seeds being gently shaken in a gourd.

The footsteps halted contentedly. There was a small thump, as though a penny had been tossed on the head of a drum at a Salvation Army meeting. This was a plane door being opened.

“Oh, hello,” said Monk Mayfair, peering at a figure he could discern in the plane. “Who are you, fellow?” He leaned forward to stare over Weem's shoulder into the plane.

Monk retreated in wild haste. “It's the body!” he yelled. “There's a dead man in my ship! In my plane! A dead man!” His voice soared in indignant alarm. “Godalmighty, where's the police? Somebody call the police!”

DEPUTY WEEM stepped back. He looked surprised, and pleased, as he produced a cigar and nibbled off the end which went in his mouth.

“So it's your plane,” he told Monk.

Monk, his lung power unimpaired by the deputy's sinister pleasure, yelled, “Get that body outa my plane!”

Ham Brooks was adjusting his camera. He looked at his pal, Monk, and in the most sinister of tones and manners, said, “You put it there, so why don't you take it out yourself.”

Astonishment raised Monk a foot straight off the floor. “What?” he screamed.

Ham leered and demanded, “Didn't you chop his little head half off in cold, cold blood?”

“This is no time for gags!” Monk yelled.

Weem was offended, too. “Murder is no joke,” he told Ham severely.

Monk was scowling indignantly at Ham. He said, with a considerable amount of suspicion, “Say, where were you when you telephoned me? You were at the airport, weren't you? How come you telephoned me from the airport and told me there was a murder?”

Weem looked alarmed. “What the hell's this?” he demanded. “Are you two guys kidding? If you are, it's a poor time for it.”

“I ain't kidding,” Monk said. “You investigate the telephone calls from the airport to the hotel, I bet you find one was made after the murder, asking for me at the Traveler's Hotel.”

“Cut it out!” It was Ham's turn to look alarmed. “We're kidding,” he told Weem.

The deputy stuck out his jaw. Appalling silence surrounded them. Their faces were tinted bile color by the light from the flyspecked bulbs overhead.

“I want to ask you two some questions later,” Deputy Weem said pointedly. “Damn funny, your showing up!”

Doc Savage was looking intently at Monk and Ham. This is a poor time—that was what his look said—for you two to start pulling practical gags on each other.

DEPUTY WEEM was looking at the body, pushing out his lips, making his mouth into different shapes. “Don't know the guy,” he said. “Hm-m-m-m. You know him?”

Doc, Monk and Ham admitted no acquaintance with the corpse.

For a while no one spoke. The presence of death, deeply still as all eternity, was apparently making them speechless.

Ham jammed a flash bulb in his reflector, carefully focused the camera; the brief weird flick of light made everyone jump, but it did not startle conversation out of them.

When Ham had taken several shots, he rejoined them, gingerly fingering a hot used flashbulb in the gun, and asked Monk, “Want to buy some of the prints?”

“God, no!” said Monk hastily.

The expended flashbulb Ham was fingering looked as if it was full of curdled milk.

“A local lecher all ready for the worms,” Ham said. “I’ll make you a bargain price on a dozen prints.”

“A lecher is no bargain,” Monk said. “Served up dead at the bewitching hour of midnight,” he added in deep, hollow tones. “No, thanks.”

“You’re just a cheap gee,” Ham said unpleasantly, and winked at the deputy.

Deputy Weem wasn’t amused. He bellowed, “How come you know so much about his character? I thought you didn’t know the dead man!”

“We don’t,” Ham said hastily.

Monk, somewhat alarmed by the deputy’s belligerent suspicion of them, pointed at Ham, made a screwing motion with his forefinger against his own head, and explained, “Overlook him, Sheriff. He suffers from occupational fatigue. All the *Planet’s* photographers get screwy like that.”

The deputy snorted.

Two strangers entered the hangar. Doc Savage hadn’t seen them before, and he didn’t believe anyone else in the hangar knew who they were. One man had a cleft lower lip, a hatchet face. The other man had a horse face and a bandy-legged walk and looked tough, durable. Both wore the white uniforms of ambulance attendants.

Weem eyed them. “Who’re you?”

“We’re from Morningside Hospital,” cleft-lip said. He had a gravelly voice. “The watchman out here telephoned for an ambulance.”

Weem said, “The old goat must’ve phoned everybody in the county.” This statement indicated that the deputy had settled in his own mind that Monk and Ham had been summoned by Mr. Ivey, the watchman.

“Go to the line-shack and wait!” Weem ordered the pair in the ambulance suits. “I don’t want you in here stomping around on my clues. I’ll see you in a minute.”

The two white-clad strangers turned away. They were leaving. The bow-legged one was wearing grass-green pants under his white ones. Cleft-lip stopped and looked back, then he spit on the floor and left with his friend.

“Two yeggs,” Ham remarked.

“They didn’t think much of us,” Monk agreed.

Deputy Weem had his head inside the plane cabin, continuing his investigation. “This axe,” he remarked, “probably is part of the fire equipment around here. In fact, it’s got Property of Municipal Airport stamped on it.”

The victim, who had been young and alive an hour ago, was now acquiring the lewd gray look that corpses get. The head was tilted forward sleepily, the eyes were closed, the lips slightly parted, the saliva on the lips resembling drops of ice. There was, remarkably enough, no blood in the mouth or on the lips, for the axe, driven far in, had severed and blocked the arteries and veins, apparently.

An automobile engine started up in the darkness near by. It raced wide open, by fevered spurts, as the throttle was tread upon.

Doc Savage came suddenly to life.

“Deputy!” he said, sharply. “Who would be leaving?”

Deputy Weem turned a startled face, the forehead of which was grooved with bewilderment. “Damned if I know. I can’t imagine—hell! Hell, let’s look into this!”

The automobile was leaving the parking lot on the north side of the hangars, and, judging from the sound, it was traveling as fast as it could travel in second gear.

“Oh, for God’s sake!” Ham Brooks exploded. He was horrified, and without explaining why he was horrified, he raced for the hangar door.

Doc was ahead of him. They got outdoors, down the steps. Nobody fell. They sprinted to the line-shack.

“Ike! Holy hell, look at Ike!” Weem yelled.

Ike lay on the floor in the attitude of one trying to make himself as shapeless as possible. He was quite unconscious. Mr. Ivey squirmed on the table. He pointed, spray flew off his excited lips twice as he tried to speak, and then he screamed at them.

“Kidnappers!” he screeched. “They got the girl!”

DEPUTY WEEM reacted to the situation with qualities Doc Savage had not imagined he possessed. “We’ll take my car,” Weem said. “Parking lot. Come on.”

In the ensuing race for the parking lot, Doc Savage outdistanced Weem, who in turn outdistanced Monk and Ham, although the latter was handicapped by the camera which he had forgotten to drop.

Weem landed behind the wheel of his car, and the machine seemed to begin moving simultaneously. Doc got in the front seat, Monk piled in the back, and Ham was trying to get in when the car got going. Ham hung to the runningboard, finally forced himself in, falling on Monk.

“Get off me,” Monk said.

Ham complied with the request, but a moment later the car made a wild swing, mixing them up again. Weem had drawn his gun.

The car accelerated along a straight stretch; it skidded and threw gravel as it negotiated a turn; the headlights illuminated a country schoolhouse for an instant, then the schoolhouse, like a ghost, vanished. A railroad crossing was coming up and beyond it the highway.

Doc Savage said, “Isn’t that them going north?”

“Yep.” Weem was calm behind the wheel. “Toward town. Here’s a crossing. Better hang on.”

An instant later, the car took off, and Doc Savage was positive it traveled fifty feet through the air before it hit pavement again. The deputy drove calmly, only his fingertips on the wheel rim.

“You a good shot?” he asked Doc.

Doc said, "Nobody is good enough to stop that car at this speed without wrecking it. I won't have that. I won't have Pat hurt."

"Pat's her name, eh?" the Deputy said.

"Yes."

"So you know her?"

"Yes."

"Figured you did. Figured something queer about you. Something queer about these newspaper guys, too. You know them?"

"Yes, I know them."

"Friends of yours?"

"Yes."

"You a friend of mine?"

"Of course."

"Feel better, then," the deputy said, still quite calm. "Kinda had me wondering there for a minute, whether I was one against three."

Doc said nothing.

"I think I know who you are," Weem said presently.

THE old car flew over the pavement, roaring like a cruising airplane. Monk, in the back seat, remarked, "It's lucky it's too dark for them to turn off their lights and see where they're going, or they might give us the slip."

Gravel which had been wedged in the tire treads flew off occasionally, hit the fender undersides. This made loud reports. Doc Savage mistook the sound, for a moment, for bullets being fired at them, but when he realized what it was, he was glad to know the tires were good enough to have tread on them that would pick up gravel. He had never seen wilder driving.

Deputy Weem said unexpectedly, "I'm gonna call you Doc Savage. Reckon that's right. . . . Let's take a few shots at them, Doc. If we can scare them into going so fast they won't dare make the turn at the junction, we can herd them right on past town on the highway. Once we get them out in that flat country north of town, we'll close in and take them."

Doc Savage made no comment about his identity having been discovered. He had concluded by now that Weem was not the clown he appeared to be, but was quite sharp.

Sparks and crashes came out of Doc's gun. He was leaning from the window to shoot, and putting the bullets into the roadside embankments.

Monk, leaning forward to watch, suddenly saw a small hole appear in the windshield glass. He realized this was a bullet hole and that they were being shot at. He felt that he should be extremely frightened, and

in a moment decided that he must be, because when he tried to tell Ham there was a bullet hole in the windshield, he couldn't talk.

Houses, lights, scudded past. It was hard to realize they had come so far so fast, but already they were in town.

"The fools are going to try a turn," the deputy said. Doc Savage had time to reflect the deputy's calm was monumental, then the souped-up old car rocked like a drunk on roller-skates; for a moment it traveled sidewise like a trotting dog, the tires making awful, fiendish screaming noises. Monk in some manner landed on Doc's lap; they were both thrown against the windshield, which was evidently bulletproof glass to withstand the shock of their weight. Then they were stopped.

"Okay, unload," the deputy said. "We passed 'em up about fifty yards. They're back yonder. But watch out for them."

They picked ditches and landed in them.

THE car they had been chasing—an ambulance—now rested with its front portion, minus the front wheels which had been sheared off by the curbing, half across a narrow ribbon of grass between curb and sidewalk. Water, running out of the damaged radiator, made a gurgling sound distressingly like the outpouring of blood from a jugular vein.

Cleft-lip and Bow-legs were not in sight.

But in a moment the deputy shouted, "There they go!" His gun spouted a fragment of flame as long as his arm.

Monk and Ham, expecting return fire, disappeared behind a tree and a fire plug, respectively, with what could have passed for utter magic.

Doc Savage had jerked open the rear doors of the wrecked ambulance. "Pat!" he gasped. "Pat, are you all right?"

He got the ugliest kind of silent darkness for answer.

Deputy Weem remarked, "What do you know, I missed!" He sounded vaguely surprised. He shot again. Suddenly he dashed forward in the darkness.

Doc Savage found Pat. She was lying doubled on the floor and Doc was afraid, momentarily, to touch her, lest she have some injury so severe that slight movement would be fatal.

Monk, yelling over his shoulder, demanded, "Is she alive?"

"Yes, alive," Doc said. He had found a pulse. He withdrew from the ambulance. "Get her to a hospital. Put her in the deputy's car."

Monk ran to the deputy's car and got in to back it nearer the ambulance. But at once he got out again, explaining, "The deputy took the keys, I guess. They're gone."

"That guy," Ham said, "is a slick hick. He thinks of everything."

Doc said, "When Weem comes back, get her to a hospital. And keep her there. And watch over her, both of you. Don't leave her for a minute." Emphasis made his voice vibrate. "She's in danger. She

knows something.”

Monk asked, “Want to keep it quiet she's your cousin?”

“If it can be kept quiet, I want it that way,” Doc said. He sounded bitter. He added, “I wonder how on earth she got mixed up in this mess?” He didn't wait for an answer, but wheeled and set off after the deputy.

Chapter V

DEPUTY SHERIFF WALTER WEEM was crouched down sadly on his haunches when Doc Savage came upon him. The spot was not only secluded in the thickest night shadows, but was made safe by the presence of a large boulder which protruded from the ground to a height greater than a man's head.

Doc, suddenly aware of a figure on the earth beside Weem, asked, “Hit one?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Good shooting.”

“Good, hell!” the deputy said bitterly. “I shot at his legs and hit him in the back of the head. I murdered him colder than an icicle. You call that good shooting?”

Doc Savage, after trying to find a pulse in the man's wrist, and finding none, asked, “Which one?”

“The one with the lip.”

“Where did the bow-legged one go?”

“Take a look over the rock, or around it,” Weem said. “You see a long kind of a flat line, like the world in that direction had been cut off flat?”

Doc looked. “That's right.”

“That's a railroad fill. There's no culverts, no way across it without showing himself against the sky. The lights of town are beyond, so he'd be silhouetted.”

Doc agreed this was true. Their quarry couldn't very well cross the railroad without being seen. “But what is to prevent him circling around?”

“A high factory fence to the south,” Weem explained. “And one to the north. He won't go back and try to cross the highway, because you remember it's lighted right along there. He'll tackle the railroad tracks presently.” Weem moved his gun grimly. “When he does—whango, I let him have it.”

Doc said, “You might kill him.”

“I might, at that.”

“You won't get much information out of two dead men.”

“That's right, but it'll be a pleasure to have two dead men to show for my efforts.” Weem cleared his throat. He sounded tired. “How's the girl? Help me watch that railroad grade, will you?”

“She's unconscious,” Doc said. “But I don't think she's much worse off than she was at the airport.”

“That's good.”

“What's the matter with you?” Doc asked.

“You called her Pat, didn't you?” Weem said. “Pat what? I don't seem to place her. But of course that ain't so strange because I don't know much about you, just what I've heard and read.”

“You sound queer,” Doc examined Weem briefly. He turned his eyes back to the line of the railroad grade, as level as the edge of a ruler. He was watching this. They were both watching. He said, “Pat is my cousin. She has, unfortunately, a thirst for excitement. For quite a number of years, she has tried to sell the idea that she would make a good assistant. She gets nowhere with that. The kind of work I do, you carry a suicide ticket in your pocket.” He glanced at Deputy Weem again. “All right, what is the matter with you?”

“You remember that bullethole in the windshield of my car during the chase?” Weem demanded.

“It hit you!”

“The bullet that made it did,” Weem said.

DOC SAVAGE was quite startled. He had imagined that the deputy's strained tone—Weem sounded rather as if he was trying to hold something between his teeth by biting down hard on it and talk at the same time—was due to the man's natural emotions, revulsion, excitement, horror, or whatever, over having killed a man. He had not supposed Weem was shot. The deputy was a remarkable guy.

“You watch the railroad,” Doc said, “while I see how bad it is.”

Weem grunted. He said, “I give that guy about five minutes more of crawling around in the brush. Then his patience will split, and he'll try it over the railroad grade.” The deputy grunted again. “He'll be in plain sight.”

“Shoulder, isn't it.” Doc meant the wound.

“Don't hurt me enough to make my eyes water. I wanta be able to see that guy!” The deputy was concerned. “Yeah, shoulder. Didn't hurt at first, and I was gonna be a Boy Scout about it. But now . . . ouch!” His breathing became heavy. He said, “Cripes, water in my eyes.” He used his slightly soiled necktie to wipe his eyes. He was not, apparently, for an instant taking his eyes off the railway embankment.

“You're not going to die,” Doc said.

“I'm glad of that.” The deputy was relieved enough to make a joke, by adding, “I wasn't quite ready.”

“It would be better if it was dressed in a hospital,” Doc advised. “So I won't touch it. Monk and Ham

are going to take Pat to the hospital as soon as they get your car keys. You better go along.”

“Not right now,” Weem said. “I want a shot at that bow-legged bird. . . . You say you don't know how Patricia Savage got mixed up in this?”

Doc was back to watching the railway grade. “It could only have happened one way—she overheard something, and decided to show us she was a detective.” Doc frowned, added, “At that, she must have overheard about as much as I know about the thing.”

Weem had quieted down his breathing somewhat. He said, “I'm the acting sheriff around here. Does that rate me any information?”

Doc, who liked Weem—at the same time, he suspected he might have trouble with Weem later; the deputy's present mellow mood was probably due to the hole in his shoulder—said readily enough, “It entitles you to anything I know.”

“From what I hear about you, that would be great, only my head wouldn't hold it,” Weem said. “Now that I've flattered you, just what is this all about?”

Doc asked, “Do you know a man named Powell?”

“Powell? What first name?”

“Just Powell is all I know.”

“I know a movie actor or two by that name, but not personally,” Weem said. “I don't suppose that would do me any good?”

“I doubt it. This one telephoned me. He sounded pretty frantic, said he wanted to see me, said the matter was very important—life and death, he said, without using those words—and could I come to Kerrville, to the airport, for a meeting.” Doc Savage paused, thinking he had seen motion near the straight line of railroad. He decided he had seen movement, and redoubled his watching.

DEPUTY WEEM made soft, heavy sounds in the darkness. He sounded like some large domestic animal, a colt or a calf, that was trying to sleep. “Why'd you act that way at the airport. I mean, asleep on the chairs. Look like a bum. Hit Ike in the belly. Why?”

Doc explained that the man on the telephone had been particularly forceful about the need for secrecy. “He sounded, or was a good enough actor to sound, as if it was actually a matter of death,” Doc explained. “Secrecy, he said, was vitally necessary, and that, if possible, I was not to appear at the airport readily recognizable as Doc Savage. He particularly requested this secrecy.”

Weem asked, “You ordinarily go for stories like that, huh?”

“Quite frequently. They pan out more often than you would think. Of course, we always run as much of a check on the genuineness of the thing as possible.”

“You checked in this case?”

“Monk and Ham did. They traced the telephone call to the pay booth in the Traveler's Hotel in Kerrville. That was about all they found out—that, and a slight description of Powell.”

“Hell!” the deputy blurted. “You got a description of Powell!”

“I would hardly call it one. Tall. Thirty years old or maybe younger. Erect carriage, business suit, dark

hair. That's all. It fits too many people.”

“It would,” said the deputy, “fit the guy dead in the plane.”

“True. But it would fit lots of others.”

“I think I'll hang it on the guy dead in the plane for the time being. Where'd you get this description from?”

“Girl at the desk in the Traveler's. Tall girl, blonde, rather nice shape, but has green eyes.”

“That's Mixie,” Weem said. “I'll let her look at the body, see if it's the same guy. She won't mind.” Weem paused to have some memories that made him grunt slightly. “If you fellows take a notion to play around with any babes in this town, I'd steer clear of Mixie. She's kind of rough on wolves. You notice them rings and bracelets she wears? Funny, but they're real.”

“I haven't met her.”

“Oh.”

“But I'd like to know if the man who called me and said his name was Powell is the dead man.”

“I'll let you know.” Weem stirred uncomfortably. “What about this bow-legged guy we're waiting around here for?” Weem cocked and uncocked his revolver to make sure it was limbered up and in working order. “Maybe he has figured a way to fox us.”

“He has,” Doc said.

DEPUTY WEEM, alarmed, listened to Doc Savage explain about the movement he had noticed along the crest of the embankment. Doc finished, “He has had time to cool off now, realize his companion was shot to death, and do some thinking about getting shot himself. Even if he isn't shot, there is the kidnapping charge, and they electrocute for that. So I imagine he's going to be careful. I imagine he's lying there in the weeds beside the railway track, waiting for a train to come.”

“By God! That's a good guess!” Weem gasped. “The trains come through here slow, because it's in the edge of town.” He was thoughtful for a moment, then said regretfully, “I thought for a minute, if bow-legs knows the trains go slow, that would make him a local boy. But I guess it wouldn't necessarily. Trains generally slow up going through towns where there are a lot of grade crossings. I guess . . . Oh, oh! Hear that?”

A train was whistling in the distance. It sent its moaning sound through the darkness three times, then there was silence, and Deputy Weem swore softly, bitterly, said, “There's two railroads through town. I hope to God that one's on the other road.”

They knew, in a few seconds, that it wasn't.

“Want to take a chance with me?” Doc demanded.

“Huh?”

“That fellow might lead us to something, if we gave him a chance,” Doc said. “Anything he led us to would be a help, because it would be more than we know now.”

Weem was dubious. "You mean let him go, you trail him?"

"That's it."

"He might get away."

"And he might not."

The deputy gave his pants a hitch. The movement made his wound hurt, and he counteracted the pain by grinding his teeth together, a most distressing sound in the darkness. "This is kind of a problem," he said. "I don't know." He added, suddenly and explosively, that he wished to blazes the elected sheriff hadn't picked a time like this to get himself sick and dying in the hospital. "I shoulda called the State Police, too," Weem said. "Dammit, I'm messing this case up like everything." He made grumbling noises deep in his throat.

Finally he said explosively, "I'll run my neck out. Go ahead, trail him."

THERE was not much time. Doc Savage moved as fast as he could and still keep a moderate amount of silence. He was heading for the railway track, taking the shortest route. The train was closer now, making loud noises as it came.

He realized, presently and thankfully, that he was going to make it. He had no idea exactly where the bow-legged man was lying concealed, if he was lying concealed in the neighborhood. When the headlight of the oncoming train began turning tall weeds, small brush, trees shades of gray, he got down and crawled. He was close beside the track. He spread out flat.

Coasting now, clanking lazily, a languid hot monster, the engine passed. Doc kept his eyes away from the light, so as not to be blinded, then lifted his head, watched. The train, moving quite slow, was a freight, and it was an invitation to the bow-legged man. If he was about, he could hardly ignore the invitation.

The man got aboard either the twelfth or thirteenth car which passed. He did it swiftly, expertly, and, the instant he was hanging to the hand-bars, he flattened there. He did not try to climb to the top, where he would be silhouetted.

Doc moved quickly, urgently aware there was a good chance the man might look back, given time to settle where he was, and see any movements beside the tracks. The hand-bar, one of several at each end of the boxcar, was rough and gritty under Doc's hands. He swung, as quickly as possible, between the cars, and remained there. For a time, while the tracks made a slight swing to the left, he could not, looking forward along the cars, distinguish the bow-legged man. Then the train straightened out and Doc saw him.

Cunningly, foresightedly, the bow-legged man did not ride far. When street intersections began to slide past—the train still moved slowly—he suddenly swung off. He had ridden no more than three-fourths of a mile.

Doc, the instant he saw the man leave the side of the car ahead, swung off himself. By working hard at it, he managed to be off and flat on the ground by the time the bow-legged man stopped the running that swinging off the train had made necessary. Doc eased carefully into some tall weeds, then to a shabby street that was beyond. The bow-legged man did likewise.

The bow-legged man walked toward the center of town. Three different times, he calmly got into cars parked in the street and tried to drive them away, but each time the owner hadn't been careless enough

to leave the keys in the locks.

Chapter VI

THE Travelers' Hotel was quite a loud affair of blond brick, blond wood, chromium, red leather and the other stuff that goes with that sort of a theme. The bow-legged man went directly to the desk, asked for and received a room key, and went to an elevator. He moved, acted, as if he were familiar with the place and belonged there.

Doc Savage, having watched this from a corner of the lobby, saw that he was going to have trouble. The desk clerk, having looked Doc over, caught the bell captain's eye, beckoned, and they conferred, glancing in Doc's direction. The bell captain went out and got the doorman for the dirty work. They wanted to know if Doc was registered. He said he wasn't.

"The lobby facilities are for hotel guests," he was informed.

He was startled, because he had forgotten he was dressed for the part of a bum, and crawling around in the brush and on and off trains had not, quite probably, helped his appearance.

"Scram!" he was directed.

He pretended to be insulted. "Who do you think you're going to throw out of here?" he demanded.

"You," the doorman said. "Do you want it with dignity, or without?"

Doc did enough stalling to get followed outside, but not enough to get himself seized by the collar. Then, when nobody was in sight, he let the doorman see his roll of greenbacks. He separated a ten-spot. "You want to make a commission?"

The doorman was astonished, then uncomfortable. "We thought you were a bum," he said. He swore bitterly and added, "That desk clerk and bell captain can just throw their own bums out after this." He eyed the ten. "You kidding?"

Doc glanced at the sky. It looked like rain, and, following the rain, it would probably get chilly. "I want a raincoat," he said. "I'll pay you for the raincoat, and this will be your commission. Also, I want to park on the mezzanine floor where I can watch the lobby."

"What's the deal?"

"Detective work."

"Let's see something to prove that. Don't detectives carry licenses, or something?"

"Not always. Get me the raincoat and put me inside. Then you can telephone Deputy Sheriff Walter Weem and ask him about me. Describe me to him. If he doesn't okay me, you can throw me out again and you've made ten."

The doorman eyed the bill, folded it twice neatly, and it vanished inside his coat. He was a big man, not as tall as Doc, but almost as wide. "I got a raincoat that cost me seven-fifty. You want it to cover up that seedy outfit you're wearing, don't you?"

"Yes."

“It’ll do that.”

DOC engaged a taxicab, and made a deal with the driver to park around the corner and remain there where he would be accessible. He paid the driver enough in advance to keep him there, on the doorman's assurance that the hack driver was reliable.

“A bow-legged man came into the hotel ahead of me, got a key and went to a room,” Doc told the doorman. “It would be worth five more to me to know his name and room number and anything else you can pick up.”

“I won't rob you,” the doorman said. “I’ll find that out for nothing.”

While the doorman was getting the information, Doc purchased a newspaper at the hotel stand, turned pages until he came to the first advertisement with a circle for its illustration theme—in this case a replica of a crystal ball with the product illustrated inside—and, folding the newspaper with the dark round circle outermost, placed it in the raincoat pocket, the black circle showing.

“Guy's registered as Ed Borzoi,” the doorman reported. “Room 412. Been here two days. Pals around with a taller guy who has a funny-looking lip. Registered as from New York City, but no street address there.”

“Thanks,” Doc told him. “Now the mezzanine.”

The mezzanine had the sameness that all hotel balconies have—thick carpet, chairs, writing desks, reading lamps, a few divans, radio, piano—with the difference that all the fittings were in keeping with the Traveler's very modern blondness.

Before leaving Doc at the stairs, the doorman said, “I squared it with the desk clerk. But he's a suspicious stinker and I gotta call the sheriff and check on you.”

“Not the sheriff. Call Deputy Sheriff Walter Weem. You won't find him at his office, but he will probably be at one of the hospitals. I don't know which one. You'll have to try them.”

“Okay.”

Doc Savage took the newspaper out of his pocket, separated it in two sections, placed the portion displaying the round black ball on his knees where it was prominent enough to be quite noticeable, and pretended to read the other section.

There was, due to the lateness of the hour, very little guest traffic in the lobby. At the west end, two scrubwomen had rolled back a rug and were cleaning the shining dark floor. The scrubwomen were talking as they worked, one of them doing most of the talking, the other pausing at intervals to shake with mirth over whatever the first one was saying. The desk clerk had a cup of coffee and a sandwich behind a glass partition. Between bites of sandwich and sips of coffee, he glanced up suspiciously at the spot where Doc Savage sat.

The bow-legged man—Borzoi might, might not, be his name—had not come down. He might not appear until morning. Or he might be conferring with someone in the hotel. Or telephoning. Or preparing a get-away. The last thing he was probably doing was sleeping.

The best procedure, Doc had concluded, was to get some help before he started working on the bow-legged man. He glanced at his watch, concluded there had been time enough for Monk and Ham to

get Pat to the hospital, and decided to find a telephone and try to learn what hospital they had gone to.

There was a pay telephone sign on the other side of the mezzanine. He got up, moved toward it, and his route took him past another occupant of the mezzanine. A young woman. He hadn't noticed her before. He felt, suddenly, a blast of icy air, one of those jets of refrigerated air which movie theaters sometimes propel across the sidewalk to entice pedestrians inside. He kept walking as if nothing had happened. It was quite a feat.

The young woman—at first his startled perceptions were only of what she was doing, and of what lay on the desk beside her—was engaged in writing with pen and ink. Possibly a letter, for she was using hotel stationery.

What had startled him, however, was the magazine that, on the desk at her elbow, was open to an illustration that featured a round black design.

HE did not fully recover from surprise during the time necessary to find four hospital numbers in the directory, call them, and be told by three of them that they weren't the hospital he wanted.

However, he did make a detailed survey of the young woman. This somewhat distracted his attention from watching the lobby—he could see the front door from the phone booth, in case the bow-legged man left. She would, though, have been distracting any time, any place. And she did it without being spectacular. Or at least, not much more spectacular than the English Crown jewels, and for about the same reason. Genuine.

Immediately he wondered why he should think she was not spectacular, and yet feel that she was probably extraordinary. He finally put his mental finger on that one. She was, in almost every detail, just a little different. Not different enough to be a phony or a freak, but different, and all the differences were so small they were almost intangible. This was a little confusing, he realized.

Monk Mayfair—at the fourth hospital he had called—came to the telephone. “Pat's all right, so you can stop worrying.”

Doc said, “Good! Let me have her story. And make it brief.”

“She's still unconscious,” Monk explained hastily. “What I meant was that the doctor says she just got a few bangs over the head, plus a big scare, probably. He thinks she should come out of it.”

“That,” Doc said grimly, “lacks a lot of being all right. When will she come out of it?”

“I don't know. Did you ever hear a doctor commit himself on a thing like that?”

Doc was anxious. “Does the doctor treating her look as if he had any sense?”

“I think he's all right. He knows who she is, and he's heard of you. You'd think he had just been appointed physician to the queen.”

“What about Deputy Sheriff Weem?”

“They're patching him up.” Monk chuckled, and the chuckle turned into a laugh. “That deputy is quite a boy. After he saw you and the bow-legged lad swing on that freight train, he walked back, joined us, and didn't say a thing about being shot until he got to the hospital. Then he sat down in a chair and began cussing. You should have heard him. He knew cusswords in four languages.”

“Is he going to be able to continue the investigation himself?”

“That hasn't been settled yet. He and the doctors don't agree.”

Doc was watching the young woman. He told Monk where he was and how he had gotten there, that the bow-legged man was using the name Borzoi, was in room 412, that there was a taxi waiting for emergencies, and that there was a young woman on the hotel mezzanine with a magazine open at a black dot on the desk beside her.

“For God's sake!” Monk said. Then he demanded, “Is she good-looking?”

“Tell Deputy Weem about the black spots,” Doc directed. “I gave him a rough outline of how we came to get mixed up in this—how somebody called us for a meeting at the airport and arranged the black spot as a password. Except that I left out about the black spot. I thought something might be gained by holding back about the black spot password—I think I didn't tell the deputy about that because the story sounded goofy anyway and would have sounded more so with the spot in it. But you might as well give it to him now, together with anything else that he wants to know that you know.”

“You want to tell the deputy sheriff everything?” Monk asked.

“Exactly.”

“Weem is just practical enough to figure the spot stuff is danged silly.”

“Probably. But tell him anyway. The deputy is clever, and has the advantage of looking like a moron. He can be a big help on this, and we don't want to handicap him by holding back facts.”

“Okay.”

“Convince him,” Doc ordered, “that you and Ham are on the up and up. Then get down here to the hotel, and we'll see what we can think up for this bow-legged fellow.”

“What if the deputy wants to come too?”

“Bring him, if that's what he wants. Don't make the mistake of trying to talk him into staying in the hospital, or anything else that might start him doubting us. If he should turn against us, he could make us all kinds of difficulties.”

“I see the point,” Monk said.

DOC left the phone booth and walked back to the chair he had occupied earlier, passing the young woman enroute. His impression of her was enhanced thereby.

Reaching his chair, he saw with surprise that the bow-legged man was now in the lobby. The fellow must have come out of the elevators during the telephoning. He had seated himself in a rust-red leather chair and, smoking a long seal-brown cigar, looked as if he had settled himself there.

On his knee was an airline timetable. It had a round dot-like design on the front which Doc could distinguish from where he sat.

Doc Savage casually removed his own newspaper from his pocket and folded it so the black spot wouldn't show. There were, he had decided, enough spots around.

The set-up, it seemed to him, was one that promised events. He tried to think what might be about to develop—something obviously was—and each time the young woman got in the way of his thoughts. He finally let himself think about her.

His second close look at her had been more impressive. And as confusing. It had borne out his first thought that in every detail she was just a bit different. This was, as it had first been, undeniably confusing. A little difficult to straighten out. She was beautiful, but she didn't overdo it. She looked intelligent, but didn't overdo that either. It was the same with being regal. It wasn't that she fell short, either. Rather, she gave each of these things a little twist.

All of this was rather intangible, and he finally selected, for purposes of illustrating to himself the impression she made, her hair. It was brown hair, and lovely, done by a good hairdresser, but there was a white streak in it over her left temple. The gray swatch, somehow, changed ordinary pretty hair into something mysterious, intriguing. The gray streak wasn't large enough to be startling, but one immediately wondered why it was there.

There were a lot of other touches like that. For a second example, she looked quite young, possibly not more than twenty. Yet there was about her a wisdom, a self-possession, far beyond twenty. He was trying to figure out why this was when he suddenly realized it had started to happen down in the lobby.

A slender man, thirtyish, tweedy, had come in and walked around the lobby idly until he came to the chair where the bow-legged man sat. He was going to speak to the latter.

UNFORTUNATELY, the newcomer was turned so that Doc could not see his lips and read them. There was no certainty that, at that distance, he would have been able to read lips, but the point was that he didn't get the chance.

Having been spoken to, the bow-legged man pretended to be mystified. Doc was sure he was pretending.

The bow-legged man shook his head. The young man in tweeds seemed genuinely surprised and bewildered, and also a bit alarmed. Quite a lot alarmed, Doc concluded, and not able to hide all of it.

The younger man sauntered away. His suit was gray Shetland tweed and probably expensive. It draped on him with an appearance of looseness, but set off his figure well, making his shoulders more square than they probably were.

He wandered around the lobby with a purpose. He was using his eyes. When he finally halted, he was standing before the display window of the lobby florist's shop, a perfectly round window set in dark masonite. The window resembled a large porthole, and he proceeded to admire it.

He ran his finger around the circular metal rim which held the glass. This was his undoing.

The bow-legged man shot him in the back.

He made a casual, precise job of it, drawing his gun with his right hand and resting it on his left elbow on the chair arm.

The shot made the astonishing amount of noise that an unexpected shot usually makes. The desk clerk jumped so violently that he threw his coffee cup all the way up to the ceiling. The coffee remaining in it made a slight brown stain against the ceiling, and the cup narrowly missed the clerk when it fell back.

Doc Savage had been taken just enough by surprise that the chair in which he had been sitting was no more than halfway on its journey through the air when the shot was fired. The chair was going toward the bow-legged man. It had been quite an effort to throw it, for it was a large chair. Unfortunately, it also fell slightly short.

The bow-legged man was knocked sidewise out of his chair, and his chair was upset. Momentum carried him a few inches on his stomach after he hit the floor. His gun, a shining piece nearly as large as a submachine gun, skidded considerably farther. Mr. Borzoi crawled after it. He had become very active.

The young man who had been shot in the back now reacted as a dead man should. He had, when the bullet hit him, thrown both hands up and rested them against the rim of the round window, then he had leaned, head bowed, against window and wall. But now he slipped downward, his chin hung for a moment on the window edge, then he slipped the rest of the way to the floor and came to a rest sitting awkwardly, in an attitude of prayer, at the wall. The red leaking out of him began making a small lake on the floor.

The girl, the one who was just a little different in almost every way, ran to the edge of the mezzanine and looked down. She was in a position to see the tweedy young dead man, but not the other man. She became rigid and fastened both hands to the mezzanine railing.

“Larson!” she cried. Her voice, clear, bell-like, carried. “Larson! Larson!”

DOC SAVAGE, practically in the act of dropping over the balcony railing, saw that there was no rug on the lobby floor directly below—the scrubwomen had rolled up the rug and had been working there; he could hear them running—and he decided there was too much chance of breaking bones when he hit the slick, dark floor. The chances of getting shot had some bearing on it, too, because the bow-legged man had almost reached his gun.

The girl stopped crying, “Larson!” and wheeled and ran for the mezzanine stairs.

The young man in tweeds gave a convulsive pitch outward and backward from the wall against which he had been leaning prayerfully. He was completely motionless, and probably quite dead, after he landed. But the bow-legged man, having recovered his gun, aimed carefully and shot his victim again, this time in the top of the head.

Doc threw a steel smoking stand at the bow-legged man. It was not very effective, and the man was able to dodge. The fellow threw up his arm, the gun enormous and shiny at the end of the arm, but he did not shoot when Doc Savage threw himself back out of view.

The young woman was on the stairs. Doc followed her. The stairway had an elbow bend halfway down, and she was at this point when he caught sight of her again.

She stopped, seated herself behind the large metal post where the stair railing made the angle, and produced a pistol from her handbag. The metal post was large enough to give protection, and so situated that it commanded the lobby. She took a rest and an aim at the bow-legged man. She was a little too late. He ran across the lobby and through the street door, unhit, apparently, by the two bullets the young woman fired at him—or, if hit, only urged to more speed on his way.

Doc Savage, coming quietly down the carpeted stairs behind the girl, reached her gun hand with both his hands. They had a brief, almost completely silent struggle.

Chapter VII

AFTER Doc Savage had disarmed her, the young woman said, "Stop trying to be a hero! Call the police!" She did not look nor sound as angry nor as frightened as she had reason to look and sound.

Doc said, "I'm doing my best." He kept a grip on her left wrist and started the rest of the way down the stairs.

She held back. She demanded, "What's the idea?" She jerked and whipped about. "I'm not going," she said. "Let go of me!"

Doc did not stop descending the stairs and did not release her. They went across the lobby that way, the girl doing all she could to resist. She even seized a chair and dragged it like an anchor behind them for a short distance.

The man in tweeds was obviously dead. Doc took what he could conveniently find out of the man's pockets and put it in his own pockets. He did not take any time to look at the stuff, just took it.

Like a turtle peeking out of its shell, the hotel clerk's head came above the desk.

"Call the police," Doc said loudly.

The girl kicked at one of his shins. He moved his leg enough to cause her to miss, and she nearly fell down.

She then did something that was somehow—even if it was hard to explain—in keeping with her character. She changed tactics.

"Hurry up!" she said. "Let's not allow him to get away."

They ran outdoors. The doorman was standing flat-backed against the wall of a niche, looking scared. The street-lights made a few shadows and coated everything in the neighborhood with various shades of yellow light.

Doc stopped in front of the doorman and demanded, "Which way did he go?"

"You think I watched?" The doorman licked his lips. "I didn't. I stood right here. He had a gun in his hands. I stood right here."

"You didn't look?"

"No."

"Well, you have ears, haven't you? Which way did his footsteps disappear?"

"I don't know, so help me God," the doorman said. He was extremely frightened.

Doc went out into the street. He released the girl's wrist to see if she would follow him, and she did.

He looked all directions in the street and saw no one moving except a man and a woman two blocks away. He tried, by listening, to decide whether a car or cab was leaving the neighborhood, but two or three vehicles were moving, two nearby and one farther away, and he could not tell. His cab still waited

at the corner.

He went to the cab, looked in at the driver and demanded, "Did you see a bow-legged man?"

The driver sat very still. He was a squarish brown man with impassive features. Only his eyes moved in his face, and their movements were quick, darting ones. He asked, "That was shooting a minute ago, wasn't it?"

"Did you see a bow-legged man go past? Last few seconds?"

"I don't want no part," the cab driver said. "Count me out."

"He killed a man. Which way did he go?"

"I was at Anzio and the Belgian Bulge and six or seven other places, but that wouldn't interest you," the driver said. "The point is, I decided to die of old age."

Doc said, "Watch the girl, then, while I look around."

"You misunderstood me, buddy. I said count me out. Clear out."

Doc said nothing. There was no point in arguing. He moved rapidly to the corner, looked, listened. He tried another corner, tried merely standing and listening, but saw and heard nothing of the bow-legged man.

The girl had followed him wordlessly. She seemed perfectly willing to cooperate.

He went back to the cab, and the driver got out and extended some money, said, "Here's what you paid me. Sorry if I let you down."

"You want to haul us around?"

"Rather not."

Doc waved the money back. "Skip it," he said. "At least you stuck to your principles."

The driver was not embarrassed.

"No bow-legged guys went past," he said. He got back in his machine and drove away.

THE girl breathed inward deeply, then outward with a quick rush. "He got away. He must have gone the other direction," she said.

Doc nodded. He said, "Let's take a walk."

"If there's some point in it, it's all right with me," the girl said.

They walked north a block, west a block, then two blocks south without seeing any bow-legged men. Doc went into an almost deserted all-night drugstore, used the telephone and got someone at police headquarters. Before he was well into his description of the bow-legged man, the man at headquarters said, "We got a pickup out for him. Sheriff's office wants him."

Doc said, "You'll want him, too. He just murdered a man in the Traveler's Hotel." He hung up on the startled silence that followed.

He sat in a booth with the girl and told the waiter he would have a malt. The girl said coffee. She looked at Doc and said, "When you're ready to hear my story, say so."

"Got it all ready?"

She looked at him steadily and did not say anything. Her eyes were brown large, pleasant, and the thing that kept them from being ordinary, beautiful eyes was a way they had of growing suddenly intense—a quality difficult to explain, but quite noticeable.

He did not press the point. "Know the bow-legged man?"

"No."

"Know the victim?"

"Why do you think I called him by name?"

"Larson?"

She nodded. "Ted Larson. Friend of mine. In love with me. I wasn't with him, although now that he is dead, I wish I had been a bit more kind."

"Any idea where he lives?"

"No."

"Know much else about him?"

She said, "His middle name was Joseph. Ted Joseph Larson. Born in Canada, on a farm, he told me. I don't suppose that is important. During the war, he was a civilian flight instructor for the army. And after that he was in the Merchant Marine. He was in the Merchant Marine for some time after the war, and since then he has not been doing much except, now and then, giving a little flying instruction at the airport. I don't think he was making much money, but he said he had a little saved back. All of this is stuff he told me at different times."

Doc was studying her, but trying not to be too obvious about doing it. He wasn't able to decide much about her. But she was alarming him. He was beginning to suspect that she was going to be one of the most remarkable persons he had ever known. He wasn't exactly sure why he had this feeling—there was not much definite that he could put his thoughts on—but the impression was strong.

He said, "That doesn't explain why he was killed."

"No, it doesn't," she agreed.

DOC moved from his pockets to the booth table the stuff he had taken from the pockets of the dead, tweed-clad young man—Ted Joseph Larson, if that was his name—and examined the things. The name was as the girl had given it, according to a commercial pilot's license with instrument and horsepower ratings, and a New York State driver's license. Ted Joseph Larson. The billfold, neat and new, contained a carefully ink-printed card legend that read: *Return to Ted Joseph Larson, Apt. 7, Linkside Apartments, Kerrville, Missouri.* There was a little over three thousand dollars in large bills. Doc did not count it exactly. He noticed the girl did not seem impressed by the money.

"Well heeled," he remarked.

“I said he told me he had some money saved back.”

“I know, but three thousand and some dollars is more than one usually carries around.”

“Unless one has a purpose.”

He glanced at her sharply. “Purpose?”

She nodded. “He was in trouble. Don't you think you had better listen to my story? You're acting sort of contrary about that. You don't have to believe it.”

The clerk came with his malt and her coffee. He drank, feeling the coldness of the malted milk on his upper lip and its coldness in his throat. He was a great deal more parched and hungry than he had thought. He said, “I haven't stopped you from telling any story.”

“Well, you don't seem much interested.”

“I'm interested, all right. I'm just trying to figure this out. It was mysterious to begin with, and now it is getting violent and complicated. But go ahead. First, let's hear who you are.”

“I? I'm Effie Erickson. Not that it should mean anything to you.” She paused as if it should mean something, though, or he should make some comment.

He said, “Effie?”

She nodded. “I'm glad you got that out of your system. Effie doesn't fit me. Everybody says that. All right, so now you've said it and we can proceed.”

“Norwegian?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Larson. Erickson. Both are Nordic names.”

“Irish. From Brooklyn.”

“Oh.”

“At the present I do nothing for a living.” She spoke without emphasis or much effort to direct her words especially to him, as if she did not care whether he believed her. “I have some money, inherited. About fifty thousand dollars. I have my own plane, and I was flying across country about two months ago and stopped over for the night here, and liked Kerrville. Don't ask me what I liked about it, because I just did. I've been here since, thinking about starting a dress shop or something like that.”

“Known Ted Joseph Larson long?”

She drank some coffee. “Let me tell it my way. The second day I was here, I met Larson. He liked me a lot at once, but he wasn't my reason for staying on. He was just a young fellow who was around as far as I was concerned, although he probably thought and felt differently. I did not, until the last few days, suspect he had anything on his mind—anything terrible, I mean. I don't think he did have. I think whatever it was came up recently.”

“How did he act to show he was bothered?”

“He showed it the way people show those things. And he became worse. If you mean, be specific about

how I knew he was worried—it was such things as forgetting dates, acting nervous by looking about frequently, as if he was afraid of bodily harm, and inattention during conversation, asking me to repeat. Things like that.”

Doc Savage finished the malt. “How soon does this story get you to the hotel?” he wanted to know.

“He telephoned me this evening. He said that he was in a terrible predicament, and would I meet him at the hotel. He said I could help him.” She said this rapidly, then drank coffee again. The coffee was hardly half gone.

“I didn't mean for you to skip anything.”

“I didn't.”

He broke the brown wafer that had come with the malted milk. “So you came to help him?”

“Yes.”

“With a gun in your purse,” he remarked.

She wasn't disturbed. “Wouldn't you have? I mean, remembering he had been scared for days, wouldn't you have brought a gun?”

“That's not a fair question. I'm a man, and a man might have brought a gun, but it seems to me more likely that a woman wouldn't have come at all. A woman who wasn't in love, I mean.”

“I didn't love him,” she said. “And I came.”

“Why?”

She was not perturbed in the least. “Because I'm me.”

He thought that was a good answer, if not a truthful one. He wasn't sure how much of what she had told him was the truth. He decided, rather surprised, that he had no feelings one way or the other about believing her, no urgings of instinct whatever. He didn't imagine that much she had said was true.

He said, “Why are you telling me this?”

“Why not?” She drank more coffee. “Didn't you grab me and haul me around and scare it out of me?”

He shook his head while chewing the wafer. “You're not that scared.”

“I'm nearer to it than you may think.” She finished the coffee and put the cup down. “Now what about you? Do I get any explanations?”

“In a minute,” he said. “Have you got a pencil?”

She handed him a ladies' gold pencil and he spread a paper napkin out flat and drew a circle on it. She watched him. When she said nothing, he filled in the circle, making a large perfectly round black dot of it. “All right,” he said.

“All right—what?”

He indicated the round black dot. “Doesn't this dingus mean anything special to you?”

She said, “You have a steady hand and you drew a nice free-hand circle. What else should it mean?”

He stood up and said, “We'll go look over your dead friend's apartment.”

Chapter VIII

RAIN, in fine droplets that swirled in the taxi headlight-beams like small gnats, began falling as they turned into Boone Street and headed north. Doc gave his name. He said he was Clark Savage, Jr., and that his profession, if one would call it that, was investigating and coping with criminal activities. He said that he considered himself in no sense a private detective, inasmuch as he became involved only with what interested him, and did not accept fees. He did not attempt to explain why he had such a profession, did not justify in any way any of its peculiar aspects, such as the non-taking of fees. He did not build himself up. All his statements were matter-of-fact.

The girl burst out laughing in his face. “I've heard of you. That's a marvelous job of understatement you're doing. You've got a worldwide reputation as a scientific genius, mental marvel and mechanical wizard.”

That silenced him.

Presently she demanded, “What is going on? It must be awfully big, to interest you. What is it?”

He leaned forward to ask the driver, “How much farther?”

“Next block.”

They left the cab, asking the driver to wait, and entered a four-story apartment building of dark red brick. He had not thought there would be an elevator, but there were two self-service ones. Leaving the elevator on the second floor, chivalry gave him a chance to stand back and let Miss Erickson leave the cage first and watch to see whether she turned toward number seven apartment. She didn't. It might or might not have indicated she had been there before. If she had outsmarted him in his little trickery, he could not tell. He could not read her at all. His suspicion was growing that she had many extraordinary capabilities which she was keeping under wraps.

He found number seven and she said, “How are you going to get in?” He tried knocking, then tried the stiff, plastic cover of the license-holder in his billfold. He noticed that she stood well back and to one side of the door, the side that was nearest the elevator which, although closed, still stood at their floor.

He wondered if she were terrified. Not merely frightened, because there was obvious reason for a little normal fright, hence no very good reason for her hiding it. Terror would be an extreme condition. Terror would be above and beyond justification by anything that had happened, or that she had told him. Terror, she might want to hide. If so, she was doing a good job of it.

Curious about the state of her fears, he purposefully delayed the door opening and added a few small dramatic touches, one of them by suddenly pausing as if he had heard a noise in the room, and placing an ear against the panel and listening. When he did this, his face was turned toward Miss Erickson, registering alarm and concern. He found out nothing from her expression.

A window was open. Through it came wind and tiny drops of rain, and the wind seemed a good deal

colder. Doc Savage, standing very still, kept his finger on the light switch, his eyes moving from one thing to another in the room.

Miss Erickson stood frozen on the threshold. It was the first time since the shooting in the hotel, he believed, that she had been genuinely hammered by emotion. When she spoke the words were tight and stringy.

“He may still be here!” she said.

“He?”

She said, “Whoever searched the place.” She was on guard.

He moved to the open window, stood so that he could glance out without Miss Erickson being outside his field of vision, and looked for a fire escape, a rope, marks on the window, or another window close enough to reach by practical methods. Finding none of these, he closed the window. He looked over the apartment again, said, “A bit fancy for a man who made his money giving flying instruction.”

Miss Erickson shrugged, “I’m surprised, too.”

“Don’t be surprised enough to go leaving your fingerprints around.”

“To hide some of mine that might be here already, you mean?” She didn’t seem angry. But if she were, he thought secretly, she wouldn’t be likely to show it.

He said, “Quit trying to pick a fight,” and began looking over things. The apartment was done in extreme modernism; the living-room rug was blue tone-on-tone and the sofa was done in antique-gold, striped velvet, the damask drapes, two-tone blue, carrying out the theme. There was enough blond wood and gadgets in bizarre shapes to make the place spectacular.

The drawers of a blond desk had been forced open, the front of one being completely torn out, and among the contents of one were five passports. The passports were Canadian, U.S.A., French, Spanish and Argentine. All bore pictures of the young man in tweeds who had been killed, but none of them gave his name as Ted Joseph Larson. None of the names were alike. They were Ivern, Collins, Raquard, Cubanez and Raolin. None of the passports seemed to Doc to be forged, although obviously they all were. All of them had been used—the official stampings in them indicated they had been used in all European countries except Holland, and in the Orient, including Japan. There were American visas and stampings by American occupation authorities in Japan.

Doc glanced at Miss Erickson. She was watching without expression. He said, “Getting these was quite a trick.”

“Using them was more of a one,” she said, “Could the visas and stampings be faked?”

“Why should they be?”

“It does seem silly, doesn’t it?” she said.

THERE was one million two hundred thousand and thirty-six dollars in the bedroom. It had been spread, or scattered, around over the floor and walked on. The sum was in the form of bonds, nationals and industrials, which were registered to their owner and hence worthless as loot because not only could they not be cashed by anyone else, but attempts to do so would be extremely suspicious. The bonds were registered in the name of O. E. Bendannus.

There was a lesser sum, three hundred and eleven thousand dollars, lying on the bed where it apparently had been tossed carelessly after the bed had been all but demolished in a prior search. This also was not in cash, but in stocks of corporations, all American. These certificates also would be registered, and would be worthless to anyone other than the owner.

The owner of these was someone named Parker T. Kovi.

There was a small but very good automatic pistol and two boxes of cartridges for it in the top drawer of a chest of drawers.

In the same drawer was a fountain-pen, tear-gas pistol and fourteen tear-gas shells, resembling .32-calibre blanks, for it.

Also in the drawer was a phial of potassium cyanide, and phials containing respectively nicotinic acid, conium, strychnine, oxalic acid; all quite deadly poisons.

“Ah-h-h-h!” Miss Erickson said softly, as if she had seen a snake. Doc whirled, and saw that her eyes, distended, were fixed on the poisons. Something had finally upset her. She fought, quite visibly, to control herself, and when she succeeded, said, “How horrible!”

“Nice playfellow you had.” He watched her intently.

“He—Larson—that poison—all the money—” She paused and put herself together, then said, “I don't get it at all.”

“Know a Mr. Kovi?”

She shook her head.

“Or a Mr. O. E. Bendannus?”

After another shake of her head, she said, “None of this means anything to me.”

The rest of the search turned up nothing to indicate what the first searcher had been after, or whether it had been found.

A ROUGH voice which couldn't belong to the desk clerk at the Traveler's growled out of the telephone receiver, wishing to know, “Mayfair? Monk Mayfair? . . . What do you want with him?”

Doc said, “Deputy Sheriff Walter Weem will do.”

The voice, which probably belonged to a city cop, was silent a while, then said, “Hold the phone. I'll see who I can find.”

Monk came on the wire presently and, answering Doc's questions as they were put, said: “Yeah, Ham is here. . . . No, Pat hadn't regained consciousness. . . . Weem came along, and he seems willing to work with us, but that's more than I can say for the city police. I think there's some friction between them and

the sheriff's office.”

Doc gave the address from which he was calling. “Can you and Ham get away and come out here?”

“We can try. You want Weem?”

“He has his hands full. Better leave him there, but not if he thinks he wants to come along. But try to discourage him in a nice way. Tell him we'll give him information as soon as we find any that makes sense.”

“I'll try that,” Monk said, and twenty minutes later walked into the apartment with Ham Brooks and Deputy Sheriff Walter Weem, who said, “I don't want you to think I'm pushing in on you, Mr. Savage, but . . .” Instead of finishing, he stared at Miss Erickson. Then he exclaimed, “The babe at the hotel!”

“This is Miss Erickson,” Doc said. “Miss Erickson, two of my associates, Ham Brooks and Monk Mayfair, and Deputy Sheriff Weem.”

Miss Erickson shook their hands, and gave them a large shot of her personality. It registered considerably more on Monk and Ham than it did on the deputy. Doc, himself a little affected by the reflection, realized that the light hadn't been turned on him in any such way as this. He suspected that Monk and Ham had better watch out, or she would make suckers out of them. After the initial shock was over, and Monk and Ham had finished straightening their neckties, Doc drew attention to the bonds and stocks.

“For cripe's sake!” the deputy gasped, eyeing the securities. He picked one of them up, demanded, “Are they real? Hell, there's a fortune here.”

Doc suggested that they find out whether they were real. He called Monk and Ham over.

“You may not be able to do much good this time of night,” he said. “But get on the telephone and check these securities. Get a full history of them, who bought them originally, in what quantities, how they were paid for, whether they have been transferred recently. The same sort of history you would get on anything. Get the addresses, if you can, of the owners, Kovi and Bendannus. Then talk to both of them and see what that leads to. After that, get an FBI or a police check on both of them.”

Deputy Weem demanded, “Stolen goods, you think?”

“Possibly, but I think not,” Doc said. “What about Pat Savage? You say she wasn't able to talk when you left the hospital?”

“Nope.”

“Did you leave a guard over her?”

The deputy bit his lip. “I shoulda, I guess. But I didn't have a deputy available. The only assistant I got is that Ike, and he was at the airport, guarding the body. Ike was only hit over the head, incidentally.”

“Any identification on the body yet?”

“Not yet.”

“What about the old watchman? Was he seriously hurt? Anything besides his leg?”

“Don't guess so. They took him to the hospital.”

MISS ERICKSON made, in the act of clearing her throat, a sound that shocked them. Sudden, blood-curdling, a choking sob of a sound, it assailed their ears. It was as ghastly a noise as Doc Savage had ever heard, and everyone stared at the young woman.

She was standing rigidly, a stricken figure, on the edge of the group. Apparently the sound had burst forth unbidden, like a scalded cat out of a kitchen, for her face became startled, then sought composure.

Deputy Weem eyed her. "What's the matter?" he wanted to know.

Doc, watching her, felt considerable admiration. She was, he was sure, a consummate actress, because there was nothing, absolutely nothing to arouse their suspicions in the way she got hold of herself and, in a properly shocked voice, made explanations.

She said, "Another body at the airport! I didn't know! Two murders. How horrible!" Then she looked at them, registering regret, and added, "I'm sorry, but I just couldn't take it. I think, after what happened at the hotel, I don't feel so well."

Deputy Weem was taken in. "I'm sorry, Miss," he said. "Yes, there was another murder before the one at the hotel. If you feel bad, why don't you sit down for a minute?" He hesitated, blushed, whipped a pint of whiskey out of his hip pocket, and offered, "Maybe a jolt of this would pick you up."

Ham Brooks was also impressed. "Yes, sit down, take it easy," he said. He bustled around getting a chair. "Here, take this chair. You've nothing to worry about, you know."

Miss Erickson gave the deputy and Ham smiles which lifted them approximately a foot off the floor. Doc concluded he had better issue a warning, and he beckoned Monk and Ham into the kitchenette.

"Don't be a sap, Ham," he said bitterly. "That girl is giving you the works."

"Who? Me? She won't take me in," Ham said. "What makes you talk like that?"

Doc, somewhat enraged, said, "For once in your life, try not getting hypnotized by a nice leg and a smile. Watch that girl. Watch her close, or you'll be talking to yourself."

Monk, as smitten as Ham was, objected, "You're just down on her. What's the matter, didn't she give you a tumble?"

"I'm not worried about you. I'm going to take you with me," Doc told Monk. "But Ham, so help me, if she puts a ring in your nose, you'll be sorry. Look at you! Ready to walk on your hands already!"

Ham sniffed uncomfortably. "If you want me to watch her like an eagle, say so."

"That's what I want you to do, brother. Like an eagle. Not a peacock. Never mind spreading your feathers and strutting. Just watch her. And if you want to lay any bets she doesn't make a clown out of you, I'll take some of that money."

Monk was alarmed. "Did you say I was going with you? Better take Ham instead. As you say, he's susceptible. Now, if you leave me to watch her—"

"God forbid!" Doc said. "What makes you think you're a better bet? You and I will go to the hospital and talk to Pat when she comes out of it."

Chapter IX

A DARK-HAIRED small nurse with a cute figure tripped into the hospital waiting room, looked at Doc Savage and giggled. She said, "Congratulations, sir, on a fine bouncing boy."

Doc Savage was shocked beyond words, and found himself unable to speak until the nurse added, "A marvelous ten-pound boy. Ten pounds!" Whereupon Doc said bitterly, "What is this place, a psycho ward?"

The nurse placed a startled hand on her cheek. "Aren't you Mr. Ginsberg?" Her eyes were large and northern-mink-brown.

Doc breathed inward deeply, controlled himself and demanded, "Do I look like an expectant father?"

The little nurse gasped, "Oh, I'm sorry!" and retreated in confusion.

Monk Mayfair had been trying to get some sleep by pretending to sleep, but he had come wide awake at the entrance of the pretty nurse. Monk seemed to think what the nurse had said, and what Doc had said, was funny. He hid his amusement from Doc rather obviously, by seizing his lips with one hand, but his eyes glinted.

They were still waiting at the hospital for Patricia Savage to regain consciousness. It was almost daylight.

The wind, entering around the edges of the closed window, seized muskmelon yellow curtains and ballooned them slightly inward, shook them a very little at the bottoms. The inrush of air subsided and the curtains hung straight and limp and cold. The rain had turned to sleet. The wind had the fretful chill of the storm on its breath and the sleet was thick on the window glass.

Monk cleared his throat. "Ten pounds," he remarked. "Say, Ginsberg must be quite a guy."

Doc Savage said nothing bitterly.

Monk swung his dangling foot. "Why don't you take six big breaths and relax. She's all right. The doctors said so."

Doc said, "You're having a nice time—thinking about Miss Erickson, aren't you?"

"How'd you know?" Monk demanded. He scowled and added, "If she's going to make a monkey out of Ham, I hope she's got it done by now. You know, it was a mistake to hand that wolf the job of watching her. It wasn't fair to the white race, either. I shoulda had the job."

Doc frowned. "Miss Erickson was sitting on the hotel mezzanine with a magazine at her elbow, open to a black circle."

Monk jumped visibly. "Why didn't you say so?"

"And shake the stars out of your eyes. Also it could have been coincidence, because there are circular designs in many advertisements."

Monk was alarmed. "There's no coincidence about this killing."

"The fellow in the hotel was killed while he was drawing attention to a circle. He was running his hand around a circular lobby window when the bow-legged man shot him."

"He was shot because of that?"

“As a result of it. Just prior to that he had accosted the bow-legged man and gotten no response.”

“Blazes!” Monk said. “The guy came into the hotel to meet someone he didn't know, with the black dot as a tag, or password. He came to meet the girl. He made a mistake, evidently not knowing it was to be a girl, and braced the guy. It shapes up that way. I don't like it, but it shapes up that way.”

Doc said, “It's a thought you can wrap around the fascinating Miss Erickson.”

LEANING back, Doc Savage closed his eyes. He didn't feel at all sleepy, which wasn't particularly good, because he had been without sleep quit a while before things had started happening at the airport last night. He wished he could go to sleep now, but he couldn't, for his thoughts kept involving themselves with the mystery.

He was, he felt, rather stupidly confused. The affair had started out by being confusing, and by his behaving, he was beginning to suspect, rather stupidly. Powell, calling him over the telephone, had been just a frightened voice. He didn't know Powell, he had nothing but what had been in Powell's voice, or what Powell had put in his voice—that was a possibility he didn't think he should overlook—on which to base what he had done.

Murder and mystery had resulted, and violence, but it was confusing, and he didn't like such confusion. He wished now that he had approached the thing cautiously, in his own way—for instance, that he hadn't taken Powell's suggestion to go to the airport and wait in disguise, at the same time displaying a black spot or circle as bait. He should have investigated, used caution, learned who Powell was, had the airport better covered, made sure Pat didn't involve herself in it.

At this point he must have gone to sleep, because the next thing he knew, a nurse was shaking him and telling him that he could see Pat.

“HAIL, heroes,” Pat greeted them gaily. “You came to my rescue like knights of old, I hear.”

Doc Savage thought his cousin looked like an expensive jewel against the setting of sanitary, white hospital sheets. He demanded, “How do you feel?”

“Fine.”

“Do they think you're all right?”

“They suspect it. And I know I am.” Pat's eyes were clear and bright. “The nicest young doctor. How do I look?”

“You're too cheerful,” Doc said suspiciously. He pulled up a chair. Pat really looked much better than he had expected; she looked fine, in fact. A suspicion hit him and he demanded, “What did you do, put your young doctor up to not letting us see you?”

“Oh, now, Ginsberg,” Pat said. “Would I do that, and why?”

He grinned sourly. “Ginsberg did all right with his ten-pounder. And why would you not want to see us? Two reasons. One, you knew you would catch heck. And second, you've probably got some wild, unpredictable scheme you want to try, which you know we wouldn't let you try.”

“Nonsense,” Pat said.

“Have you?”

“Have I what?”

“Got a snide scheme up your sleeve?”

“Wouldn't you like to know?”

“If you have, be warned that it isn't a tiddly-winks game you're playing. Murders are like mushrooms, where one grows, others can grow. There have been two tonight already.” He frowned at her. “Are you really feeling okay? That rap on the head didn't crack anything?”

“My head's fine.” Pat gave her head a shake to show how fine it was, became pale, looked for a moment as if she was going to faint. “Well, almost, anyway. It's lucky I got hit on the dome, or he might have done some damage.”

“He—was the murderer a he?” Doc demanded.

“I don't mean the murderer—I mean one of those kidnapers, the one with the funny lip.” She grimaced, threatened, “If I catch that guy, I'll—”

“He's dead. Deputy Weem shot him,” Doc said.

Pat shuddered. “This thing is rough, isn't it?”

He nodded. “Rough enough that you had better tell me a straight story. You can begin with how you happened to be so far from New York and in that hangar tonight.”

Pat glanced at Monk. Monk had taken a chair and was tilted back, hands suspended by thumbs from vest pockets. Pat said, “It was your fault,” to Monk.

Monk blinked twice in astonishment. “How do you figure that?”

“Why, I was there when you told Ham Brooks about Doc getting a call from somebody named Powell, and you were coming out here on it. I simply came along.”

“Without letting us know you were coming!” Monk blurted.

Pat said grimly, “I knew better than that, brother. I've been thrown out too many times to expect to get a ride with you guys.”

“So you got yourself a rap on the head,” Monk pointed out. “And, except for us chasing your kidnapers over the countryside like wild Indians, you might have gotten killed.”

Pat shook her head. “Oh, I doubt that—I mean, I could have talked myself out of it, maybe. All they wanted to know was whether I had seen the murderer in the airport hangar.”

“They asked you that?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“During the wild ride. I told them no. They were too busy being chased to decide whether or not I was

telling the truth, but I think I could have convinced them.”

Monk emitted a grunt of comprehension. “So that’s why they kidnapped you, they thought you had seen the killing.”

Doc Savage eyed Pat suspiciously. “Did you?” he demanded.

Pat said, “So help me, I do not know who murdered the man in the hangar,” and Doc Savage did not believe her. She was not, of course, lying. Her words meant what she had said them to mean, but they covered just that much ground and no more. She might be hiding a lot, or nothing.

She added, “I came as far as Kansas City by air line, then backtracked by train. I found out you were registered at the Travelers’. I went out to the airport tonight—last night, as soon as I could. I had arrived after you did. You flew out, didn’t you? Anyway, it was late, and I went to the airport, and prowled around.”

Doc frowned. “What do you mean, prowled around?”

“Just that. I wanted to see what was going on. I went past the line shack and saw the watchman there and Doc asleep on a chair, then I poked around in the hangars, those that weren’t locked. I heard . . .” She stopped, shuddered violently. In a moment, she said, “It was the man dying. I went there. I was paralyzed. I left as soon as my legs would work, and someone tripped me on the steps and hit me over the head. I was stunned, but not knocked completely out because I knew vaguely that someone was there.

“Then the person left, and I didn’t know much of anything for a while, not until I was in the line shack and you were there, and even then I wasn’t able somehow to speak. You know the rest. When those two men had me in the ambulance, they drove terribly fast, and one of them kept asking me questions about who killed the man in the plane. Then I heard them shooting, and then I passed out.”

“Quite a story,” Doc said.

“It was awful.” Pat shuddered.

Doc said, “I’m glad you told the whole truth without an argument.”

Pat eyed him narrowly. “Eh?”

“Particularly the truth about the magazine with the black spot,” he said.

“How did you—” Pat stopped, bit her lips. “I—I forgot about that.” She moved her gaze to different parts of the room, aware of their disapproval, and finally snapped, “You make me tired! You act as if I were a crook! I did forget it. The magazine was on the man’s lap when he died. I took it.”

“Why?”

“Because it was open at a black spot, of course!” She tried to sound injured. “I haven’t done anything criminal. I haven’t even messed up your plans, if you have any, which I doubt. Why do you have to come in here and bulldoze me?”

Doc said grimly, “You realize you are in danger, don’t you? Because they think you saw the murderer.”

“Oh, fiddlesticks! Those two men must have been the murderers. One of them is dead, and the bow-legged one killed a man in plain sight in the hotel lobby, so he won’t be worrying about me and my

testimony. I'm in no danger.”

“Nevertheless,” Doc said, “Monk is going to stay with you to make sure you're safe.”

“That's silly. Monk could be doing something else. I don't want to be a bother.”

“You might have thought of staying in New York,” Doc said grimly.

He caught Monk's eye, beckoned with his jaw, and Monk followed him outside. They moved down the hall to get out of earshot, and Doc said, “She's up to something.”

“I think so, too,” Monk agreed.

“We've insulted her ability, apparently,” Doc said dryly, “and she's going to show us up. I'm as sure of that as I'm standing here. She's not my cousin for nothing.”

Monk looked uncomfortable. “I'm sorry my big mouth is the cause of her being here. I should have known she likes excitement, and once she takes a notion to stick her nose into one of our cases, nothing is going to stop her.”

“It's not your fault. Usually she gets the information out of me.” Doc rubbed his jaw, and grinned slightly. “She's rather slick at it, at that. I'll make you a little bet.”

“Eh?”

“I'll make you a little bet that right now she is nearer to solving this than we are. I think she knows something, has a lead.”

Monk was startled. “You really think so?”

Doc nodded. “This time,” he said, “we'll outsmart her. Here is what you do: you go back in there and go through the motions of guarding her. Don't let her give you the slip. When she sees she can't get away from you, she'll try the next best thing—talking you into a partnership with her. She'll probably become a very pitiable little girl and ask you to help her prove that she'd make us a good assistant. That's what she's been working on for a long time.”

“Uh-huh. Come to think of it, she's tried that on me before.” Monk looked sheepish. “The way she goes at it, she really makes me feel like a dog.”

“This time,” Doc said, “you fall for it.”

“Help her, you mean?”

Doc nodded. “Enough,” he said, “to find out what she knows that she's not telling us. When you know that, get in touch with me, and we'll clap her in the hospital or jail or somewhere where she'll be safe, then go ahead and use her clue.”

“She'll raise hell.”

“All over the place. But maybe it'll teach her not to pull another stunt like this.” Doc was pleased with his idea. He added, “I'm going back and see what Ham has found out about the owners of that million and a half dollars worth of bonds and securities.”

“I'll bet,” said Monk bitterly, “he's found out more about that Miss Erickson than anything.”

PATRICIA SAVAGE gave Monk a repentant look when he entered her room again. She said, "I'm an awful nuisance, aren't I?" Her tone was sad.

She's already going to work on me, Monk thought, and was lost for a moment in admiration for Doc's ability to read Pat's intentions. He tucked the covers in around her chin. "Doc thinks you overdid it this time," he explained. "He had me out in the hall just now to assure me I'd hang by the thumbs if you got out of my sight."

"He didn't like my story," Pat complained.

"Oh, I don't know."

"He didn't."

"He was pretty rough on you, at that."

Pat glanced at him intently, and Monk thought for a moment that he might have overdone it. But he relaxed when she said, "You're a halfway reasonable guy, Monk. I wish Doc was as logical. What do you think is the matter with him? Is it just because I happen to be his cousin?"

"No, he figures the going in our racket is too tough for a woman."

In her most convincing tone, Pat said, "He's wrong. You know he is. I can handle a car or a boat or a plane as well as most of you, and, while I can't lift a horse, I can lick an average run of man. What's the matter, does he figure I'm dumb?"

"He's just old-fashioned," Monk said. Then he added invitingly, "I don't think he's as set against you being one of our outfit as he used to be. Maybe you'll get his mind changed."

It was working, Monk decided. He watched Pat gaze at him with her lips trembling, and listened to her say pleadingly, intensely, "I wish you would help me, Monk. I really wish you would." He went through what he hoped were the expressions of a man torn between two loyalties, a man struggling with decision, and, finally, a man who had decided to doublecross a friend in a nice way. He said, "If there was any way I could help—"

Pat seized his hand. "You mean that?"

"Yes, but how—"

"Scram out of here, so I can dress!" Pat said excitedly. "Then we'll get going. You can help me."

"But—"

"Don't argue!" Pat exclaimed. "I know how we can wind this up in half an hour!"

Chapter X

A BLACK taxicab covered with a lime-gray coating of sleet came to a cautious stop in the middle of Cook Street. The driver, unable longer to see anything through his windshield, said, "I wish I hadda guy sold me this defroster, I know what I'd do!" He got out, used a safety razor blade to scrape ice off the windshield.

Inside the cab, Monk Mayfair shivered. If his coat collar had not already been turned up, he would have turned it up. He rubbed some of the steam off the inside of the glass, but the sleet on the outside prevented him from seeing anything beyond.

He couldn't tell where they were, and it might not mean much if he could. He had not heard what address Pat had given the cab driver. They had piled into this cab outside the hospital, and he had no idea where they were going, nor what they would find when they got there. He suddenly didn't like this.

The weather also irritated him. "This is a big change in the weather," he said.

"That's exactly right, brother," the driver agreed. He added that any man who got into the taxicab business ought to have his head examined.

"What was that address?" Monk asked cunningly.

"Huh? Morningside Hospital, you mean?" The driver seemed surprised.

"How much farther?" Monk wanted to know.

"About half a mile."

Monk settled back on the seat. He avoided Pat's eye. Pat said, "Wise guy, aren't you? So now you know where we're going, and what good does it do you?"

"It makes me curious as anything. Who's in the hospital that you want to see?"

"The murderer."

Monk jumped violently, peered at Pat and demanded, "Are you kidding?"

"If I am, it's myself I'm fooling." She settled back with an air of satisfaction. "Didn't think I had accomplished anything, did you?"

Monk grunted. He was concerned. He hadn't, he decided suddenly, actually thought Pat had any information of real value. He still wasn't sure. Pat having the grudge she had against them, that she wasn't ribbing him.

The taxi driver was examining the defroster to see whether it was putting out any heat. He said, "These things are worth about two cents."

Pat said sharply, "What are we waiting on, driver? For summer to come?"

Short, wide-shouldered, big-bodied, the taxi driver scowled at them. He said, "Lady, you want to know something?" He moved slightly, and his right hand appeared over the seat holding a gun. He added, "You want to know how it feels to get shot?"

Monk froze. He glanced at Pat. She sat in a rigid, strained position, lips fixed in the shape they had held when the gun appeared. The change in her coloring, from ruddy to normal to lighter than normal, was as apparent as if an electrician was operating a dimming switch.

Down Knox Street from the north, a car came, feeling its way over the sleet-coated pavement with the caution of a fat pig. Dark, slow, it moved between the rows of shade trees with their frosting of ice that made them look like white lace against the darkly threatening sky.

The driver was suddenly very ugly. "You want to yell?" he wished to know. "Go ahead. Yell. It's been a

coupla hours since I shot anybody.”

Pat said bitterly, “So you were waiting outside the hospital for me!”

The driver was keeping track of the approaching car with his ears rather than his eyes. He said, “Not you, babe. Not especially you, babe. Just any of your outfit.”

“I don't believe you!” Pat said angrily.

The oncoming car began slowing down and, when it reached them, it skidded a few inches and was at a standstill. Two men got out. Monk had never seen them previously.

Their cab driver welcomed them with an apish grin, jerked his head at Pat, and said, “Babe don't believe me.” The two newcomers were about of a size, but one had a blue and the other a red necktie. Blue necktie said, “So babe don't believe you.” He got in the cab. He had the largest gun in his hand Monk had ever seen. Red necktie said, “You say babe ain't a believer, eh?” He hit Monk between the eyes twice, faster than it seemed possible, with a blackjack. Monk made a bellowing sound and came forward out of the seat. He was quite unconscious, however, and fell down on the floorboards.

The man who had hit Monk was astonished. He said, “For cripes sake, did you ever see a guy jump like that when he was swatted?” He wagged the blackjack under Pat's nose. “How about you, babe? Would you jump?”

Pat quietly fainted.

Chapter XI

THE taxicab which carried Doc Savage had chains on all four wheels, traveled cautiously. The boughs of trees were bending low under their burden of grey sleet, like grey-robed monks bowed in silent prayer. A few ambitious householders already had dirtied their sidewalks with cinders and ashes.

At the airport, the cab pulled into the parking lot north of the hangars, the ice crackling under its wheels.

“Want me to wait?” the driver asked.

“Yes, do that. This shouldn't take over half an hour.” Doc opened the cab door a narrow crack, and icy wind whipped inside, struck him in the face. He got out and leaned into the icy wind, shivering, all the way to the line-shack.

A short man with a glinting pair of eyes said, “Come on where it's warm. Quite a change in the weather.” He wore a leather coat and was evidently the day airport manager.

“Quite a change,” Doc agreed.

Mr. Ivey, the night watchman, lay on the desk under a soiled blanket with a parachute pack for a pillow. He seemed to have been asleep. The old man moaned, opened his eyes, looked at Doc, but did not say anything. He was not looking at Doc with pleasure.

“How is the leg?”

The old man scowled. “Didn't they arrest you?”

Doc said, "Not yet, but don't give up hope." He turned to the short man with the alert eyes. "I wanted to look over the scene of the murder in daylight." When the man looked doubtful, he explained, "I'm working with Deputy Sheriff Weem, and you can check with him if you wish."

The airport manager said he guessed it would be okay. He said his name was Drance. He pulled on a sheep-lined winter helmet and went out to Three Hangar with Doc. He explained, "Old Ivey ain't usually that cranky. I guess his leg hurts him."

"He seems inclined to blame me for what happened to his leg," Doc explained. "I was asleep in the line-shack and wouldn't go with him to investigate the scream he heard. I suppose he thinks that if I had been along, he wouldn't have gotten scared and fallen down the steps."

"I don't know much about him," Drance said. "Cranky old bat, though."

"They get that way, sometimes, when they work a dull job too long."

"I guess so, but he's only been working here two months."

"You wouldn't think he would hang around here with that leg," Doc remarked.

"Naw, you wouldn't. He said he couldn't sleep on account of his leg hurting, and he might as well loaf out here as anywhere." The airport manager grimaced. "It must be hell to be old and lonely and no home to go to. You'd think that nephew of his would take pity on the old geezer."

"He has a nephew?"

"Yeah, pilot for some executive on the West Coast. Comes through now and then in a classy private plane, and always takes the old guy out to dinner. Old man looks forward to it a lot. Fact is, I think Mr. Ivey has been expecting the nephew for a couple of days. Here's Three Hangar. Them's the steps the poor old fellow fell down."

DOC SAVAGE did not ascend the ladder-like steps immediately, but moved around them, the ice-crusting weeds crunching loudly under his feet. He recalled that Mr. Ivey had claimed to have fallen on the second step, and it was that step to which Doc gave most of his attention. He noted there was a brace for the railing which joined the stairs at approximately the second step, and, upon inspecting this, discovered small marks under the ice covering, marks such as would have been made had a wire been tied across the steps so as to trip anyone using them.

"They already found that," the airport manager remarked. "That assistant deputy, or whatever you call him, from the sheriff's office, Ike Davis, was poking around this morning and found them marks. He thinks that was where a wire was fixed up to trip the young lady last night."

Doc said, "Will you go up the steps and into the hangar?"

"Eh?"

"Go ahead, and let's see if it will show how the old man missed the wire on his way into the hangar."

The manager climbed with care, because of the ice. He held to the handrail, and lifted his feet with forethought and caution.

“Good enough,” Doc remarked. “Because of the ice, you probably used about the same care an old man would use. The wire, judging from the marks, was tied about three inches out from the tread, and you would have missed it. You might try coming down a few steps and let's make sure.” The manager descended four steps. “Good enough, you'd have been tripped coming down,” Doc said.

They went into the hangar, stood in its vastness and its coldness, listened to it give out small unpleasant sounds like bones breaking as the storm pummeled it with wind and sleet.

“They took the body away, a-course,” the manager explained. “The city police was out here earlier. They got photographs and fingerprints.” He grinned apologetically, added, “That's why I came along. They said not to let the place get tracked up.”

Doc Savage made no comment. Presently he went outdoors again. The wind seized his suit coat, shook it, and sleet broke loose and came sliding down the arched hangar roof, making a metallic cackling.

He searched the vicinity of the hangar, taking into consideration the position of the moon, the shadow areas, when the murder was committed. He noted the present wind direction, decided what direction the wind-shift must have taken when the storm front passed, and did some further searching, with the result that he found a ball of paper lodged against the woven wire border fence beside the hangar. He studied it intently for a while.

When he was sure it was a sheet from a magazine and featured a black circle in an advertising illustration, he picked it up carefully by the ice which had frozen over it.

THE Elite Funeral Home smelled, rather horribly, of roses; not of real roses, although some of these were about, but of rose incense. The Elite looked like the sort of a place that would have an arrangement with the police whereby they got any official business in the way of bums, floaters and unidentified.

An attendant in a sloppy frock said, “This'n's him.” He whipped a sheet off a body. There were several sheet-covered forms on wheeled stands in the room.

The body the attendant had disclosed was still dressed in the tweed suit, except for coat.

“The police got the coat?” Doc asked.

“Nah, Jake brought it along,” the attendant said. He added, “The city don't always like to pay for new suits to bury 'em in. It's in here.” He eyed Doc suspiciously. “But maybe I hadn't oughta show it to you.” They conferred about this, and a five-dollar bill changed hands, after which Doc saw the coat.

The pockets of the coat, he noted, had not been turned inside out. He asked for some paper and envelopes, and emptied the contents of each coat pocket, every flake of lint and dust, carefully on the paper, a different sheet of paper for each pocket.

Before he had finished, he was sure the wadded sheet from the magazine had been in one of the pockets of the tweed coat. He spread the wadded magazine page out and examined the lint which its folds had collected in being shoved into the pocket and taken out, comparing that lint with the pocket lint. He decided he didn't need a microscope.

He sealed lint from each pocket in a separate envelope, labeled the envelope, and said, “Here, write your name across the flap,” to the attendant, who did so, not very willingly.

“Got a telephone?”

“Uh-huh. In there.” The attendant pointed with his pen.

Doc looked up and called the number of the CAA weather station at the airport, asked of the hearty voice that answered, “How soon is this stuff going to clear up?”

“About an hour, I’d guess,” the weather station operator said. “Kirksville and Columbia report no precipitation, ceiling’s four thousand or so in the last sequence. You want temperature and dew points? I can give them in a minute.”

“You think we’ll be up to instrument weather here in an hour?”

“Better than that. It’ll probably be contact.”

“Good enough,” Doc said. His flake-gold eyes were bright with excitement.

He called the hospital, to be informed by a disgruntled voice that Miss Patricia Savage had left the hospital in the company of Monk Mayfair nearly an hour previously.

He hung up, the excitement in his eyes having taken on a hard, apprehensive character.

DEPUTY SHERIFF WALTER WEEM took a cigar out of his mouth to gesture and say, as he stepped backward with the opening door, “I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you.” The deputy didn’t look as seedy nor as tired as when Doc had last seen him. He was wearing a flashy yellow necktie without any trace of egg on it. He explained sheepishly, “I took a shower and shave while I was waiting, and borrowed one of tweed-suit’s neckties.” He fingered the necktie, added, “I guess he won’t mind. Where’s your homely pal?”

“I left Monk at the hospital with Pat, but they’ve left.” Doc glanced at Ham, and asked, “Have they called in?”

Ham was sprawled in a chair, feet on a table, using a thumb to keep down the receiver hook of a telephone he was holding against his chest. His head shake was quick, anxious. “Neither Monk nor Pat have called.”

The hardness and apprehension in Doc’s eyes became more hard, more apprehensive. He did not speak for a moment, then said, “What have you found out about the owners of those securities?”

“They’re genuine.”

“You connect the dead man, Larson, with them?”

“You bet I did.” Ham picked up some notes. “Ted Joseph Larson was the owner, and apparently was about the whole owner of Larson and Powell, a stock brokerage concern in New York.”

“Powell!” Doc said sharply. “Didn’t you—”

Miss Erickson interrupted, “Oh, we thought of that.” She occupied a chair near the door and seemed at ease, relaxed, no more than idly concerned about goings-on. But, as in the case of almost everything about her, there was one thing that contrasted sharply. This time, her air of relaxed ease was contrasted by the completely tight, strained grip one hand was taking upon the chair arm.

She added, “The trouble is, we couldn’t get any description of Powel.”

Ham nodded. "Except that he's an elderly man. I found out that much."

"Exactly what kind of business did the firm do?" Doc demanded.

"They were investment managers, more than straight brokers, from what I've learned." Ham consulted the sheet of notes again. "I got hold of a friend of mine, Dan Arnold, and he said the firm of Larson and Powell was more than ten years old, and at one time, before the war, had a subsidiary called Domestic & Foreign, which did business abroad, but that folded up when the war came. No scandal. They just had no business, so they ceased doing business, and what they had was turned over to Larson and Powell."

Doc considered this information. "Investment managers," he said thoughtfully.

"That's one name for a service similar to investment trust management," Ham explained. "Since taxes have become so tough, and the ways of avoiding them so complicated, some firms have made a business of specializing in handling a client's investments so as to save them as much in the way of taxation as possible. There are other aspects, too, particularly on foreign securities. With the world situation what it's been, it takes a specialist to know what's what, and one of those chaps, if he's good, frequently can move fast and save a client plenty."

Deputy Weem parted his lips and emitted a puff of cigar smoke like a cannon.

"At least," he said, "we can see how this guy might have a million and a half dollars worth of securities lying around."

Chapter XII

PRESENTLY DEPUTY SHERIFF WALTER WEEM added, "But damned if I understand it!" He did not seem to be suffering at all from his wound. "Could you give me an example?" he asked Ham.

"Example of what?" Ham was puzzled, and apparently didn't like the deputy too well. He seemed to dislike the deputy most when the latter smiled at Miss Erickson, which he did at every opportunity.

"Hell, this investment managing thing," said the Deputy.

"Well, say you had an estate of a hundred thousand dollars and twenty thousand in insurance payable in monthly payments to your dependents," Ham said. "And a will making your wife, say, executrix. Sounds all right, doesn't it? But here is what would happen: on the wife's death the estate would again go through probate administration and be subject to inheritance taxes. A good investment manager might do something like this: put the estate in trust for the wife and provide the trust be continued after death for the benefit of the children. That would keep the estate from going through two probate court administrations and twice being subject to inheritance taxes. And if the estate was in property, it would be advisable for the owner to establish a tax gain or loss at certain times, and that's a job for good counsel."

"For God's sake!" said the deputy. "You make me glad I ain't got no money."

"Do you understand it?"

"No, and I don't want to." The deputy batted ash off his cigar. "Tell Mr. Savage what you found out about the owners of this stock and bonds, Bendannus and Kovi."

Ham said, "Bendannus lives in Detroit, I understand. And Kovi in St. Louis. I got that information from

the company that issued the stock and bonds, not from Larson and Powell. I called Kovi in St. Louis, and he had a foreign-sounding voice, and, when I mentioned Larson and Powell to him, he became nasty and hung up. I think he was scared. I've got a call in for Bendannus now and—”

“Cancel the Bendannus call,” Doc interrupted.

Ham looked startled, but lifted the phone, jiggled the hook, said, “Operator, this is Ham Brooks at Chariton 3400. Cancel my Bendannus call to Detroit. . . . Yes, cancel it.” He hung up and stared at Doc. He was uneasy. “Did I do something wrong?” he wanted to know.

“No, you were on the right trail,” Doc said. “But it won't be necessary now . . . I think I've sketched in enough of this thing to get the whole picture.”

Ham said he was frankly damned if he saw any picture.

“Get hold of the FBI,” Doc said, “and have them put agents on both Kovi and Bendannus.”

Ham was startled. “Arrest them, you mean?”

“Just prepare to do so. Have the FBI put them under surveillance so they can pick them up after the thing cracks open.”

Ham said, “I still don't get it.” He lifted the telephone again.

WHILE Ham was calling the St. Louis office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Doc Savage looked thoughtfully at Miss Erickson. She returned his gaze with relaxed ease, but her right hand, resting on her knee, had a tight bite of dress material. The hand looked tense enough to be paralyzed. But otherwise she was completely calm, seemingly undisturbed. Doc said to her, “Are you feeling any better?”

“I'm all right,” she said. “I feel about like anyone would feel after seeing a friend killed in cold blood.”

Deputy Weem took a stance, cleared his throat, squared his shoulders, and said, “Don't you worry, we'll get the lad who killed Larson.” He indicated Doc, added, “I have a lot of faith in Mr. Savage, here.”

Miss Erickson didn't have so much faith in Doc.

“I can't see that you're accomplishing much,” she said.

“I wouldn't say that,” the deputy told her. “Of course, if you mean that I'm not doing much myself, you might be right.”

“Just what *are* you doing?” Miss Erickson demanded sharply.

“I'm giving Mr. Savage a clear field, for one thing,” the deputy said. He didn't seem to be ashamed of his lack of action and ideas. “When I think of something, I'll do it. The trouble is, I ain't thinking of hardly nothing.”

Deputy Weem was, Doc Savage observed, again acting the part of a knot-headed hick. Doc suspected this was the deputy's manner when he was most satisfied with the way things were going. The deputy probably had Missouri mule traders for ancestors, these fellows being a breed who usually seemed most dumb and gullible when they were trimming a victim in a trading deal.

“Doc asked, “Like to hear a reconstruction?””

“What's a reconstruction?” asked the Deputy innocently.

“In this case, I mean a theoretical picture of what happened, put together with what clues we have,” Doc explained.

“Say, now, that'd be fine,” the deputy said. “I'm sure confused.”

Ham finished telephoning, wheeled, and said he wasn't exactly in the light of day, either. “I think I've got a suspicion of what the motivation is, though.”

“What?” the deputy blurted.

Ham hesitated. “I'd rather not commit myself until I can prove it. I could be wrong.”

“Let's put it this way temporarily,” Doc said. “Let's say that there's an international racket operating, a very profitable one, dealing in immense sums of money, millions perhaps. Let's also say that the headquarters is here in Kerrville.”

“For Lord's sake! Why would anybody pick Kerrville as headquarters for that kind of thing?” the deputy exclaimed.

“Why not? It's situated on a trans-continental airway, has quick rail connections to either coast. But, more important, the U. S. Government isn't looking for such things in towns like Kerrville.”

“You don't wanta say just what the racket is?”

“Not just yet. Not until we can prove it.”

“Ummmm. What can you say?”

“I think I can reconstruct most of the rest of the picture,” Doc said.

Miss Erickson examined Doc with lazy interest. “I'd love to hear it,” she said. Her tone, in contrast with her relaxed, serious manner, was almost playful. The effect was that she didn't believe any of this.

“First, let's see what the situation was before I got that phone call from Powell,” Doc said. “I imagine it was something like this: the racket had been very profitable, very successful. But some members of the gang—I'm not sure how many, but let's say four—decided to crowd the others out of the trough. Four rebels. They were Powell himself, the bow-legged man, the cleft-lipped man and the man who was murdered in the plane.”

The Deputy had forgotten to act dumb. His eyes were bright and intelligent, his cigar stuck up at a surprised angle.

“These four,” Doc said, “were found out by the others. And the others must have decided to punish them, probably by throwing them out without a penny. And so the rebels, for revenge, decided to sic me on their late partners. That was why Powell called me. To sic me on his late associates.”

“I don't see where you're getting this international pipedream,” interrupted Miss Erickson.

“Out of thin air,” Doc admitted. “But let's continue. Here is what could have, and I think did, happen at the airport last night. Powell was going to meet me there and sic me on his late partners, probably with some cock and bull story. But his former associates had found it out. So they sent a man to the airport to stop it. The man they sent—he was the man in the tweed suit, Larson—found one of Powell's gang, one of the rebels, waiting in the plane. Powell's man selected that particular plane because it was Monk's

plane, and he knew Monk was one of my assistants. Monk would be recognizable anywhere. Quite probably they had learned Monk and Ham had checked in at the hotel. But they hadn't spotted me, because I was playing the part of a bum. They didn't even realize I was at the airport. Anyway, Powell's man waited in the plane, and one of his ex-partners found him there—the tweed-suited man, Larson, as I said—and so Larson killed the fellow. It was plain murder. The man had doublecrossed Larson, so Larson killed him.”

Deputy Weem batted both eyes rapidly, said, “I wish we had some proof.”

Doc Savage spread the envelopes out on a table, and added the crumpled magazine page. He explained that the envelopes contained scrapings from the dead man's tweed coat pockets, and that the magazine page, torn from the magazine Pat had had in her hands when she left the hangar, had been found near the hangar.

Deputy Weem was pleased. “That's good circumstantial stuff,” he said.

“To continue the reconstruction,” Doc said. “Larson killed the man in the plane with an axe, a fire axe from the hangar. Pat arrived a moment later. Larson hid. Pat saw the man in the plane finish dying, picked up the magazine—Pat saw it was open to a black spot ad—and left the hangar. Larson, excited—it might have been his first murder—fixed the wire and tripped Pat, then hit her over the head. I think he intended to kill her, perhaps thought he had. He tore the ad out of the magazine and threw it away. Then he fled, and turned up later at the hotel.”

Ham, listening tensely, swallowed and accidentally made a croaking noise. He looked surprised. “But who got Pat and why?”

“Powell ordered the kidnapping of Pat from the airport, I believe,” Doc explained. “They might have thought Pat knew who had killed their pal and wanted to find out so they could revenge it. They may have had some wild scheme to kill Pat and throw the blame on their former partners. . . . At any rate, it didn't work, because we chased them, and one of them, the one with the cleft lip, was shot to death by the deputy, here. And a very good piece of work that was.”

Deputy Weem winced. “If he wasn't the murderer, maybe it wasn't so good.”

“I don't think you need feel sorry for the fellow. His partner, the bow-legged man, went to the hotel and killed Larson. That might have been on Powell's orders, but it was probably revenge for Larson killing the bow-legged man's friend in the plane, and, indirectly, getting the cleft-lip killed by stirring up the mess that resulted in his death.”

“Say, this sounds pretty good,” the deputy said. “But can you reconstruct it any farther?”

Miss Erickson said, “Who's kidding who?”

They gazed at her in amazement.

She had a small revolver in her hand. It was pointing at each of them, directly so they could look down the stubby barrel, in turn.

She said bitterly, “If this is a reconstruction, I'll take vanilla. Who told you, Mr. Savage? Powell? Have you got Powell?”

Doc watched the gun, wondered where it had come from, said nothing.

“Deputy Weem,” said Miss Erickson. “I'd hate to shoot you in that fine, foxy head, and it won't be

necessary if you unload your firearms very carefully.”

The deputy looked hurt. “Now?”

“Right now.”

VERY carefully, using only his fingertips, Deputy Sheriff Weem unloaded guns—not one, three—from his person. On instructions, he tossed them out of the window which he opened, also on instructions.

“This is embarrassin’,” he complained.

Ham, when ordered to do so in the same fashion, disarmed himself. He had only one weapon, an overgrown pistol affair, a machine pistol, which had been in an underarm holster, surprisingly inconspicuous for so large a gun. He was perspiring. So was the deputy.

Miss Erickson examined Doc Savage. “I understand you never carry a gun.”

Doc said nothing.

Swift, lithe, Miss Erickson came to her feet. But even in that movement, there was one small thing that was different, in this case a lagging, half a stumbling, by one foot. She seemed, as she had always seemed to Doc Savage, a terrifically efficient young woman who in each ability, each efficiency, was just a bit awry. It was not that she lacked perfection. The unbalance was never a lacking. It was childish to think of the way she had moved with lithe activity in every way except for a stumble as indicative of the thing that he had noticed most strongly about her. The stumble was not a weakness, nor a clumsiness. It was as if one part of her, her foot, had reacted normally to the situation; that the foot alone had rebelled, while the rest of her was under trained control.

She stood in front of the door.

She said, “Mr. Savage, you have had me, for the last four hours, scared worse than I have ever been scared in my life. I owe you something for it.”

“You held up very well,” Doc said dryly.

“I owe you something,” she said. “Here it is: do you know where your friend Monk Mayfair, and your cousin, Patricia Savage, are? Where they are right now? I’ll tell you. They’re in the hands of friends of mine and they are going to get their throats cut if anything happens to me.”

She opened the door, made sure it could be locked with a key from the outside—the occupants of the room could be locked in by anyone in the hall who had a key—and shifted the key to the outside. She stepped out, closed the door, locked it. She made no noise on the hall carpet going away.

Chapter XIII

THE door, of metal, was solid against their shoulders when they slammed into it. Doc said, “Back door,” and Ham nodded, ran for the rear of the apartment. Twice Doc and the deputy hit the door, then the deputy turned pale, sagged back in a chair, and said, “Cripes, I forgot I was shot.” He sat there looking terribly frightened, worried about wherever he was hurting. Ham came back, said, “She locked the back door earlier. I remember seeing her do it, and not thinking anything about it.” In a considerable rage, he seized the heaviest chair in the apartment and attacked the door.

Doc Savage had looked out of the different windows, deciding he did not care to jump from any of them. Nor was there an accessible fire escape, the building being of fireproof construction, evidently.

“She's gonna get away,” the Deputy said sickly. He added bitterly, “Can you beat that! A lovely little girl like that, right under our noses, a snake in the grass!”

Doc said, “Ham, did she use the telephone?”

“When?”

“Any time since you've been with her.”

Ham was again picking up the heavy chair, which had made no impression on the door when he hit it. He became rigid, eyeing Doc, and said, “Telephone call? Yes. Yes, she made one. Her landlady. Said the landlady would worry about her not showing up.”

“You hear her call?”

“I heard her part of it. She talked to her land—” Ham's expression became strained.

Doc said, “Better trace the call, eh?”

Ham went to the telephone. He looked like a man who had found a wormhole in the uneaten part of an apple and is wondering where the worm is.

Out in the hall someone, evidently another tenant yelled, “Cut out that racket!”

“Call the building superintendent,” the Deputy shouted. “This is Deputy Sheriff Weem. Tell the super to bring a key to this door.”

“Who ya ribbin'?” the voice demanded skeptically.

Deputy Weem made his feelings clear on himself and the tenant and the state of the nation, and the tenant went away quietly for the building superintendent.

PRESENTLY, a short, pale, puzzled man unlocked the door, but Doc Savage seemed in no hurry. To the deputy's impatient demand, weren't they going to chase Miss Erickson, Doc shook his head and said it would probably do no good. “She has several minutes start. But you might, when Ham gets through with the phone, start the city police and state patrol hunting for her.”

The deputy said he would do that, and could you beat it, a classy babe like that turning out to be a crook. He said it was enough to make a man want to go to Tibet and become a Lama. he said, “Weren't you surprised?”

“No,” Doc said.

The deputy's jaw fell, permitting his cigar to drop, but he caught it expertly. “The hell you weren't!”

“She was waiting on the mezzanine of the hotel with a magazine open at a black spot advertisement, and she tried to take a shot at the bow-legged man,” Doc said. “So she couldn't be innocent.”

“Gun! Shot!” The deputy burned himself with the cigar. He cursed. “You didn't say anything about a gun before.”

“I didn't want you to lock her up,” Doc said.

The deputy sheriff gazed at the ceiling, and his lips moved as if he was praying, but he was swearing terrible oaths, executing them only with his thoughts and his lips.

“I wanted to let her run loose and watch her,” Doc said. “I thought she might lead us to something.”

“Hell, she has!” said the deputy. “Hell, she's led us into an embarrassing situation.” He groaned, added, “The sheriff, if he don't die before he finds this out, is gonna fire me.”

Ham put down the telephone sheepishly. He said, “I got hold of the landlady she called—I mean, I found out where the phone is.”

“Who was the landlady?” Doc asked.

“A pay telephone booth in the railway station,” Ham said violently. “She foxed us proper!”

Deputy Sheriff Walter Weem was on the telephone talking unpleasantly to some member of the city police department, giving Miss Erickson's description, and saying, “She was in on the gunplay at the hotel last night, and she's one of the murderers.” The Deputy finished, hung up and asked Doc, “Is she one of the murderers? I laid that on a little thick to shake the lead out of their pants.”

“We'll have to see how it shapes up,” Doc said. “But you needn't feel so low about it. I think we about have it in the bag.”

“Bag!” The deputy snorted. “You mean we're in the bag, don't—” He paused, and his expression brightened. “Say, you mean you got an idea?”

“I hope it's an idea. If you want to go along—”

“Why wouldn't I? Let's start.”

“That bullet hole—”

“Nothing will cure this bullet hole in me quicker than to get a few pairs of handcuffs on some people,” the deputy said violently.

Outside, it was a clear, bright midday, biting cold. The sleet had stopped. The clouds had gone. Doc Savage frowned at the cold, glass-clear sky and became worried. He drove the deputy's old car, and sent it over the ice-coated pavements faster than the deputy seemed to consider safe.

THE CAA Weather Station was across the airport from the line-shack and hangars. Not quite a quarter of a mile separated the structures. A driveway of gravel, which now looked like ice marbles, turned off and led the short distance from the road to the bungalow-like Weather Station building. The ice made this drive difficult to negotiate, but Doc managed it by using care.

“We can drive across the field directly, instead of around by the road when the blow-off comes,” Doc Savage volunteered. “Let's go in where it's warm.”

Their faces grew numb the moment they were out in the cold. Ham Brooks endeavored to breathe in as little of the cold air as he could, and then only through his nose, because taking it in his mouth made his teeth hurt.

It was cozy and warm inside the Weather Station, but there was a startling amount of noise from a gadget keying out A and N beam signals, teletypes clicking off weather sequences, and three loudspeakers monitoring the 3105-, 6210-, and 4495-kilocycle radio bands. A tall man sat in the middle of the bedlam, pulling cockleburrs out of a bird dog's liver and cream colored hair.

The man said, "Hello, Walt," to the deputy, who told Doc and Ham, "This is Pete."

"We want to wait in here where it's warm," Doc told Pete. "And we want some information. Have there been any arrivals since the weather cleared?"

"Joe Traller came in in a T-Craft from Moberly," Pete said.

"Who's Joe Traller?"

"Got a tire shop in town."

"He wouldn't be our man," Doc decided. "Any radio contacts with ships coming in?"

Pete went over and looked, and while he was looking, a radio speaker said, "Kerrville radio from Airco 97300, over Chariton at 3000 landing Kerrville." Pete picked up the microphone and gave the pilot who had called in the wind direction and velocity, said the weather was contact, and to use runway thirty-six.

"Maybe that's your man," Pete said to the deputy when he finished the radio contact.

The deputy eyed Doc Savage. "What about it?"

"Could be," Doc agreed.

They stood at the windows, warmed by a radiator, and watched the sky, the runways, the buildings across the field.

Doc said, "In case you are puzzled, I think this is what has happened and is about to happen. Someone is coming in by plane bringing some of the stuff this gang has been dealing in. I think this messenger was expected last night, but the weather kept him out. I think he will come in as soon as the weather clears, and this may be our man coming now."

Amazed, the deputy asked, "How did you dope that out?"

"Why would Powell pick the airport for a meeting with me?"

"I wondered why, to tell the truth," Deputy Weem admitted. "There's better places. Certainly less conspicuous places. You figure he did it so you'd be here to see this messenger arrive?"

"Yes."

"You must know more than I do," Weem complained. "What you say, you make logical, but damned if I see how you reach the conclusions in the first place. What makes you think there is any messenger—"

"Here that plane comes!" Ham exclaimed.

Low-winged, fast, sleek, a single motored job that glistened like a dagger in the cold sunlight, the plane came sliding down in the landing pattern.

"We'll try to get there about the time he climbs out," Doc said. "If we can grab the fellow, and if he is carrying what I think he is, we can probably wind the thing up in a hurry."

The plane came in, flaps down, and made a careful landing on the ice-covered runway, used quite a bit of distance for the runout, skidded and veered rather wildly as the pilot applied brakes on the ice surface. After that, the plane had some difficulty turning on the ice, finally gunning around, moving toward the line-shack. Drance, the manager, was out in front of the gas pit making come-on gestures. As the plane approached him, he began walking backward, both hands held in front of him, beckoning.

“All right,” Doc said. With Ham and Deputy Weem, he hurried out to their car.

ICE, sleet ice on the grass, ice on the runway when they crossed it, made a crackling louder than the sound of the car engine. Doc, driving, said, “We’ll stop directly in front of the plane to block a getaway.” He watched the plane intently. It was at a standstill now, the door was open, the pilot was getting out. He had a rather large and fat-looking briefcase.

Doc, unsure about the amount of skidding they would do, kicked in the clutch and began working with the brakes; the car slid, turned half around, straightened out, slid again.

Drance, the airport manager, was staring at them in astonishment.

Doc said, “Be careful. There may be shooting.”

The pilot, who was the only occupant of the plane, stepped out on the wing walkway. He stood looking at the oncoming car.

In the door of the line-shack, Mr. Ivey appeared. He was on crutches, which he used inexpertly, clumsily, with infinite care on the ice. He maneuvered himself a few feet outside the door, stood watching. The old watchman half-raised one crutch, either to wave at someone, or merely waggle the crutch in excitement.

A gun went off somewhere nearby. It made a surprisingly loud report in the cold, crisp air. The man who had just arrived by plane gave a violent jump, then fell down, one knee going off the plane wing walkway. His document case skittered down the wing, fell to the concrete ramp, and skidded several yards over the ice.

The pilot of the plane drew a revolver, looked around for whoever had shot him, couldn't locate the individual, and aimed at Mr. Ivey, who hadn't fired the shot. His gun let out a loud report, and Mr. Ivey's crutches flew out from under him. He fell down and floundered around on the ice-covered ground, making sheep noises.

Doc wrestled with the car. It got out of control, the ice slicker than he had supposed, and, turning half around, smashed into the plane.

The shock dislodged the man on the wing—he had freed his knee from the hole it had made in wing and fabric—and he slid off and landed heavily on the icy ramp. He began cursing, and thereafter cursed with a steady intensity. He put two bullets through Doc's car, the slugs hitting nothing but car metal and upholstery.

The car containing Doc Savage, Ham and Deputy Weem was still turning, although it had hit the plane, and now it came to a stop lodged partially under the nose of the ship, one prop blade jammed down through the top like a great sword blade.

When they tried to open the doors and get out, they found the doors were cramped and would not open.

The plane arrival was now crawling. His hands, feet, made scratching sounds on the ice because of the intense effort he was putting forth. He reached the document case, which was the size of a small, flat suitcase, and took it with him.

Mr. Ivey, the watchman, trying to crawl to cover, still made lamb-like bleatings. He apparently had not been hit by the bullet which had been fired at him. He tried hard to get back into the line-shack, but got nowhere.

Doc began breaking glass out of one of the car windows.

The man from the plane, fierce, agile, reached Mr. Ivey. He seized Mr. Ivey around the neck, under the chin from behind, with the arm carrying the briefcase. He jammed his gun into Mr. Ivey's back with the other hand. He said something that no one but Mr. Ivey seemed to hear. Whatever it was, it induced the fullest, most horrified cooperation in Mr. Ivey.

Around a hangar, a car came. There were chains on all four tires, and it came without much skidding. In it were two men and a young woman. One of the men, driving, put his head out and yelled at the man who had come in the plane.

“Come on, Nick,” he shouted. “Let's go. Bring the old bat!”

The man from the plane climbed in the car, taking Mr. Ivey with him.

The car began moving.

The young woman sprang out of the machine. The car slowed; one of the men shouted angrily. The young woman did not look back. She was running for a hangar. One of the men fired at her, but missed. The car containing Mr. Ivey, the plane arrival, the two men, skidded around a hangar and lined out for the airport lane and the highway beyond.

The young woman turned and ran toward Doc Savage's party. She did quite a lot of slipping about on the ice. She was Miss Erickson.

“If your car won't run, you'd better get one that will, without fooling around,” she said.

Chapter XIV

THEY did some shoving and grunting and slipping, and suddenly their car skidded free of its lodgement against the plane. Drance, the airport manager, came sliding toward them yelling, “What'n hell's going on?” They ignored him, piled into the car, and the tires made buzz-saw noises against the ice. To save time, and shorten the distance somewhat, Doc headed back across the field, the way they had come. By making a wide circle, he managed to get lined up so that they simply vaulted the retaining concrete curb of the gravel drive of the Weather Station, and shot out onto the highway at something over fifty miles an hour.

The deputy said, “Oh, my God!” several times, and, terrified by Doc's driving, looked at the floor. The railroad crossing threw them into the air, and Miss Erickson said, “Go south.”

“South?” Doc eyed her. “The other car went north.”

“Go south,” she said. “About a mile, then there's a gravel road—gravel and dirt—leading toward the river.”

Without raising his eyes, the deputy said, "She's right."

"Right about what?"

"The road. Damned if I know what else she could be right about."

Doc, in the space of a few seconds, thought intensely about the chances that Miss Erickson could be trusted, weighing these against the chances that she could not, that she might be sacrificing herself to throw them off a trail. The thing that decided him, the item that tilted the balance in Miss Erickson's favor, was actually nothing that had happened, no incident that had occurred, but was rather a sum of the things he had observed about Miss Erickson's character. She was, as he had felt from the beginning, rather extraordinary. There had been, as he had noticed, a facet to her character that was quite unusual—the fact that she did not seem to conform completely to any one pattern. In almost everything, he had noticed, she conformed completely to a pattern, except for one exception. This non-conformity—crack, fissure, in her appearance, habits, thinking—had been evident almost everywhere. She would conform completely to a certain line, in thought, appearance, or action, and then suddenly there would be one thing at complete variance with the pattern. He decided to follow her advice.

The car, wheels alternately brake-locked, then free, skidded, rocked, whined on the ice; at the intersection of airport road and highway, it did a complete turn-and-a-half and stopped in the middle of the pavement. He got headed south, gathered speed again. Deputy Weem was now hiding his eyes.

Ham asked the deputy, "What's the matter?"

"Hell, such driving!" the deputy groaned.

"After what you did to us last night, you could say that?" Ham said bitterly.

HALF a mile south there was, as Miss Erickson had said, a side road leading off to the west. Doc turned into it. "This the one?"

"It leads to the river, about a quarter of a mile from the cabin," she said. "But you had better not waste any time. By going north, the way is longer, but the road is better. You won't have much of a margin, if you have any at all."

Doc said, "I'll do what I can. You talk."

She looked at him. She glanced away. She seemed less worried than any of them by the dangers of driving at unsafe speed over an ice-coated road. She was, he saw—the glances he dared take at her were brief—tense and rather pale, grimly concerned.

She said, "You don't seem too surprised."

"By what?"

"By me—by what I did."

"Not very," he said.

"Mind telling me why?"

"I'd rather hear you tell us some truth."

“There's plenty of time,” she said. “It's about twelve miles. Didn't I surprise you? I really expected to.”

There was a long hill, and he drove more cautiously. The road had a high crown, the gravel glistened with ice, the weeds along the grader banks were stiff with ice, and everything glittered in the sunlight. He said—thoughtfully, because he was really surprised at himself—“I am no judge of the female character, understand that. But this once, about you, I seemed to have a feeling. I kept having this feeling, but a lot of common sense kept telling me it wasn't a reasonable feeling to have. You're pretty unscrupulous, aren't you?”

“Unscrupulous? A crook, you mean? That's true. For several years, I have been quite crooked.”

“Yes, I could see that, and what I couldn't see, I could surmise,” he said slowly. He turned the wheels suddenly in the direction of a skid to catch the skid and straighten out the car. “I felt, though, that somewhere along the line there would be a completely different facet to you.”

She grimaced. “You read me pretty well.”

“No, you happen to be different from most people. With the kind of a difference that I could read.”

“Oh.”

He asked, “What did you balk at—the killing?”

She shuddered violently. She didn't say anything. The car climbed a long hill.

The deputy had taken his eyes off the floor, glanced at the road, at the speedometer, and shivered. He turned to Miss Erickson with: “Lady, I wish you would unravel this for me. I am a confused old man, and I don't like it.”

“Take the left turn where the road forks ahead,” said Miss Erickson.

Doc asked, “Where are Monk and Pat?”

“At the fishing camp on the river,” Miss Erickson said. “That's where we're going.” She looked at Deputy Weem. “I'll unravel it,” she said.

But she didn't seem to know where to begin, or was having trouble loosening words, until Doc Savage asked, “How much of a total in United States securities owned by enemy individuals and companies have you managed to handle?”

“More than you would think,” she said. “What would you say if I told you the figure was close to half a billion? Well, it is.”

“Say, what are you talking about?” Deputy Weem demanded. He was startled.

“Don't you read the newspapers?” Miss Erickson asked. “Haven't you read all those stories about the seizure of enemy holdings following the end of the war, the breaking up of German corporations and cartels, for instance, the seizing of Japanese holdings? Those things weren't just stories in the newspapers. They weren't just strings of figures like the daily cost of the war and things like that. People—wealthy Germans, French collaborators, and collaborators in Italy, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and rich Japanese—were actually having that money taken away from them.”

Doc said sharply, “All of which was right and just. Those people caused the war, and in most cases the wealth was war loot, directly or indirectly. Those people have to be shorn of their ugly power.”

Miss Erickson didn't say anything for a while. Then she said, "I said I was unscrupulous, didn't I?"

"Dammit, don't start beating around the bush again!" the deputy yelled. "What's behind this? What's the treasure?"

Doc said, "Miss Erickson and her gang were taking enemy-owned securities and concealing the fact that they were foreign-owned from the United States Government." He glanced at the young woman. "That right?"

"That's right."

"How'd you do it?" the deputy wanted to know.

"That would take hours," Miss Erickson said. "It's technical, and the methods were different. You see, I was a security analyst before the war, and got caught in Paris when France fell. I made my contacts then, and we were working it before the war was a year old. We worked through fronts in Switzerland and Portugal. I contacted Larson. We got a gang together. Larson and Powell did the finer part of the work. They got access to corporation records, and any other records that were necessary, and made forgeries. It was careful work, and cost us big bribes at times, but it paid well. We charged fees ranging from twenty to fifty percent."

The deputy scratched his head.

Doc said, "She forged the necessary records here in the United States to make it seem the securities were never foreign-owned."

"Oh!" The deputy blinked understandingly. "What about Bendannus and Kovi, the guys who owned them stocks and bonds we found in Powell's apartment?"

"They're front men," said Miss Erickson, "for a French collaborationist named Novest, who is now in hiding in Spain. Bendannus and Kovi are acting as trustees holding the French quisling's securities for him. They will—or would have—turned the securities back to him later, when it was safe."

The deputy was satisfied that he understood.

"Who murdered who and why, that's what I want to know," he said.

THE road was now climbing and descending small hills and snaking cautiously around or along the sides of larger ones, and there were red oak and elm trees growing close to the road and everywhere over the hills. The car took a run at a long hill and made it, although the rear end did some sliding back and forth near the top.

"Powell, the bow-legged man, the cleft-lipped man and the man who was murdered in the plane became greedy," Miss Erickson said. "They decided to doublecross the rest of us—I think they intended to kill some or all of us. We found it out. We naturally took measures to defend ourselves. Our first move was to threaten them. They retaliated by sending for Doc Savage."

Doc said, "So I guessed right."

"If it was guessing, it was plenty good."

"It was."

“Well, Powell was to meet you at the airport last night,” Miss Erickson said. “You had that right, too. One of my—my group went to the airport to stop it, and murdered the man in the plane, and tried to murder Pat when she stumbled on the scene. Then Powell’s two friends kidnapped Pat—to kill her, I think, and lay the blame on us. You broke that up. My—Larson—was killed by the bow-legged man. Larson had come to meet me. I had already arranged for two of my—my friends—to kidnap some of you, either Monk or Ham or Pat. It turned out they got Monk and Pat, as they left the hospital.”

“Why?” Doc demanded.

“Why were Monk and Pat taken? To force you to release any of us you happened to catch.”

“Monk and Pat haven’t been harmed.”

She shuddered. “I—I don’t know.” She took her lower lip with her teeth. “Before God, I wish I did know. The killing, none of it, was my idea.”

Doc asked, “Was the black spot, or black circle, business a password?”

“Yes. It meant danger, be careful. We had used it a long time.”

Ham said, “It sure meant the right thing last night.”

“Who,” demanded Deputy Weem, “was that guy who came in the airplane a while ago?”

Doc said dryly, “Mr. Ivey’s nephew.”

“Huh?”

“He’s our messenger, who brings securities from abroad,” Miss Erickson explained. “He has around five million dollars in stock certificates in that briefcase, or is supposed to. He—” She stopped and pointed. “The river,” she said.

Then, a moment later, pointing, she added, “There’s the camp.”

“Yeah, and there’s our pals from the airport,” said Deputy Weem.

Ham, suddenly realizing he wasn’t armed, yelled in horror, “I haven’t got a gun. Has anybody got one?”

The deputy pulled up his right trouser leg. He wore heavy, tall woolen socks, boot socks, and in the top of the right sock was thrust a small two-barreled derringer. “I got this,” he said. “The trouble is, it won’t shoot straighter than you can throw a rock.”

THE road they were following dropped straight west down a steep hill to a strip of flat bottomland, heavily tree-grown, not more than a hundred yards in width. The road went almost straight across this to the camp, which consisted of a single long slattern of a building cocked on the high river bank. A second road, a better one, coming sedately down the bottomland from the north, joined the first at the cabin.

Along this second road, visible through the sleet-whitened trees, like a black bug crawling under lace, was the car that had left the airport ahead of them.

“Get to the camp ahead of them!” Miss Erickson wailed. “If you don’t . . . The man guarding Monk and Pat doesn’t know I . . . Oh, hurry! Get there first, and I’ll have Monk and Pat turned loose.” She said more, but it was excited and hardly understandable.

Doc, treading the accelerator, trying to sense the treachery of the ice-coated road before there was any possibility of sensing it, sent the car downward.

Ham said, "They see us!"

The other car was gathering speed. It would, Doc saw, be close; either a dead heat, or so near one that the difference would not matter. He decided to let the other car get there first, then crash it.

Suddenly, from twigs, branches, in many places in the trees between themselves and the other car, ice particles jumped and glittered in the sunlight. An instant later, the cold bright air vibrated from a fusillade of three shots, cascaded with echoes. None of the bullets seemed to come particularly close.

The other car was gaining.

Doc said, "Get set. I'll let them come in first, then hit them."

Deputy Weem croaked, "My car!"

"This old heap!" Ham sneered.

The deputy was insulted. "This is the best hot-rod job in the state! I spend half my time working over . . ." He stopped, and what stopped him was the unmistakable sound of a bullet hitting the car somewhere. After that, he forgot the car, gripped his tiny double-barreled derringer, muttered, "I hope this pea-shooter ain't froze up. The shells I got for it is kinda old."

A good hundred feet ahead of them, the other car swung up to the house, skidded, turned completely around, got to a stop. A hundred feet, but not too much of a lead. Doc hardly slackened speed.

He said, "Get the doors open, so they won't jam this time!"

Men were alighting from the other car, but they seemed to do it in slow motion, and only two of them were out when the crash came. The crash was not slow motion. It was a concentrated earthquake. Every door of their car flew as widely open as it would go. And they hit whatever was in front of them in the car.

The other machine gave a jump and a skip, slammed into the side of the camp cabin. The cabin promptly fell off the blocks which supported it about two feet off the ground. The blocks only partially upset at the far end, giving it a crazy twisted attitude.

Ice, broken loose on the roof by the shock, came trickling off the roof, bushel after bushel of it.

THE car-crash-house-crash sound went away to the bluffs and, in the interval before it echoed back like cannon-fire, a man began screaming in pain. He was in the car. Another man, pinned between car and house, leaned as far back as he could, mouth widely open, as widely open as he could get it, but no sound came out. He made gestures with both hands as if practicing swimming. His leg had been crushed between house and car. Only two men had gotten out of the car. One of them had a red necktie. The other was the plane arrival, who still had his briefcase.

Doc rolled out of the deputy's car. He was dazed, but did not realize he was until he discovered he was holding the wheel of the deputy's car with both hands. It had snapped off, somehow, at the juncture with the steering column.

Ham yelled, "Watch that red tie!"

The red-tied man had stopped to aim at them. Deputy Walter Weem raised an arm. His derringer was so small that fire and noise from it seemed to come only out of his fist. The red-neck-tied man fell down, and red fluid almost the exact color of his tie came out of his ear and quickly stained his cheek, nose, eyes, chin and the ice under his face.

Doc said, "Don't kill anyone!"

Deputy Weem said, "Hell, I shot at his leg!"

He aimed again. Fire, noise left his fist. The man with the briefcase folded headlong, and slid for fifteen or so feet, using the briefcase as a sled.

Doc reached the camp shack door. He kicked it hard, dodged to one side as it flew open. He waited. There was no sound, no movement from the cabin. Doc called, "Monk!"

Monk's voice, relieved, pleased, yelled, "What's goin' on out there?"

"Is it safe to come in?"

"Sure."

"What happened to the man guarding you? There was supposed to be one."

"He's in here, but he don't care," Monk said.

Doc went in. The place was one large room, cookstove and table and shelves at one end, bunks at the other. Patricia Savage and Monk were tied to two of seven chairs, and to the left, below a window that faced the bluff-like hills, a man lay dead from a hole in the bridge of his nose that a bullet had made. He was the guard.

"What happened to him?" Doc demanded.

"A bullet came in the window and hit him," Monk explained.

"When?"

"Fifteen minutes ago," Monk said. "I think it was that bow-legged guy." He bowed his neck stiffly toward the table. "There's a butcher knife over there, if you'll cut us loose." A moment later, when he was freed of the ropes that held him to the chair, he fell stiffly over on to the floor. He was too stiff to move.

Pat was in a little better shape. She had not, apparently, been tied as tight. She gasped, "Be careful of that sniper. He may still be—"

Gun-sound, from some distance away, followed close on the heels of a bullet that smacked into the shack wall. The bow-legged man had entered the proceedings.

Doc, flat on the floor, working his way to the door, called, "Be careful! There's one of them on the hill."

And Deputy Walter Weem said, "You're telling me."

The deputy had reloaded his little double-barreled gun, and, first squatting, then standing erect, placing his arms in different positions, was trying to aim the stubby gun at someone on the hill. He said, horrified,

“This damned thing ain't got no sights!” Then he fired. The little gun made an astonishing noise. On the slope of the hill, fully a hundred and fifty yards away, a man—the bow-legged man—fell out from behind a tree. He fell stiffly, unbending, the way a post would fall.

“Well for Cripe's sake,” the amazed deputy said. “I didn't think it would shoot that far!”

Ham Brooks, in the act of turning over the man who had fallen on the briefcase, suddenly pounced on the man, and there was a brief violent struggle which ended when Doc Savage stepped on the wrist with which the man was drawing a gun. Ham struck the fellow twice, quite hard.

Doc said, “You had better stay close to Miss Erickson. She may take a dislike for our company!”

Deputy Weem was running toward the bow-legged man on the hill, who wasn't moving, and who wouldn't move again.

Ham joined Miss Erickson at the car, and both of them looked into the smashed machine at Mr. Ivey, who was groaning.

“The old watchman's alive,” Ham called. “What'll we do with him?”

“Bring him inside.” Doc picked up the briefcase with one hand, seized the man who had been carrying it with the other hand, gripping the fellow by one wrist and, dragging the man, carrying the briefcase, made his way to the door and inside the shack.

Pat, who had tried to walk to the door, and fallen because of stiffened muscles, asked, “Is it all over?”

“The noisy part of it probably is,” Doc said. He dropped the unconscious man, and put the briefcase on the table and opened it. He dumped out the contents.

MONK, looking at the pile of securities now on the table, said, “Whoeeee! Are those genuine?” His eyes protruded.

Miss Erickson appeared in the door. She stood there, erect, completely calm, except for a starkness about her mouth that was the one contrast to her composure. Doc Savage, watching her, said nothing, and she did not speak, but presently she moved slowly to the table. She looked at, but did not touch, the securities.

She said, “I suppose I'll have to stand trial.”

He nodded. “That's right. The only thing is, it probably won't be a murder charge. Where's Ham?”

“Taking care of the old man. They'll be inside in a minute.” She had not taken her eyes from the bundles of stock certificates and bonds. “These belong to a quisling Dutchman named Oonstruck. Hans I. Oonstruck. I can tell you where he's living, and what name he's living under. . . .”

Doc said, “You could tell us about others besides Oonstruck.”

“I suppose I could,” she said slowly.

“Will you?”

She shrugged. “What have I to lose?”

When her composure snapped, a moment later, he was not, somehow, surprised. It was in keeping with her makeup, that there had to be some crack somewhere in the otherwise solid certainty of whatever she did. This time the crack was in her composure, and she was suddenly in tears, so violently in tears that Pat went to her, touched her with hands and words, comfortingly.

The tears, Doc reflected, were entirely real and of genuine remorse, and, in view of the strange lack of complete conformity in everything about Miss Erickson, whether it was mood, appearance, behavior, speech, he would have been shocked if she had reacted in any other way. He felt, he supposed, sorry for her. Yet what she had been doing, and what her associates had been doing, was contemptible. The prosecution, at her trial, would probably try to give it the complexion of treason, but it wasn't that quite. It was just unethical, and a little nasty, and it had turned into murder and violence and treachery. He felt, he realized, quite sorry for Miss Erickson.

Deputy Weem put his head in the door. "That bow-legged guy's dead as a door nail."

His head disappeared. A moment later, he and Ham appeared again at the door. They were trying to help Mr. Ivey, the nightwatchman, inside the shack.

"This poor old guy," Ham said, "is all bunged up and—"

Doc yelled, "Watch him! Look out!" He pitched forward frantically. Mr. Ivey, moving with intent and desperation, had dived both hands into Deputy Weem's coat pocket. It must have been the pocket into which the deputy had dropped his remarkable little two-barreled gun because, presently, after Mr. Ivey's hands were in the pocket, the whole bottom was blown out of the pocket, together with a portion of the deputy's trouser leg. Doc, reaching the group, pinned Mr. Ivey's hands, got them out of what was left of the pocket, got the little gun out of them. The little old man made hissing, spitting noises, his face bone-colored with fear and rage.

"Why'd he do that?" the deputy yelled excitedly.

Doc pinned Mr. Ivey against the wall.

"You remember a fellow named Powell who called us into this thing? Mr. Ivey is Powell."

In a voice low, bitter and terrified Mr. Ivey told them what he thought they were. He did not use profanity, only nice words that he made sound like snakes crawling.

THE END

Next month—look out for pink whales and bloody murder! It began with a soft, greasy voice on a telephone, and went on with poisoned aspirin tablets for the wrong headache. Doc Savage and his pals walk into a strange trail of sinister goings-on when they run across the man who had pastel whales for a hobby . . . and there's more than the usual quota of chills and thrills. The new Doc Savage novel is called **COLORS FOR MURDER**, and it's yours next month in the June issue . . . on sale April 26. So look for your copy before your dealer's supply is all sold out.