



THE EVIL GNOME

A Doc Savage Adventure By Kenneth Robeson

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*Scanned and Proofed
by Tom Stephens*

Chapter I. THE HOT-COLD DAY

LION ELLISON got into a mess in a very simple way. The whole thing was quite innocent on her part. For all that Lion did was look for a job.

To begin with, Lion was almost broke, and she figured that practically nobody could be needing a job worse at the moment.

Secondly, Lion was a female animal trainer, so jobs in her line were scarce, the circus business having stayed in the dumps in which it had fallen. Lion was very good at her trade, but there just weren't any jobs. Cats were her specialty. She could handle any kind of cat. Burly roaring lions and striped spitting fiends of tigers got on stools when she pointed her finger at them.

If you have any idea that a female wild-animal tamer must be a lady devil minus horns and entirely without the usual equipment of heart and soul and likes and dislikes—and nerves—which other people have, you had better get rid of the idea. They're not like that, particularly Lion Ellison.

Nor do they have to look like young witches. They can be entrancing creatures as was Lion Ellison, although admittedly not all of them are. Like a mountain flower in June. Like a strain of lilting music at

dusk. Also a little like the excited scream of herald trumpets just before something great is to happen. All of that was Lion Ellison. She was a small thing. Audiences loved her, and so did circus people—and so had the head gaffer of the last show that Lion worked. The head gaffer had given her a kiss, minus permission, so immediately they had quite a clem. A clem is a fight. It was out back of the crumb castle, which is the cookhouse. The head gaffer got a black eye. Lion got the sack, for the head gaffer happened to own a good part of that particular mud-opera.

All of which explained why Lion happened to be getting off a train in Kirksville, Missouri, and looking ruefully into her purse which she found, as she had expected, contained only six dollars and some odd cents.

"Well, it can't get much worse," Lion said grimly.

This thought was an error.

Lion checked her suitcase, then walked uptown. The circus was in town. She could see that. The tack-spitters—bill-posters, called tack-spitters from their habit of spitting tacks on a magnetic hammer—had done a good job of plastering the town.

Suddenly she heard martial music and knew the parade was coming. She crowded to the curb to watch, and being a seasoned showman, she cast a speculative eye over the crowd. She could tell from the interest shown by the gillies and thistle-chins—circus lingo for the local inhabitants—that this was a good show town, and no boomer stand.

The parade came. She watched. First marched the windjammers, the band, in sartorial glory and melodic uproar. Then the bulls, the elephants. And all the gaudy rest of it. The convicts, or zebras. The big turkeys—ostriches. Two hogs—hippos—in a cage. A cage of old folks—monkeys. And another cage of zekes—hyenas, also called gravediggers. They were all there, all the great stupendous and unsurpassed wonders and marvels of the civilized and uncivilized world that make up the stock in trade of a fairly good circus. All thundered past in spectacle and glory, spangles and silks not very noticeably frayed.

Lion breathed rapidly and was as excited as a little girl seeing her first parade, only with a feeling that was deeper. It was marvelous. Her eyes were moist. She hadn't realized how she had been missing it all.

She went to see about the job.

The advertisement had appeared in a newspaper and Lion had clipped it; she now carried it with her. She just about had it memorized:

ANIMAL TRAINER—Girl, experienced finker, no First of May, handle babies, stripes, all cats. Top pay. Apply Room 12, Voyagers Hotel, Kirksville, Missouri.

Lion Ellison considered that a divine providence had directed this advertisement specifically at her, because she was an experienced finker, which meant a circus performer, so certainly she was no First of May, which meant a newcomer to the profession. She could handle babies, which were pumas; stripes, which were tigers, and any other big cat. She also could use some of that top pay.

The Voyagers Hotel was a rather nice-looking hostelry. Room 12 proved to be on the second floor. Lion knocked.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed.

The little old man who had opened the door must have been exclaimed at a great deal by persons who were seeing him for the first time, because he smiled.

"I got used to startling people a long time ago." He stepped back. "Won't you come in?"

"I'm sorry," Lion said.

He reminded Lion of one of the "old folks"—the monkeys. He had never been very tall, and age or something had shriveled him about as much as a man could be shriveled. On second glance, Lion decided it was not age that had shrunk him. He probably was no more than forty. But he was like something out of a funny paper or a fairy tale.

He wore a tight skullcap that might have belonged to a necromancer, and a flowing robe of dark-blue velvet that might have been a bathrobe or a lounging robe, yet did not quite look like either of these. Yes, decidedly like something out of a funny paper or a fairy tale. Unusual. Something like a gnome.

Lion pulled out the ad. "I'm Lion Ellison," she said, "and I've come about this job." She took a deep breath and smiled and began selling herself. "My father and mother were circus, and so were my brother and myself, all our lives," she explained. "I've worked with cats for several years, and I lost my last job when we had a strike and the owner of the show got ugly and closed everything down and took it to winter quarters. Here are some of the cat acts I have worked—"

"Never mind," said the wizened man who looked so much like a gnome.

Lion felt a wrenching inside her. She had the sickening thought that maybe the job had been filled.

"But—" Her words stuck.

"There's no job."

Lion felt hopelessness creeping.

"There never was a job," the shriveled little man continued. "Never a job. You see, this was all a scheme. Something I tried. I wanted to get hold of you, but I didn't know your address, and so—"

Lion blinked. "Do I get this right? You put that advertisement in the paper in order to get in touch with *me*?"

"

That's exactly right."

"Hm-m-m."

"It worked, you see."

"But wouldn't it have been simpler to advertise for me by name? The way it was, you just advertised for a woman animal trainer."

The little old man smiled and shook his head. And Lion, watching him, was suddenly conscious of a strange feeling about him. She didn't exactly dislike him. But he was so strange, and he looked so unusual, and even his voice was a little weird. Creeps. That was it. He gave her the creeps.

Then Lion got a heart-tightening shock.

"It's something your brother wanted me to do," the wizened man said.

TO understand just why Lion Ellison was so heavily shocked, you have to know about her brother, Ned. Neddy Ellison was his name, and he had always been a prissy kind with milk for a brain and nothing

much for a backbone. Not at all like Lion, who had sparks and electricity for a brain, and steel for a backbone. One was strong, the other weak. So it had not been good for Neddy Ellison to grow up around a circus.

There are two sides to circus business, one of them good and the other not so nice. There are the legitimate animal and aërialist acts, the things that the crowds come to see, which are good; on the other hand, there are the grifters, the lucky boys and their cappers who go after the strawberry shortcake, as the easy money is called. The right side and the wrong side of circus business. A man with a weak character sometimes has difficulty distinguishing the right from the wrong in everyday life, and in the bizarre existence of a circus where life is distorted, the distinguishing of right from wrong becomes doubly difficult.

Not that Lion believed her brother had been an outright crook. But she had always been afraid for him.

But two weeks ago, her brother had died. She hadn't been notified. She'd only seen the newspaper stories. They must not have been able to find her address, or something.

Killed when his parachute failed to open, the news items had said. It seemed that Neddy Ellison had been making jumps for a group of planes and pilots who were accompanying a circus to do skywriting and advertising, and entertain with jumps and stunts. That Neddy Ellison had nerve enough to be a 'chute jumper hadn't surprised Lion; there had never been anything wrong with the nerve of any of the circus Ellisons. His parachute hadn't opened. The headline said:

CIRCUS STUNTER KILLED

Lion stared at the little old man.

"You . . . you knew my brother?" she breathed.

He did not answer; he only stared at her, and there was something—it might have been in his eyes and it might not—that made a coldness go up and down Lion's back. His eyes were strangely piercing, she noted.

After moments passed and he had not spoken, Lion said, "Say, what is this, anyway?"

There was a slight movement at his mouth, a twist that was sly and quizzical, and he walked to the dresser—it was an ordinary hotel room with bed and dresser and rug and telephone stand and two chairs—and brought back a bundle. The package might have been a laundry bundle containing half a dozen shirts. It was tied with stout brown paper.

"Yours," the man said. "He wanted you to have it."

Lion put the bundle on the bed and untied the string and opened the paper.

"Oh!" she said, and her heart came up in her throat. These were her brother's personal belongings, the little intimate things which he had always prized. Lion saw neckties, a scarf, cuff links, watch chain that she had given him. She was shocked, and found herself biting her lips to keep the tears back.

With shaking fingers, she picked up a letter which she had noticed. It bore her name, but the envelope was not stamped. She took out the contents, found herself staring at what was obviously an unfinished letter:

Dear Sis:

If this letter seems incoherent, it is because I'm rapidly going mad. For hours and hours, I've been almost frantic. And now, finally, a solution has come. I have thought of a man who can solve this. The only man in the world, probably, who has ability to handle the matter.

You remember the man whom you once told me you wished I resembled?

As soon as you get this letter, I want you to take it to him.

I'm going to write you the whole story. It is an incredible, horrible story. It isn't even earthly. Nothing in the Arabian Nights or any fairy story ever equaled—

It was her brother's handwriting. She was sure of that.

Unexpectedly, Lion jumped. The wizened man had touched her shoulder. "I am sorry," he said. "I must go."

Lion shook her head. "I fail to understand this."

"It is perfectly simple." The little man seemed somewhat impatient. "Those are your brother's belongings. He wanted you to have them."

"But why should you go to all that trouble to see that I got them?"

The other shrugged and glanced toward the door urgently. "I'm sorry. I must be going."

Lion decided she had changed her mind about this shriveled little ogre. She didn't like him. Furthermore, she had a feeling that if she was around him much longer, he would terrify her. She didn't like people who scared her. Suddenly she was angry at him, and she stood up.

"Now wait a minute!" she said sharply. "There's something wrong about this!"

The little old man looked at Lion, then did a strange thing. He began to laugh, and his laughing was not loud but ugly and cackling like the vocal efforts of a hyena. Involuntarily, without knowing exactly why, Lion shivered. The little man backed to the door, opened it, stepped out into the hall and closed the door.

When Lion looked out into the hall—an unpleasant kind of fascination had held her rooted in the room for a second or two—she saw no trace of the fellow. She failed to understand how he had vanished so quickly.

Lion walked out on the street carrying the bundle under her arm. It was warm. Two planes were circling in the hot sunlight several thousand feet above her head, skywriting an advertisement for the circus. She walked slowly, enmeshed in her thoughts.

She could not get rid of a feeling of ghostly unreality about her whole meeting with the wizened man, and the sensation puzzled her. She did not have a temperament inclined to become jittery without cause. She could walk past a graveyard at night and probably experience fewer qualms than the average. Yet there had been something about this meeting, a masked quality she could not define. She shivered. Creeps. It had given her the creeps.

Then Lion Ellison crossed the street. It was a warm summer day when she started across the street, but when she got to the other side she found that it had suddenly become a cold day.

Chapter II. DID I KILL?

IT happened so suddenly, and it was so unexpected, that the real significance did not dawn upon her instantly. She made an instinctive gesture to draw her coat to her throat and hunch her shoulders against the chill wind. Then she came to a wrenching stop.

Cold? But it had been warm, almost hot, a moment before!

The impossibility of it made her start to give a nervous, self-conscious laugh, but the laugh didn't quite jell. She did the natural thing, glanced at the heavens to see if a storm was blowing up. There were a few clouds, cold and gray-looking.

Lion made a grim mouth and got in front of the first pedestrian who approached. A man.

"Pardon me," she said, "but is it cold?"

"Huh?" He stared.

"I . . . er . . . just wanted to know," Lion explained.

"Do you feel sick or something?" He frowned at her. "Or is this a new kind of pickup? If it is, I don't mind telling you that I'm a deacon in my church, and not interested—"

"If you can't answer a civil question," Lion said, "would you mind just walking on?"

The pedestrian scowled, didn't know what to do.

"This is the coldest day we've had recently!" he snapped at last, and walked on with dignity.

Lion stared after him. She decided it would make her feel better if she could laugh lightly, and she did so. It didn't help much.

Nor did it help her frame of mind when it gradually dawned on her that she was ravishingly hungry. Strange. She had consumed a late and hearty breakfast, and she had no business being hungry at this time of day, and certainly not *this* hungry. She felt practically famished.

There was a drugstore nearby, and on the window a sign said, *Try Our Jumbo Sandwiches*. The combination was too much for Lion. She entered, selected a deserted booth at the back, and ordered.

She did some thinking. The bundle which contained her brother's belongings—she still had that. She placed it on the booth seat beside her. She put her purse on the table. It was a black patent-leather purse, a large one; she had learned to like large purses, for with a circus you were always traveling and you needed a place for knickknacks.

She examined her clothing. She was dressed exactly the same. Nothing seemed changed. The whole thing must be an acrobatic of her imagination. Possibly she had been worked up over finding there was no job, and receiving her brother's belongings, so that she hadn't noticed it was cold until she started across the street. And yet she distinctly remembered that it had been hot.

Deciding to repair her make-up, she opened her purse, and thus found the knife.

THE knife was such an ugly thing that she jerked her fingers back involuntarily. It had a long blade, double-edged and concave ground like a straight razor, and the hilt was very plain. A knife made for nasty work. Nor did the dry stains, dull-red in color, on blade and hilt, do anything to improve the aspect of the thing.

Lion snapped her purse shut hastily and sat there. Her fingers took a drinking straw and crushed it and

tore it. For now she was suddenly and unaccountably scared.

She knew—it was more than a vague feeling now—that all was not right. She did not know what it was, but something uncanny and not immediately understandable had occurred. A frosty sort of fright began creeping through her.

"Waiter," she said, "will you get me a late newspaper?"

When the paper came, she stared at it unbelievably, finally exclaimed, "But this is impossible!"

"Eh?" The clerk was puzzled.

"Thursday—this says today is Thursday." Lion shook her head. "Isn't this Monday?"

"Thursday," the clerk corrected, and walked away.

Having bought the paper on a hunch, Lion realized that she had discovered her worst fears more than justified. Something extraordinary assuredly had happened. Her sandwich came, and in spite of the turmoil of surprise in her mind, she seized the sandwich and began wolfing it. That was another thing—being so hungry.

It was all so uncanny that Lion felt like steadying her mind by reading about wars and football games and such civilized things. She glanced over the headlines, noted among other items that the wars were still going full blast in Europe and a new neutrality debate had started in the Senate.

The principal news story on the front page was one about a murder: Lion first started to skip this because she was feminine enough to care less about a murder than a story concerning a fashion trend. But the headlines gripped her.

The governor of the State had been murdered.

The murder of a governor was sensational enough to arouse her interest. There was a huge picture on the front page; because such was her habit, Lion read the cutlines below before she looked at the picture. The cutlines said:

**ACTUAL PHOTOGRAPH OF
MURDERESS IN ACT**

This photograph of the murder of the governor was taken by Dan Meek, 902 First Street, a candid-camera fan who happened to be passing the governor's office at the time. The photo, probably one of the most remarkable ever snapped, shows every detail of the crime during commission. The murderess is plainly recognizable, and the knife she used can be identified. The knife has not been found.

Immediately above the picture was a caption in heavy type which said:

**TWO THOUSAND DOLLARS
REWARD FOR THIS GIRL KILLER!**

But Lion paid no attention to the reward offer. She was staring at the murderess in the picture. The murderess was herself.

IT was not easy to comprehend; in fact, she did not realize the truth at first. Not until she held the newspaper up beside the mirror that was built into the end of the booth and compared her reflected

likeness with the printed one. The same. Even the frock. Hat. Shoes. Handbag. The things she wore now were identical with those in the picture.

Lion stared at the knife, then with horror tightening every fiber of her body, she snapped open her purse and compared the ugly blade therein with the depicted murder weapon. Identical.

It was very quiet in the drugstore. There were no other customers, and only two clerks were on duty, both of these standing together at the cigar counter, bending over a picture magazine. The fountain compressor motor ran, making a low whine.

Lion shuddered, closed her purse wildly. She had to make a great effort to read the murder story in the newspaper.

The printed items were lengthy, but Lion discovered they were composed mostly of a synopsis of the governor's rather spectacular career as the State's chief executive, and as a brilliant prosecuting attorney who had sent many noted criminals to prison. The truth seemed to be that little was known of the actual murder.

No one had seen the murderess enter or leave the governor's chambers. "It might well have been a ghost murder," said one portion of the story, "had it not been for the stroke of luck which brought candid photo fan Dan Meek, of 902 First Street, to the scene with his ever-ready camera." The article stated that the camera bug, Dan Meek, had made an ineffectual effort to pursue and capture the murderess, but she had escaped through a door, which she had locked.

Police had found fingerprints of the murderess on the governor's desk and on the door through which the candid cameraman had chased her. The fingerprints were reproduced on an inside page of the newspaper.

Lion pressed her fingers on the glass top of the booth table and compared the prints with those in the paper. She was no fingerprint expert, but they looked identical to her.

"I'm an accused murderess!" she thought wildly.

While she was thinking this, a policeman came into the drugstore. Obviously, he was looking for her.

Chapter III. DESPERATE WINGS EAST

THE instant she saw the policeman, Lion *knew* he had come for her, but afterward she wondered if it couldn't have been a bit of clairvoyance of her over-stimulated imagination. The officer might have strolled in for a soft drink or cigarettes.

The drugstore had a back door, close at hand. Lion stood up. She had the presence of mind to behave as casually as she could, to walk slowly, until she reached the door. She was perfectly sure she was going to escape—the lights were turned off in the back of the store and it was gloomy.

Because the officer noticed her instantly, Lion knew he had come in looking for her.

"Hey, you!" he shouted.

Lion put her chin out, glued elbows to her sides, and began making speed. She hit the door, sloped through, flipped the panel shut behind her. She had no plan. Just to run.

The door opened onto a side street. No one was in sight. Lion kept going. The package of her brother's belongings handicapped her somewhat, but she decided not to drop it. An alley appeared. She veered

into that.

But the cop had seen her. His excited yell came down the street, a gobbling noise. Gun sound and bullet report followed almost instantly. The lead struck something and climbed away up to the sky, screaming.

Lion's feet made a hard grinding on the alley concrete. There were no windows, only a few doors, all the latter closed. Far ahead, almost at the end of the block, a truck stood.

It was a small truck with a van body bearing the name of an electrical concern. Lion dived behind the wheel. Thank God, they had left the key. She threw the switch, stamped starter and accelerator. Lead came through, making splinters in the back and leaving a round hole and a jagged crack in the windshield.

The motor caught, gears gnashed steel teeth, and the truck went out of the alley with about the same commotion as a scared hog.

THE town had a population of around ten thousand, so Lion was not long reaching the outskirts. Luck led her onto an almost deserted road. She saw a pond, a grove of trees, and driving the truck into the trees, she left the machine.

She moved about, watching, for a time and decided that no one had noticed her. On second thought, she investigated the rear of the electric company's delivery truck. There were tools, coils of wire, lengths of conduit, an old radio. There was also a long white coat, doubtless worn by the electrical service man to protect his clothing. It bore the company's name. Lion put it on—wrong side out, so that the name did not show. She left her chic hat in the truck, convinced that her rather luxuriant brown hair would be less conspicuous. That hat had stood out plainly in the murder photograph. Then she left.

The act of walking did something for which she was grateful. It cleared her mind, enabled her to get a better grasp of the situation.

Seeing the problem clearly did not make it sensible. She was wanted by the police for murder. The killing of a man of whom she had hardly heard, and certainly never met. Fantastic was a mild word for such a thing.

There was one thought she tried to keep away. When it first flashed into her mind, it was sickening enough to bring her up short.

Was it possible that during some kind of a mental lapse, she had actually committed the murder? Was she a murderer?

Most imperative of all, what could she do? How could she help herself?

An idea hit her, so she glanced about to make sure no one was in sight, then climbed through a barbed-wire fence into some brush where she was hidden from view. She opened the bundle of her brother's effects, went through the stuff, but found nothing that could be construed to explain anything. She ended the inspection with her brother's unfinished letter in her hand. Her eyes ranged the missive. And suddenly one sentence jumped out at her:

You remember the man whom you once told me you wished I resembled?

The reference, Lion realized, would have been meaningless to anyone but her self. In fact, the reference was obviously to a long-past quarrel with her brother, during which she had explained in rather plain language just the kind of a person she had hoped he would be. She remembered the quarrel distinctly. It had come out of a clear sky while they were discussing an article they had been reading about a man named Doc Savage, a rather spectacular individual who, according to the magazine article, made a

profession of aiding the oppressed, righting wrongs and punishing evil-doers.

"Sounds to me like everybody was playing this Doc Savage for a sucker," Neddy Ellison had said contemptuously. "The smart guys in this world are the guys who see that they get theirs."

The remark had enraged Lion. She'd been worried about Neddy at the time; he'd been talking too much about easy money. So they had quarreled, and Lion had finally voiced the angry wish that Neddy had a few of the qualities of Doc Savage.

Lion looked at the letter in her hand.

"I don't see anything," she remarked grimly, "to prevent me from finding out whether this Doc Savage is what they cracked him up to be."

LION left the brush patch and set out in search of a telephone to contact Doc Savage.

She might be taking a foolish trip. She wondered. Her circus upbringing had given her the direct opposite of a gullible nature, so she was not inclined to believe much that she read. Yet the magazine that had carried the article about Doc Savage had been a periodical of national circulation with a vaunted reputation for accuracy. The story about Doc Savage had read as though it were exaggerated, Lion recalled. The things printed about him had sounded suspiciously like the kind of ballyhoo they used around the circus.

It was a neighborhood grocery store, not too tidy and full of the usual smells. It was located near the State Teachers College, which was probably why it had a pay telephone. College students had written feminine names and telephone numbers on the wall around the instrument. Lion got her six dollars changed into quarters, dimes and nickels. When she took down the receiver, however, she smiled grimly.

To her complete astonishment, the operator eventually reported that the office of Doc Savage in New York would accept a collect call.

Lion came very close to the mouthpiece. "Put them on. . . . Is this Doc Savage?"

"No."

"Well, put him on," Lion requested.

"Not a chance," the voice informed her. "He's not in town."

Lion bit her lips, listened to the voice asking, "Is this something important?"

"It couldn't be much more important," Lion said grimly. "How will I get hold of this Doc Savage? Where can I find him?"

The distant listener did not seem much impressed by the imperativeness in her voice. He said, "As I see it, there are only two things you can do. You can wait and call again in the morning, or you can go ahead and tell me your troubles."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Monk," the voice explained. "The full name is Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair. I'm one of Doc Savage's five assistants."

Lion deliberated. This was a serious matter; it was no exaggeration to say that her life was at stake. It wasn't any kind of job for assistants to be handling; Lion wanted the main guy himself.

"When did you say Doc Savage would be back?" she asked.

"In the morning," Monk explained. "And there's absolutely no way of getting in touch with him until then."

"I'll try to tough it out," Lion said, and hung up.

LION ELLISON started to leave the grocery store, stopped just inside the door, watched a car of the State police cruise slowly by. The two officers in the machine were looking at everything very intently. "Hunting me," Lion thought, and shivered.

She was almost certain to be arrested—if she remained in Missouri.

It was a time for desperate measures.

Lion made a grim mouth. "I've got it!" she said suddenly.

It was late afternoon when Lion cautiously parted dry weeds at the edge of a cornfield and studied the airport. There were two planes standing on the field, one a large and fast craft, the other a slower two-place sport craft. Lion decided on the big plane; it exactly suited her needs, providing it was fueled.

There was a slight drawback to her plan in the shape of a car full of State troopers who were parked near the office.

Lion was thoughtful for a while, then she retreated. Twenty minutes later, she ran across a yard and entered a farmhouse. It was milking time; the farmer and his wife were out at the cow lot. Lion went to the telephone.

She called the airport and said, "I want to talk to the State troopers. . . . Hello, police? This is the girl you are hunting for the governor's murder. Do you want me to surrender? If so, will you come to a farmhouse five miles south of the airport and half a mile east of the highway?"

Lion slipped out of the farmhouse without being observed. She heard a motor roar, saw the patrol leave the airport in rocketing haste.

It was not much trouble for Lion to reach the large plane. She lost no time. A glance showed her that the craft must have been recently refueled; the tanks were full. She worked with the starter mechanism until the motor whooped into life.

Two men ran out of the office, yelled something she could not hear. She gunned the engine, sent a cloud of dust rolling over the men. Wheel brakes released, the ship sped across the field, making a drumming sound.

Lion had once been an aviation bug, and she'd had about fifty hours of solo. That was enough. She hauled back on the wheel, took the ship off. The craft was very fast; within a few seconds, the airport range station with its radio transmitter towers was below her.

There was haze, with visibility limited to about ten miles, so a very few minutes put her out of sight.

THE State police who had taken the wild-goose chase to an imaginary farmhouse were not pleased when they found out what had happened.

The story naturally came smoking out in the newspapers.

It must have been seven o'clock—the sun had been down less than an hour—when a wizened little man appeared at the local telegraph office. Sticking out of his pocket was the newspaper which contained the

story of Lion Ellison's escape by airplane. The item referred to Lion as "the unidentified murderess."

"I would like," he said prissily, "to receive a record of all telegrams sent this afternoon."

"I'm sorry," said the manager, "but the last time I heard, we weren't showing our sent messages without a court order."

"I would show them to me if I were you," said the shriveled man.

The manager had sized up his visitor and didn't like him. There was something spooky about the fellow. The impression was not one that could be easily defined, yet it was pronounced.

"Get a court order, buddy," the manager said. "Or else quit bothering me."

The shriveled man shrugged, but there was a slyly quizzical expression on his face, a look that was half gnome and half fox. He turned and walked out through the door.

The telegraph-office manager grinned in relief.

Then he all but screamed.

Because there, suddenly and inexplicably on the counter, directly under his nose, was a heap of telegrams which were marked as sent. The afternoon's business. A moment before the business had been in the cubbyhole under the counter, with some of the messages hanging on the spindle back at the operator's desk. Now the whole thing had appeared on the counter.

"Great snakes!" the manager gulped, and leaned weakly on the counter.

At this point, the operator came to the counter, walking angrily. He leveled an arm at the business scattered out on the counter.

"Who got them messages off my spindle?" he demanded. "Hell, they haven't all been sent! Can't you see they're not marked off?"

The manager swallowed twice, nervously loosened his necktie. "Did you see that queer-looking little man who was just in here?" he asked.

"Ain't paid to look at customers," said the exasperated operator.

"If I didn't know there wasn't such a thing," muttered the manager, "I'd say that shriveled guy was one."

"One what?"

"A he-witch, I would call it," said the manager grimly.

It was possibly thirty minutes later when the long-distance operator in the telephone office had a peculiar experience. She didn't realize just how peculiar the experience was, due to the fact that she had a heavy date for a dance after she got off work, and she was giving that some pleasant thought.

She missed her pad of toll tickets, the record of long-distance calls that had been made that day. "Now I'll catch it," she thought.

But she found the call slips lying on the edge of a desk nearby.

It was probably fortunate for the telephone operator's peace of mind that she did not try to figure out

how the slips got there. She presumed the chief operator or someone had picked them up and left them there.

A bit later, the wizened little old man sat on one of the benches on the courthouse lawn. His gnome-like vaguely-sinister visage was pensive. He muttered under his breath, like a witch making verbal mumbo-jumbo over an evil brew. He mumbled, "So she telephoned Doc Savage. That is too bad. There was no need of them both dying, but it will have to be. Too bad."

Chapter IV. THE TRAPPERS

LION ELLISON had never seen New York City before. She looked at the metropolis, all splendid in the morning sun, and thought, "My friend, you're lucky. Yes, you are." Which was a fact, because she was not in truth a very expert pilot, and she had flown twelve hundred miles or so from Missouri and hit New York City square on the nose, and she hadn't had a map.

She was wondering where to land. Locating an airport without a map would be a difficult proposition; anyway, she wasn't sure she wanted to set down on an airport—an alarm would doubtless have been broadcast for her and the plane she had purloined. She compromised by circling and flying away from the town and landing in a pasture. It wasn't as smooth a pasture as it had appeared from the air, and she left the plane standing on its nose with the undercarriage somewhat askew. She would have to pay for the damage somehow—another thorn in the brier patch.

The money she had left took her to New York, to Grand Central Station, which was the busiest spot she'd yet seen. Subways were mysteries to her; she promptly got lost in one. It was eleven o'clock before she arrived in front of the skyscraper which housed Doc Savage's headquarters.

She'd read about this particular building, so she'd been prepared to be awed. But not prepared quite sufficiently. It was exactly what they'd said it was. Stupendous. Eighty-six stories it towered, not counting the dirigible mooring mast that some dreamer architect had added to the top, and which had proved about as useful as a pair of tonsils.

She walked into the place and was awed by its modernistic magnitude. The size, if nothing else, made the lobby breath-taking. There was a phalanx of elevators.

Lion went to a uniformed elevator starter, asked, "Doc Savage's office?"

"Private lift in the rear," the starter said.

Lion moved toward the back of the lobby.

The elevator, she discovered, was an automatic one. There was no operator. There were merely two buttons, one labeled "Up," the other "Down." And a small plaque over the "Up" button said, "Clark Savage, Jr.," with modest letters. Lion shrugged and gave the button a poke.

The door shut silently and the cage raised upward so swiftly that Lion had to swallow and pump at her ears with her palms to equalize the pressure. Then the cage stopped. The door, however, did not open.

Lion jumped when a voice addressed her from overhead.

"If you will remove that knife from your purse," the voice said, "you will be admitted."

LION glanced upward, saw where the voice came from—there was a small loud-speaker, hitherto unnoticed, in the cage roof. But just how the unseen speaker had known there was a knife in her handbag was a dumfounding mystery.

"Who are you?" Lion asked uncertainly.

"Ham Brooks, an associate of Doc Savage," the voice said. "What about the knife?"

Lion said, "I'll put my purse on the floor."

She did so. At once the elevator doors opened and the young woman stepped out into a modestly decorated hallway, the walls of which were completely blank except for one door, a bronze-colored panel which was labeled, *Clark Savage, Jr.*, in plain letters.

There was another small door at the side of the elevator, and from this a man appeared. He was a lean, thin-waisted man with good shoulders, the wide mouth of an orator, and a high forehead.

Lion pointed at the elevator. "You got an X ray on that thing or something?" she demanded. "How did you know I had the knife?"

"X ray is right," Ham Brooks said.

"

What!"

Ham said, "We take a few precautions around this place." He studied her with growing approval and Lion began to get the impression that he was susceptible to feminine charms. "Something we can do for you?" he asked.

"Doc Savage," Lion said. "I want to see him."

Ham studied her, his intent eyes searching and weighing her. Then he walked into the elevator, picked up the handbag which contained the knife. "This way," he said.

They passed through the door with the unobtrusive lettering into what seemed to be a reception room furnished with a conventional array of comfortable leather chairs, a deep rug, and two unusual items—an enormous inlaid table that must be worth a small fortune, and a huge steel safe.

And a moment later, Lion was facing Doc Savage. She knew instantly that this man was Doc Savage. She knew, too, that the magazine article which she had read long ago had not exaggerated as much as she supposed.

The Man of Bronze, the article had called Doc Savage. It was appropriate. Tropical suns had given his skin a bronzed hue that time and civilization probably would never eradicate. There were other impressive things about him—his eyes, for instance. They were strange golden eyes, like pools of flake-gold always stirred by tiny winds. Powerful eyes, with something hypnotic about them.

Only when Doc Savage was close to her did Lion realize his size. He was a giant, but of such symmetrical muscularity that there was nothing abnormal about his appearance; one had to see him standing close to something to which his size could be compared to realize how big he was.

His voice was low, resonant, and gave an impression of controlled power. "You are the young woman who telephoned last night from Missouri."

Lion asked, "How did you know that?" in a startled voice.

The bronze man's flake-gold eyes and metallic features remained inscrutable. He did not explain that his aids had made a recording of her telephone calls—as indeed they recorded all calls to the

headquarters—and that he had recognized her voice. "Conjecture," he explained. "You made a fast trip to New York."

Lion said, "I stole a plane."

"We knew that."

Lion stared. "How?"

"Newspapers."

"Then I expect I had better be telling my story," Lion said grimly.

She proceeded to tell everything that had happened to her from the time she read the newspaper want ad for a woman animal trainer. She spoke haltingly at first, but more smoothly as she found her confidence in the big bronze man increasing.

Having finished, she looked levelly at Doc Savage.

"If I'm guilty of murdering the governor, I'll take my medicine," she said tensely. "I'm certain enough that I'm not guilty to take my chances. Will you help me?"

The bronze man nodded without delay. "We will," he said.

THE bronze man glanced at Ham, added, "We might listen to her story again, so that she can tell if she left anything out."

Ham nodded, and they passed through a room which seemed to be a library, containing a great array of ponderous-looking scientific tomes and entered a laboratory which Lion, although she was no scientist, could see was equipped with remarkable completeness.

From a complicated-looking contrivance, Ham removed what might have been a reel of steel wire. He placed this on another device, explaining, "Your conversation was picked up by concealed microphone and recorded on this wire with magnetism."

(Magnetic recording of speech upon hardened steel wire has long been feasible. There is a possibility that this will eventually replace the conventional form of recording by a needle digging a groove in wax.)

Lion bent and listened to the playback, somewhat self-conscious at first, giving more attention to her voice than to what she had said. But soon she realized the purpose of letting her listen to what she had said—she began to think of things that she had left out, small items for the most part.

When the playback finished, Ham said, "As a lawyer, I have frequently found this method of stimulating the memory to be valuable. Do you recall anything important that you left out?"

Lion considered. "I barely mentioned my brother," she said. "I . . . er . . . possibly should have given you more detail about his character."

"How do you mean?" Doc Savage asked quietly.

Lion had the courage to call a spade a spade, even if the matter was as intimate as a member of her family.

"Neddy," she said, "wasn't above becoming involved with crooks."

"You have any reason to believe he was a crook himself?"

The girl's chin went up. "I don't accuse my brother. He is dead. But he was—well, he was always fascinated by the easy money and the grifters who made it around the circus."

"He was traveling with a flying circus?"

Lion nodded. "And he was killed."

"His parachute failed to open."

"So the newspapers said," Lion admitted grimly. "I have no details. This happened only a few days ago. I wrote—I didn't have the money to go myself—for more information, but there had not been time for an answer."

Doc Savage was thoughtful, and Lion watched him. She was finding it easy to talk to him, discovering that his quiet manner made her feel better. The bronze man said, "Do you still have the package of your brother's belongings which the small, shriveled man gave you?"

"Here." Lion had retained the bundle in spite of all her troubles.

She opened it and they examined the contents.

DOC indicated the letter. "This his handwriting?"

"Absolutely." Lion made a hopeless gesture. "But what help is it? The letter doesn't tell anything, except that my brother had found out about something strange and incredible and horrible."

Doc Savage glanced at Ham Brooks, who had been sitting in on the conference, but saying nothing. Ham said, "Her brother found out something, was killed to silence him. And Miss Ellison, here was framed because it was feared her brother had told her what he had learned."

Ham was enthusiastic about his theory, plunged on. "You know what my guess would be? Just this: They killed her brother, then searched his belongings and found this unfinished letter. They figured maybe it was a false start he'd made on a letter which he'd finally written and sent to Miss Ellison. So—presto! They had to get rid of Lion—Miss Ellison. There you are—Motive and everything."

Lion shook her head grimly. "It isn't that simple. There's something eerie and fantastic about it. Something that—I don't know how to describe it—is ghostly and unearthly."

Ham smiled confidently, said, "Tush, tush. Your imagination, no doubt."

"Imagination—nothing!" Lion was irritated. "I tell you, that wizened little old man was like . . . like something ugly out of a fairy story. I don't think he's human."

Ham opened his mouth to answer, but the telephone rang. He picked up the instrument. "Yes. . . . You what? . . . Great mackerel! Hold the wire."

Ham then looked up and muttered, "Speaking of the devil—who do you think Monk just caught trying to make a sneak up here? No one else but our friend whom we were discussing—the mysterious runt."

Lion stared. "You mean—"

"None other. At least, the way Monk describes him, he's the shriveled little man who handed over your brother's belongings in Missouri."

"But how did he get *here*?" Lion ejaculated.

"That is what we will find out," Doc Savage said grimly. "Tell Monk to hold him."

Ham spoke into the telephone, looked up to say, "Monk says he's got him locked in a room."

Chapter V. THE MYSTERIOUS RUNT

MONK had caught the wizened, gnomelike little old man sneaking into the private garage which Doc Savage maintained in the skyscraper basement. From this garage, a private—it was secret, also—elevator led up to headquarters.

Monk had accosted the little man. The latter had instantly drawn a revolver, which Monk had taken away from him with great alacrity.

Monk grinned at his companion. "You figure we caught a crook?"

"Holy cow! Why else would he be sneaking in here?"

The speaker was a third member of Doc's squad of associates, Colonel John Renny Renwick. He had been with Monk when the capture was made.

Now Renny walked over to an instrument panel and made some adjustments with switches and knobs. The basement garage, like the entire skyscraper headquarters, was cobwebbed with burglar alarms; one of these alarms was responsible for their capture of the marauder.

Renny, in a rumbling voice that was like an agitated bear in a deep cave, said, "Now, listen. . . . Isn't that our new mascot doing some yelling?"

THEY had heaved the gnomelike prisoner into a tool room just off the garage. This room, about the size of a Pullman compartment, was windowless, made of concrete reinforced with steel. It was sometimes used as a vault.

The door was a great slab of the same kind of steel that goes into the construction of battleship gun turrets.

Monk opened the door. He jerked his head back, slammed the door.

"Little runt tried to knock my brains out with his shoes," he complained.

They put their ears to the door and listened. They could hear their prisoner making rather strange sounds.

Renny opened the door a crack. An unusual sight confronted them.

The wizened little man—he was as hideous as any frightening dwarf ever concocted by a movie director for a horror film—was standing in the middle of the room making gestures with his hands, sounds with his mouth. The hand motions were meaningless. Or were they? He seemed to be molding something in the air.

"Acts like an African witch doctor," Monk grunted.

The little man stopped and stared at them. His eyes had a blazing intensity.

He said, "You will release me at once!"

His demand was not loud, but it contained such firmness that Monk involuntarily stepped back, then caught himself and blocked the door. "No dice," Monk growled. "Doc is gonna be down here in a minute. He'll have a raft of questions."

"I will answer no questions!" snapped their remarkable captive.

"Did you ever see truth serum work?" Monk leered at him. "Doc has his private stock of the stuff."

The small man drew himself up. The intensity of his passionate rage was around him like heat. "You fools! Don't you realize that you are dealing with no mere man? That I am no ordinary mortal such as you?"

Monk and Renny discovered they were getting uncomfortable. They exchanged glances, suddenly stepped back, and slammed the steel door on their prisoner.

There was a small aperture in the door for ventilating purposes. The voice of their captive, rather muffled, came through this.

"I am going to demonstrate what I mean," the little man was telling them, "by disappearing from this room."

The room was in effect a vault. The threat of the little man was ridiculous. Both Monk and Renny suddenly began laughing.

Monk slammed home the big bar which secured the steel door on the outside.

"I'd like to see him disappear now," Monk said grimly.

DOC SAVAGE, Ham Brooks, and Lion Ellison arrived in the basement garage. The girl was excited, and Doc Savage outwardly emotionless. Ham was accompanied by Chemistry, his pet chimpanzee, which bore a startling resemblance to Monk. Ham had originally acquired the animal to aggravate Monk, had later become quite attached to the pet.

Doc asked, "Where is the prisoner?"

Monk pointed at the steel door. "In there."

"Well, trot him out," Ham said peevishly, "and we'll see who he is and what he wanted."

Monk unbarred the steel door, opened it and stepped inside. He popped out within a split second. Coffee cups would hardly have fitted over his eyes.

"

He done it!" Monk squalled.

Only Renny understood the exact significance of what Monk said. Renny roared, "Holy cow! He couldn't have!" and dived into the little room which had such solid walls of steel-reinforced concrete. The big-fisted engineer floundered around in the gloom. "Bring a flashlight," he yelled.

Ham walked into the cubicle, said, "Plenty of light comes in from the garage. There's nothing in here. Why all the fuss?"

"Nobody here—that's just it." Renny sounded as if he was about to strangle.

The significance of the thing dawned on Ham and the others. They stared incredulously. Ham demanded. "You mean to tell us you had the man locked in there? You're not kidding?"

Monk made gasping noises, finally managed, "I tell you the mysterious runt did just what he said he'd do—disappeared!"

Chapter VI. THE JAIL TRAIL

DOC SAVAGE owned a matter-of-fact temperament. He was not easily startled nor readily confused; he had trained himself to look deeply and with suspicion into anything that appeared supernatural, to search for an explanation. He took no stock in ghostly manifestations or magic in any form. Monk and Ham and Renny were almost as hard-headed in these matters as their bronze chief.

Monk and Renny finally got their astonishment sufficiently in hand to give a coherent explanation of what had occurred. The others listened.

Renny finished, "We caught him; we locked him in there; he said he was gonna vanish—and he did."

Monk scowled belligerently at Ham. "And don't try to tell me it didn't happen."

Lion Ellison now shook her head slowly. "There is something weird about that little man. I told you that."

"A man is a man." Monk muttered, "and one of them ain't much more weird than the next one."

Ham said, "Except that this one could vanish out of the equivalent of a bank vault."

Doc Savage moved away from the group. The bronze man had hardly spoken, and his apparent unconcern had caused Lion to glance at him once or twice. She seemed dubious about his ability; it didn't seem to her that he was even interested in the matter.

The young woman drew Ham aside and said in a low voice, "He doesn't seem very enthusiastic about this."

"Who, Doc?" Ham smiled wryly. "You don't know him yet. If you mean that he isn't excited—I don't believe I ever saw him really excited."

Without offering any explanation of what he was doing, Doc Savage left the garage. He evidently went up to the eighty-sixth floor laboratory, because he returned with a number of bottles, some empty and some containing chemicals, and an atomizer, litmus paper, and other devices which Lion didn't recognize. He entered the vaultlike room where the prisoner had staged his miracle. He squirted chemicals in the air with the atomizer, fooled around with the litmus paper, and in general—as far as Lion could see—accomplished nothing.

"It's got him fooled," she whispered to Ham.

Doc Savage's bronzed features were inscrutable, although his flake-gold eyes seemed more animated. "Probably we should go to Missouri," he said, "and pick up the mystery there."

Lion Ellison had discovered already that she was going to be somewhat puzzled by Doc Savage. She had expected something spectacular of the bronze man, and nothing of that nature had occurred. Or had it? His aids had captured the wizened little man, it was true.

Lion soon got a fresh dose of the awe which had overwhelmed her when she first arrived at the bronze man's headquarters. She began to realize that the establishment was more unusual than she had imagined. Doc Savage gave low-voiced orders; she overheard enough to know that he was directing the others to pack light equipment which could be carried by plane. So they were going to fly. She presumed they would take a taxi to an airport—but she got a surprise.

Because Doc Savage had enemies, and these occasionally watched the skyscraper exits and made trouble, he had arranged a unique and fast method of travel from the eighty-sixth floor establishment to the hangar where he kept his planes. This conveyance was a contraption which Monk called the "go-devil," and other things not so polite. Lion was introduced to the device. She found herself stepping into a cylindrical, bullet-shaped car which was padded, very crowded once all were inside, and which traveled in a shaftlike tube. Doc threw a lever. There was a roaring *whoosh!* and other phenomena.

In a circus where Lion once worked, there had been a gentleman who made his living by being shot out of a cannon into a net. He had tried to interest Lion in the projectile job, and she'd tried it out before hastily declining. Being shot out of that cannon was similar to what happened to them now.

Eventually, the bullet of a car stopped. They pulled themselves together and got out. They had gone a long distance through a tunnel.

Lion glanced about; her mouth and eyes became round with astonishment. She stood inside a vast building of brick-and-steel construction that looked strong enough for a fortress. There was an assortment of planes ranging from a huge streamlined thing that had speed in every line to a small bug of a ship that had no wings whatever, only windmill blades that probably whirled. All of the planes were amphibian, she noticed; they could operate from land or water. There were boats as well, lying in slips. She saw a small yacht; she stared in astonishment at a peculiar-looking submarine which was equipped with a protective framework of big steel sledlike runners. A submarine for going under the polar ice, she realized suddenly.

"Why—this is amazing!" she exclaimed.

"Doc's hangar and boathouse," Monk explained. "On the Hudson River water front. From the outside, looks like an ordinary brick warehouse."

Lion stared at Doc Savage. She had completely revised her opinion of the bronze man.

"All of this must cost a mint of money," she said. "Where does he get all of what it takes?"

Monk grinned. "Oh, he picks up a penny here and there."

"Maybe I'd better tell him I'm broke. I can't pay for all of this."

Monk smiled again. The source of Doc Savage's wealth was a mystery, the solution known only to the bronze man and his five associates. Doc Savage had a fabulous gold hoard deep in the unexplored mountains of a remote Central American republic—a vein of gold that was almost a mother lode, and watched over by descendants of the ancient civilization of Maya. On any seventh day, at high noon, Doc Savage had but to broadcast a few words in the Mayan tongue—a language which they had reason to believe no civilized person other than themselves understood—and the message would be picked up in the lost valley. Days later, a mule train loaded with gold would come out of the jungle. The source of wealth had come to Doc Savage as a result of an unusual adventure; the hoard was his to draw upon only as long as he used the wealth in his strange career of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers.

"All aboard," Renny called.

They used a plane of moderate size and great speed. It taxied out through the electrically opened doors of the big warehouse-hangar, bounced across Hudson River waves for a while, then took the air.

THEY had flown across most of Pennsylvania when Lion gave a violent start, sprang up, hurried forward and clutched Doc Savage's shoulder.

"They'll recognize me!" she gasped. "The police. That picture. I can't go back to Missouri."

The bronze man had been flying. He glanced at the instruments, noted the altitude was above eighteen thousand, then threw a lever which connected up the robot pilot. He slid out of the pilot's seat.

"We brought along a make-up kit to take care of that," he explained.

"Disguise me?"

"Yes."

Lion shook her head. "We used make-up around the circus, so I know something about it. I doubt if you can make a disguise effective."

"We can try," the bronze man said quietly.

Twenty minutes later, Lion examined herself thoroughly in the mirror. She saw a little old lady with grayish hair, pale-blue eyes that were rather staring, discolored teeth—and wrinkles. The gray hair was the result of dye; she had expected that. The changed color of her eyes—pale-blue instead of warm-brown—was the result of colored caps of nonshatter optical glass which fitted on the eyeball; Lion had heard of invisible glasses of that character, so she was not too surprised. But the wrinkles bothered her.

Lion indicated the wrinkles. "You sure these will come out?"

"Easily."

Lion said, "They'd better!" rather fiercely. The bronze man had applied a chemical to her face; it had felt like her tongue after taking a bite of green persimmon.

The remainder of the flight was uneventful, except for speed. The pace of the plane was breath-taking. They were very high, but visibility was good, and Lion picked out Columbus, Indianapolis, Springfield, in faster order than she had believed possible. "I wouldn't have believed this," she said.

"It's not so remarkable," Monk said; then reminded her, "The regular passenger line makes it from New York to St. Louis in about six hours."

Lion watched below. She saw Hannibal, Missouri, sprawled on the banks of the Mississippi about which Mark Twain had written so much. Later she pointed, said, "There's Kirksville."

Doc Savage landed, putting the plane down with hardly a jar. They taxied toward the edge of the field, where the office and the red-and-white beacon tower stood. Doc cut the motors.

A taxicab was parked near the office, the driver standing beside the machine. "Wanna cab?" the driver called.

"You bet," Monk shouted.

The driver got into the cab, rolled the machine toward them, and stopped when he was very close. Three men—they had been concealed in the back seat—scrambled out.

The three men had guns and badges that either said, "Sheriff," or "Deputy Sheriff."

"I'm sheriff of the county," one man explained. "Just take it easy while we look you over."

Other, armed deputies came out of the office one after another until a round dozen had appeared. Some had revolvers; more of them carried rifles and shotguns.

"A regular army of duck hunters," Monk muttered.

"Shut up," the sheriff told him.

A man brought a fingerprint outfit. They took Lion's prints, compared them with some they had in their possession. Then the sheriff made a short speech.

"You're all under arrest," he said. "The charge is accessory after a murder, shielding a murderess, and the prosecuting attorney will figure out what else."

Chapter VII. MYSTERY MURDER

THE jail had been built a long time ago, Monk concluded after a round of his cell, during which he gave the bars of each window a thorough shaking. "Age has just toughened this place," he decided.

They had been searched and confined to the cell, and on the other side of the bars now stood the sheriff, his deputies, some city police and the prosecuting attorney. The spectators were staring at the prisoners, particularly Doc Savage, with much interest, but no sympathy.

Ham walked over, shook the heavy door indignantly and shouted, "Listen, you guys, don't you know who you've locked up?"

"Said he was Doc Savage," the sheriff answered, unimpressed.

"Doesn't that mean anything to you?" Ham yelled.

The sheriff filled his pipe and struck a match without any show of concern. "You fellows trying to tell me how important you are?"

Ham peered at him and decided it was hopeless to try to bluff the man. Ham made aimless gestures with his hands—he was at a loss without the sword-cane in his fingers—and finally threw up his arms in disgust and turned to the others.

"What'll we do now?" he groaned.

"We'd better think it over," Monk said.

"Nope, let's try something you can do, too," Ham suggested.

Monk was too concerned with their plight to recognize the insult. It was as solid a jail as he had ever seen. The sheriff was not an impressionable individual, so there was small likelihood of his releasing them. The prosecuting attorney also looked as if he was ambitious.

The sheriff rapped on the cell door and made a parting announcement.

"The governor of this State was murdered, and that girl has been identified as the murderess," he explained. "You were with her. We found a make-up kit in your plane, so we know you helped disguise her. We figure that hooks you up with complicity in the crime."

"We're innocent," Renny rumbled angrily.

The sheriff snorted. "I suppose the girl is innocent, too."

"I am," Lion snapped.

The sheriff snorted again.

"You're all so innocent," he said grimly, "that they'll probably hang you."

THE sheriff returned to his office in the courthouse, put his feet on his desk, lit a cigar and engaged in some self-satisfied contemplation. He was not unaware that he had some famous prisoners in his jail, but he was determined not to be swayed by that. The law was the law, as far as he was concerned.

He did some pondering about the tip that had enabled him to make the arrest. It was a telephone tip, and the voice had impressed the sheriff as being somewhat creepy.

The sheriff now had a visitor. He was a shriveled little gentleman, very dapperly dressed, with a camera flung over his shoulder, a sheaf of copy paper in one hand and his vest pocket full of cigars and pencils.

"I'm Marty McNew from the St. Louis *Daily Examiner*," the visitor explained. "Understand you've arrested the girl who murdered the governor? How about it?"

"Hope so," the sheriff said.

"Heard there were some men with her?"

"Fellow named Doc Savage," the sheriff admitted. "Also three others named Ham Brooks, Monk Mayfair, and Renny Renwick."

"You going to hold them all in jail?"

"Hell, yes!" the sheriff said. "They were helping a murderess, weren't they?"

The visitor smirked. He asked a few more routine questions, presented the sheriff with cigars, and left.

The sheriff was thoughtful after the fellow left. "Something familiar about that man," he thought, "but I can't quite place it." He puffed at the cigar, made a blue fog of smoke, and suddenly bolted upright in his chair.

"That was the man who tipped me off that Doc Savage might show up here in a plane with the girl!" he exploded.

The thought was startling, so much so that he abruptly discarded it as too fantastic for consideration. It's my imagination, that's all, the sheriff thought.

After he had left the sheriff's office, the wizened little man entered a car and drove out into the country. The quick darkness of early winter had fallen when he stopped his car close beside a deserted farmhouse.

The car, without giving that appearance, was bodied with armor plate, had windows of thick gelatinous-collodian sandwich glass which was the nearest thing to bulletproof that science had yet developed, and the tires were filled with sponge rubber instead of air. The little man was careful not to roll the window down very far.

"How behaves the world?" he asked.

"Without understanding for the unseen man," a voice answered him from inside the rattletrap of a farmhouse.

Evidently this was a password. The little man seemed satisfied.

"They are in jail, all of them," he said. "That is unfortunate, but I do not see how it can be helped. They were fools who did not understand. They would not have listened to me."

There was brief silence inside the farmhouse, then a voice asked, "You have something further in mind?"

The little man shook his head in the darkness. He appeared sad.

"I have knowledge of a banker in Kansas City," he said. "His name is Ellery P. Dimer. You know about him, I believe."

"Yes."

"It is unfortunate about him, too," the little man said, his voice more macabre than usual. "It seems that he is going to die under strange circumstances."

Having completed this rather enigmatic conversation, the shriveled man drove away.

THE banker, Ellery P. Dimer, had been a leading citizen of Kansas City for a long time. He was noted for his charity and a benevolent understanding of the frailties of human nature. Also he had what was generally considered to be one of the widest circle of acquaintances of any man in the State. He knew everyone, had been everywhere. He owned a lusty, hail-fellow-well-met personality, which was sometimes attributed to the fact that he had once owned a circus, and for years had been in the carnival business. Even now, he was reported to have interest in several circus outfits.

But Ellery P. Dimer was a good banker.

That morning, when he dressed, he shoved an efficient-looking automatic pistol in his coat pocket. His wife noticed.

"Why are you carrying a gun, Ell?" she asked anxiously.

Dimer shrugged, grinned somewhat too expansively. "Just taking it down to one of the bank messengers. Think nothing of it, darling."

His wife was not entirely satisfied. It seemed to her that he had been worried for several days past.

Ellery Dimer drove to the bank himself, although he usually let his chauffeur perform this task. He took a roundabout route.

He went immediately to the collection department, which maintained a highly efficient group of information-getters who were called collectors by courtesy, but were more in the nature of private detectives.

"You got anything on those three men?" he asked.

He was handed three envelopes, each of which bore a name. The names were *Burdo Brockman*, *Elmo Handy Anderson*, and *Danny Dimer*.

"

Are those the three?" the head of the collectors asked.

"That's them."

Banker Dimer shoved his jaw out grimly and carried the three envelopes to his private office. He opened them, studied the contents at length. Only once did he speak, and then it was a single, explosive word.

"Hideous!" he said.

Later he snapped on the interoffice communicator and summoned his bank officers, as well as the head of the collection department and three of his principal operatives. These persons assembled in the office.

"I've called you here," announced Ellery Dimer, "concerning a matter which has completely amazed and horrified me."

He frowned at them and took a deep breath.

"I am not going to beat around the bush," he said. "This thing came to my attention through my half-brother, a man by the name of Danny Dimer. I am going to tell you the whole truth, then we are going to decide—"

It was then that his throat got cut from ear to ear, the knife appeared in his chest and he began screaming.

ELLERY DIMER did not emit much of a scream. Mostly it was gurgle. And a thin horrible crimson spray flew over some of those assembled in the room. An assistant cashier fainted without making a noise.

The murder was utterly impossible.

Dimer had stood there, unharmed and speaking firmly. Then his throat was open and leaking. The knife was sticking out of his heart.

The dead man fell to the floor.

One of the collectors folded over a wastebasket and was sick. Every face in the room had drained. For moments there were no sounds but those made by the man draped over the wastebasket.

Eventually they collected their wits and called the police. And the officers were anything but receptive to the story.

The homicide officers, having listened, held a private consultation.

"The story they're telling can't be true," growled the officer, "therefore they're lying to cover up."

"Sure. One of them killed Dimer. The others are lying."

"Or they all conspired to kill him, more likely."

So all of the bank employees who had been in the room when Ellery Dimer died shortly found themselves inside Kansas City's very effective city jail. The charge was murder.

Another factor did not help. Examiners discovered a shortage of two hundred thousand dollars in the stock of cash which should have been in the vaults.

Chapter VIII. VAGUE TRAIL

THE Adair County sheriff—Kirksville, Missouri, was in Adair County—was a conscientious man. When he saw a copy of a Kansas City paper containing the story of the fantastic death of Banker Ellery P. Dimer, he went to the prosecuting attorney.

"That kind of puzzles me," he said.

"Puzzles you how?"

"Remember how this girl insists she has never been anywhere near the capitol in Jefferson City, and didn't even know the governor?"

"This Lion Ellison, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I don't see any connection."

"I just had a hunch." The sheriff picked up the paper, added, "Think I'll let 'em look at this. Might come to something."

He walked over to the jail and handed the newspaper to Doc Savage. The bronze man read the item about the banker's murder, but his metallic features did not change expression.

"Know anything about that?" the sheriff asked.

"Nothing worth repeating," Doc admitted.

"You haven't given explanation of why you were in company of this girl," the sheriff said.

"Would it have got us out of jail?"

The sheriff grinned thinly. "Not much."

After the sheriff departed, Doc Savage passed the newspaper to the others. Renny scowled, rumbled, "Holy cow!" He stared at Doc Savage. "This helps explain why we were framed into jail."

"We were framed, undoubtedly," Doc admitted.

Monk said, "Sure we were. And my bet is that our shrunken little wart of a friend is behind it. He tipped off the cops that we would probably land here with Miss Ellison. He found out in New York that we were helping Miss Ellison, so it was natural for him to guess we would head here. So he tipped the cops off, got us locked up, and now he's going ahead with another murder."

Ham shook the newspaper violently and objected, "But this murder was impossible! Several people in the same room, all of them claiming they never saw the murder committed. It couldn't have happened."

Monk snorted.

"Listen, we had that runt locked in a room, and he vanished," the homely chemist reminded. "That couldn't have happened, either."

Doc Savage's regular bronze features were inscrutable, but there was thought behind them. His thoughts were numerous and complicated, but they amounted to one thing, which was the simplest fact of all. They could not accomplish anything while locked in jail.

EACH of them had been consigned to a different cell, Renny getting the cubicle which was strongest, probably because his big fists looked so formidable. There was nothing extraordinary about the jail construction. It was just a good jail that was rather ancient.

Monk and Ham and Renny glanced thoughtfully at Doc Savage from time to time. They were wondering why the bronze man was remaining in jail. They did not doubt that he could escape whenever he wanted to—Monk had whispered as much to Lion Ellison, but the young woman was skeptical.

"Escape from jail whenever he wishes?" The girl shook her head dubiously. "But they searched him. They searched all of us when they locked us in here. What'll he use for a key?"

Monk looked at her and shook his own head. "You're still underestimating Doc," he assured her.

As more hours passed, it became increasingly evident to the others that Doc Savage was waiting for something. It was late that night—it was as dark outside as a bat's idea of Valhalla—when their curiosity was satisfied.

A voice arose from the street that ran along one side of the jail. The voice was that of a very tall and very thin man—in fact, this individual came nearer to being a walking skeleton than it seemed possible of any man. His clothing fit him about as gracefully as sacks draped on a framework of broom handles.

This ambling string of bones was apparently singing. However, the words he was using were not English; it was extremely unlikely that they would have been intelligible to anyone on the street. The language was Mayan—the ancient vernacular of Maya which is a lost tongue as far as modern civilization is concerned. Doc Savage and his five aids spoke the lingo, used it to communicate whenever they did not wish to be understood by others.

Monk heard the voice, gave a leap, jammed his face to the window bars.

"Johnny!" he exploded.

Lion Ellison noticed the excitement, whispered, "What is it?"

"It's old Johnny—the walking word factory," Monk explained. "In other words, William Harper Littlejohn, the eminent archaeologist and geologist and user of big words, who is one of our gang."

Doc Savage went to the window, called down to Johnny in Mayan, asking, "Have any trouble?"

"What do you mean—sneaking off on a hot mystery like this without telling me?" Johnny sounded indignant.

"You were in the Painted Desert country excavating a village of the early basket-weaver era," Doc Savage said. "We didn't want to take you away from your work."

Johnny explained. "I flew up here as soon as I could. This is the first chance that I figured it was safe to talk to you."

"Everything set?" Doc asked.

"I've got my plane in an oatfield out east of town," Johnny said. "I've rented four cars, and they're parked in four different directions from this jail so we can get hold of one regardless of what direction we have to run."

"Good," Doc Savage said. "I was waiting on you."

Doc Savage moved back from the window abruptly; he had heard a small sound. The jailer walked up to the cell, muttered, "What the hell was that noise?" and finally moved away. After the man had gone, Doc passed low-voiced commands to the others.

"We'll try a break now," he said. "There was not much sense in attempting it until Johnny showed up, as it was reasonable to suppose he would."

In searching the bronze man, the sheriff had not neglected to pry up his shoe heels to make sure there were no cavities inside. But what the sheriff had failed to do was cut into, or jab an ice pick through the heel itself. Such an operation would have shown the little glass-lined vial which had been cast into the rubber when the heel was molded.

Doc unscrewed the metal cap of the vial, exposing a nib of glass which he broke off.

He walked over to the door, began to apply the liquid contents of the tiny vial to the locking bars, a drop at a time. The moment the stuff touched the metal, pronounced reaction took place. The metal seemed to turn to rust, swelling as this occurred.

Monk craned his neck to watch the operation in the pale light that came from the single bulb in the runway; the homely chemist grinned. He knew the chemical composition of the potent acid, somewhat corrosive in nature, which quickly disrupted the molecular structure of a metal.

Later Doc shoved, and the cell door came open.

THE bronze man carried only the one vial of acid; he had used all of it on the bars. Releasing the others in that fashion was out of the question.

"Monk," he suggested, "suppose you get sick."

The bronze man moved rapidly to the outer door, stepped close beside it, pressing to the brick wall. Monk got the idea and began groaning. Monk fancied himself as an actor. His groans reeked of agony and approaching death.

Big-fisted Renny boomed, "Hey, jailer! You better see what's wrong with this guy."

The jailer presumed they were all locked in cells, so he had no fears about entering the runway. He came in boldly and did not notice Doc until the bronze man's fingers were about his neck.

Doc did not choke him. He exerted pressure with fingertips on strategic nerve centers which produced quick unconsciousness. The man would be out for fifteen or twenty minutes, and eventually reviving, would have nothing more than a slight headache to show for his experience.

The fellow had the keys. Doc got them, worked with the lock until he had released his three men and Lion Ellison.

One other cell was occupied, the inmates being petty criminals, who had been picked up for local crimes. These small-time crooks had been watching with silent interest, but now one of them spoke grimly. "If this is a break—it won't stop halfway," he snarled. "Turn us loose, or we'll raise such a hell of a roar that you won't have a chance of lamming."

Doc said, "We'll have to do something about that," and walked to the cell. He unlocked the door, stepped inside.

There were blow noises, a yip or two of agony, and then quiet. The bronze man stepped out and locked the door again.

"They'll probably revive about the same time as the jailer," he said.

They had no trouble walking out of the jail. But once on the street, there was plenty of difficulty.

There was a blinding flash of light. It turned all the street white, lasted but a fraction of a second.

"Photo flash!" Monk shouted. "Somebody took a picture."

Monk's bellow flushed a photographer out of a gloomy doorway across the street. The man ran with long-legged anxiety to get away from there.

Doc Savage stopped Monk, said, "He just took a picture. Catching him will do no good."

Monk growled, "That guy was a newspaperman from a Kansas City sheet. I remember seeing him around the jail today."

They discovered Johnny. The elongated archaeologist and geologist was waving his arms to get their attention. They ran toward him.

THE car which Johnny had secured—he'd had a frenzied time renting four machines without attracting suspicion, he explained—was an ancient sedan which deserved a niche in the hall of fame because of the noise it made. The headlights gave just a little more illumination than candles.

Doc Savage asked, "Your plane is close to town?"

"Four or five miles."

Monk ejaculated, "Hey, we can't run away from this thing! We gotta lick it!"

"There will be enough police in that town," Doc explained, "to find us if we stayed. Furthermore, we have no clues in Kirksville."

Monk grumbled, "I don't see where we've got any clues anywhere."

"There's that murder of the banker in Kansas City," Ham reminded.

"Yeah, and Kansas City is full of cops. Furthermore, the cops would have found any clues that had been lying around."

Johnny got behind the wheel and drove the noisy car to the highway, turned south and took the first main road left turn. The road was blacktopped, and the pale headlights were almost useless.

"Where are we headed for, Doc?" Renny asked.

"You remember that picture of the governor being murdered?" Doc asked.

Lion said suddenly, violently, "I'll never forget it! Last night, all the time I was trying to sleep, I couldn't see anything else."

"It was taken by an amateur photographer named Dan Meek, 902 First Street, in Jefferson City."

Ham, astonished, demanded, "Where did you get that information?"

"The newspaper that published the picture. The information was in the cutline underneath the photograph."

The old car gave a great jump, seemingly trying to swap ends, as Johnny turned into a farm field. Weeds threshed against the chassis. Johnny had wheeled his plane behind a thicket of scrub oak and maple trees

which grew thickly on a spot where a house must once have stood. Leaves were gone from the maples, but frost-painted foliage was still thick upon the scrub oaks.

"Johnny," Doc said

"Yes?"

"You weren't in that flashlight picture the newspaper photographer took. There is nothing to prove that you helped us escape. And if this car is found here, they will know we left by airplane. You had better return the rented cars, and keep an eye on things. And don't let yourself be seen any more than necessary."

"Why should I keep out of sight?" Johnny asked.

"Because anyone who took the trouble to investigate could learn you were a member of our outfit," Doc reminded him.

Monk put in, "What he means is that you're about as inconspicuous as the Eiffel Tower."

Johnny sighed resignedly and remained behind. Doc put the plane into the air, lifting the ship over a hedge, and pointing it southeast to avoid the government airport at Millard, where the attendants would doubtless make note of any passing planes.

Ham stared back at the headlights of Johnny's old automobile. "I'll bet he keeps under cover—about like a Fourth of July celebration. He likes his excitement too well."

"If he'd been in that jail a couple days, he'd be careful," rumbled big-fisted Renny.

Lion Ellison came forward and put a hand on Doc Savage's arm. Excitement made her fingers bite at his arm like jaws. "Do you have truth serum that you can give this photographer? I've *got* to know whether he saw me—well, like the picture showed." Her voice was strained.

Monk, who had overheard her, said grimly, "We'll crack that egg without any trouble."

Chapter IX. THE IMPOSSIBLE MURDER

OVER Jefferson City, visibility was good. They could discern the capitol building, a thing of domed magnificence like alabaster in the moonlight, with a fountain that was like a jewel before it, then the lazy silver ribbon of the Missouri River. And spread behind were the bright sparks of the city lights, with the State penitentiary a ponderous mass off to the left.

Doc said, "We had better avoid the airport."

This plane, which was one Johnny had taken to the Painted Desert on his archaeological expedition, was one of Doc Savage's ships, hence equipped to operate from either land or water. Doc cranked up the landing gear, swung north and dropped toward the surface of the river. There were silencers into which he cut the motor exhausts, reducing them to a thick whisper.

A little muddy water spotted the windows and dampened the metal-wing skin when he landed.

"Wonder if Johnny had standard equipment aboard?" he said.

Standard equipment included a collapsible boat, and a miniature edition of an outboard motor that had a great deal more power than its appearance indicated.

Monk rummaged for a while, announced, "Here they are."

Three quarters of an hour later, they were dragging the collapsible boat upon the baked mud bank of the river not far from the capitol. They carried the little craft to a wad of black shadow under a bush and left it there.

Doc Savage took the lead. The streets were deserted, and seemed doubly cold because they had been chilled by their ride on the river. Doc Savage moved well in the lead.

Lion touched Ham's arm and asked, "How does he know where we're going?"

"Doc? I've seen him do this so often that it doesn't surprise me any more. He probably saw a map of Jefferson City somewhere at some time."

Ham shook his head in admiration. "I think Doc puts more time in on memory development than anything else in that daily exercise routine."

"Routine?" Lion was puzzled.

"The aerialists and acrobats with a circus have to practice, don't they?"

"Of course."

"Well, every day since I've known him, Doc has expended at least two hours on what I guess you would call an exercise routine. It's an amazing thing. He has scientific methods of developing all his senses and mental abilities. As you get to know him better, you may be inclined to think he's a little inhuman—but as a matter of fact, he's an example of the degree to which a man can develop himself by concentration and persistence."

THE building was old and made of brick that an expert readily could have told had come out of the kilns before the turn of the century. It was a mongrel thing probably called an apartment house, but hardly entitled to the name. There were, as nearly as Doc and the others could tell, four apartments, the two upstairs being reached by separate wooden stairways that could have been improved with paint.

Doc Savage gestured the others up the stairs; bringing up the rear, he performed two operations. At the bottom of the stairs, he sprinkled thickly a grayish powder that might have been dust. Well up the stairs, almost at the top, he scattered a different powder, this one more yellowish in hue.

Lion watched, whispered, "Where did he get—"

"Johnny had some equipment cases in the plane," Monk breathed.

"Pipe down," Ham said in a low tone. "I think Dan Meek is at home. There's a light."

Dan Meek had no hair on his head. He had very large white teeth, most of which he displayed in a big grin, but the grin loosened at the ends and finally collapsed as he stared at them.

"You're under arrest," Monk announced loudly. "We've got all the goods on you. The little runt confessed."

Monk liked violent actions, and he was not bashful about taking liberties with the truth.

The amateur camera fan, Dan Meek, staggered back. A wintry expression of horror twisted his face.

"I . . . he confessed—" His voice was a gurgle.

Monk followed up, got him by the necktie and yelled, "He laid both murders onto you, the dirty double-crosser."

Dan Meek was losing color; ordinarily he had a skin that was as tanned as a well-baked loaf of bread, but it had almost turned to the hue of unbaked dough. His hands made don't-know-what-to-do motions.

Monk, really convinced he was getting somewhere, bore the camera bug back to a chair, sank the man in it, and jammed their faces close together. Monk's face was an object calculated to induce considerable fright.

"Tell us the truth!" Monk roared. "That's the only way you can stop 'em from hanging you until you are dead."

Dan Meek's mouth behaved like a fish out of water. Monk got him by the throat, lifted him up by pressure and choked him somewhat. "Hanging by your neck until you're dead!" Monk shrieked. "See how it feels!"

Monk figured he was doing very well. But the effect of surprise wore off, so that Dan Meek got his mental feet back on solid ground. Two hot spots of color flamed in his cheeks. Suddenly he planted a hard right hook on Monk's nose.

Monk staggered back, grabbed his nose and honked and blew in pain.

"I'll tear 'im apart!" Monk squalled. "I'll liquidate him!"

"On the contrary," said Dan Meek, "you'll behave in a civil manner, or get a chair broken over your head."

DOC SAVAGE had moved to the far side of the room, where there was a door. He passed on into a dining room furnished with a dining suite that was very new and shiny. Beyond there was a kitchen, ordinary except that it contained a refrigerator so new that the interior had not yet been unpacked.

On the rear steps—they were a steep wooden tunnel sloping down in the chill blackness—the bronze man planted the two powders in the same fashion as when he had entered. The dust-colored particles on lowermost steps; the yellowish powder higher.

He went back and took over the questioning of Dan Meek. The bronze man made his voice persuasive, firm without being dominating. He said, "We are investigating the murder of the governor, and the murder of a banker named Ellery Dimer, in Kansas City, and we would like to have any information you can give us."

Dan Meek had completely recovered his self-possession. He stood with legs wide apart, hands on his hips.

"I don't know anything about the banker's killing," he said levelly. "I remember reading it in the newspapers. What's mysterious about it? They arrested six or seven people for the banker's murder, didn't they?"

Ham said, "The people in the room with the banker claim they did not see what killed him."

Dan Meek snorted. "You believe that, I suppose? Hell, of course they saw it. They're probably all in it together."

Doc said, "We had better begin on the murder of the governor."

"Yeah?" Dan Meek scowled.

"You saw it, didn't you?"

"So what?"

"There is no object in becoming hard-boiled," Doc said without emotion.

Dan Meek bristled, took a step forward and leveled an arm. His voice was almost a shout. "You're not keeping me," he yelled. "I've got you pegged!"

Monk said, "I'm gonna peg you if you don't behave!"

Dan Meek was not impressed. "I saw your pictures in the newspapers," he shouted. "You were arrested in Kirksville for helping the girl who murdered the governor." He swung, stabbed his arm at Lion. "And that's the girl!"

Monk said, "We're gonna have to get this cookie into a corner."

THE prisoner scowled and shook his right fist at them. "Get out of here all of you!" He did not seem in the least afraid of them. "I'm going to call the police."

Doc Savage removed a flat metal case from his coat pocket, opened it and began placing the contents on the table.

"Truth serum?" Ham asked, looking at the case.

Doc nodded.

Dan Meek looked a little less certain of himself. His hands tightened and he said angrily, "You fools! You can't keep me here."

"Can't keep you—that's crazy talk." Monk glowered at him. "I personally, with one hand, could keep a dozen guys like you right here." Then the homely chemist narrowed one small eye; an idea had hit him. His face sobered.

Abruptly Monk walked to one of the doors, slammed it, and put his back against the panel.

"What's got into you?" Ham demanded.

Monk ignored Ham, looked at Renny, and said, "You remember that little runt in New York? That room? And how he got away from us?"

Renny remembered, and not pleasantly. The big-fisted engineer made a jump for the other door and turned the key in the lock. "Holy cow!" he yelled at Ham. "Look at those windows and see if they're locked on the inside!"

Ham stared at him. "You gone crazy?"

"

Are the windows locked!" Renny roared.

Ham winced at the tone, looked bewildered, but went over to the window and made an examination, then said, "They're locked inside. Both of them."

Doc Savage had not contracted Renny's excitement. He knew the big-fisted engineer had remembered the fantastic escape of the wizened little man from the garage vault in their New York skyscraper headquarters. But now something happened that changed Doc's attitude.

He had caught an odor—it was an odor which was formed through reaction when two powdered chemicals were combined, even in the smallest quantities; the particular two chemicals in this case being those he had sprinkled on the stairs, front and rear. So someone had come. Some person—or thing of substance—which moved with an absence of noise that was ghastly.

"Locking the doors and windows won't help you!" Dan Meek shouted. "It's too late—"

Doc Savage moved then. He put all his strength and agility into a violent lunge for the door, bowled Monk out of the way, struck the panel and knocked it open. There was a small vestibule, an outer door. He thrust that open.

It was then that Dan Meek began to beat the floor with his fists. Doc heard the frantic pounding, stopped, ran back into the room.

Monk, Ham, Renny and the girl were all staring, reduced to a hypnotic silence by what they were seeing.

It was stupefying, that thing happening before their eyes. Impossible. Their minds refused to accept it.

No one moved, really, for moments, but it made no difference because, by all practical standards, Dan Meek was dead, his head having been separated from his body.

Chapter X. POLICE CHASE

LION ELLISON fainted then, and went down, her body twisting as she sank so that she had turned completely around by the time she was down. She made no sound, except for the breath rushing past her lips.

Monk lunged, caught her, kept her head from striking the floor.

"She's fainted," the chemist croaked.

Renny made a gurgling sound that was all horror. His huge hands leaped out, clamped upon a chair, and he began to club at the air in the room. He struck grimly, with terrific force, always slashing out at empty air. He did not hit anything, although he covered the entire room; and finally he backed into a corner, holding the chair out in front of him like a lion tamer being menaced by an invisible beast. He had not spoken; he did not speak now.

The animal life in Dan Meek's body was dead now, so that all physical movement had ceased.

Ham had been staring fixedly at Dan Meek: his eyes had hardly shifted. Ham's legal training and his long practice of law had, probably excepting Doc Savage, given him a more matter-of-fact mind than any of the others. So something like this was a far greater shock to him.

Dan Meek had fallen where he had been standing, the two parts of him dropping together, the head tumbling over a little to one side. The beating which his fists had given the floor had been a death throe or some kind of reflex—much as a chicken kicks after its head is pulled off.

Suddenly Ham began speaking. His voice was toneless, as if it might have been made by one of those new machines that make the tones of a voice without any of its human quality.

"There was nothing to show how it happened," he said. "We were standing here. And then, suddenly,

Dan Meek was falling—and his head came off."

Ham looked around with an utterly foolish grin on his face. "That's as crazy as anything, isn't it? It's silly. A man oughta laugh at it, hadn't he?"

Ham's lips peeled off his teeth. He began to titter in high falsetto.

Doc Savage took hold of Ham's arm, led him to the door, and when Ham still tittered, slapped him. Then he shoved Ham out in the hall. The dapper lawyer stood there, hands opening and closing, and got control of himself.

"Thanks," he muttered. "That thing gave me the talking willies. First time it ever happened, I think."

Doc went back into the room. He said, "Everyone be as still as possible," and moved over and fastened an ear against the wall to listen. He thought of another and better way to pick up sounds—he drew a pocketknife which he had located on Johnny's plane and brought along, opened the knife, sank the blade deep into the door casing. Then he gripped the handle with his teeth. He knew from experience that he could pick up vibrations—such as footsteps—much more readily in that fashion.

He waited for a long time, then was thoughtful. At length, he got down on all fours and began going over the floor of the room. The carpet was not new; neither was it old, and its design was made up of browns and reds and blues. Doc searched with his hands as much as his eyes.

It was his fingers which found dampness, and his handkerchief showed that the moist spot was red. Blood. The spot was perhaps two feet long, not much more than two inches wide. The cut place in the rug was about a yard from the bloodstain. It was a narrow slit, six inches in length. Doc pulled the fabric apart at the cut; there was a gash in the floor which, as nearly as he could judge, extended over half the thickness of the hardwood flooring.

Renny had come into the room and was watching. He said, "That bloodstain and the cut in the carpet mean anything to you, Doc?"

"It probably explains," Doc Savage said quietly, "why we weren't killed along with Dan Meek."

DURING the next few minutes, Doc Savage did a number of things which the others failed to understand. It was not exactly clear, for instance, why he had Monk and Renny and Lion Ellison—the young woman had revived—leave the house immediately, instructing them, "When you get outside, separate. Each take a different direction. Walk two blocks, hide yourself in the darkness and wait. When you hear three sharp whistles, go to the spot where we left our boat on the river bank."

"You mean we're not to come back here?" Monk said.

"Not unless you hear yells for help."

Ham soon found himself alone with Doc Savage. The dapper lawyer was still without his cane, and was lost when it was not in his hands; it was a sword-cane, and he had carried it almost continuously for years. He had even had Monk concoct a chemical with which to daub the end of the sword, thus making a slight prick of the blade produce quick unconsciousness. Ham watched Doc curiously.

Ham Brooks had developed a keen brain, and he was not without analytical ability as far as reading clues was concerned. Most good lawyers are semidetectors.

But Ham failed to see any significance whatever in a certain photograph which seemed to interest Doc Savage greatly.

They had found Dan Meek's photographic dark room. It was in the attic, reached by a ladder which lowered from the ceiling of a large closet. There was the usual equipment of trays for developer, shortstop and hypo, and a good enlarger of the automatic focusing variety. There were partially used boxes of bromide papers, and jars of stock developer solution and hypo.

Dan Meek's pictures were in a steel filing cabinet. There were scores of them. Doc Savage leafed through the photographs rapidly, not expending a great deal of time on any one of them. Abruptly, he began drawing pictures from the file; he spread several out for Ham's inspection.

"Recognize them?" he asked.

"No, I never saw—wait a minute!" Ham stared.

It was the wizened little man who had given Lion Ellison her brother's belongings—the strange little fellow who had been seized by Monk and Renny in New York, and who had vanished. They recognized him from the description Monk and Renny had given.

Ham studied the picture, said, "He had about as much taste in clothes as a color-blind clown."

"The fact that Dan Meek had these pictures of him proved the two were friends," Doc reminded.

Doc Savage spent some time examining the pictures. Then, to Ham's astonishment, the bronze man selected one of the least interesting photos of the wizened man. The picture which Doc took didn't even show a recognizable likeness of the subject's face.

In this photograph, the little man seemed to be seated on the edge of a fountain or possibly a small ornamental fishpond. He had his chin cupped in his palm, obviously posing as a thinker. Ham gave close attention to the remainder of the picture, but he could discern nothing more interesting than an assortment of rocks, water that was distorted by reflection, and a portion of a tree or two.

This was the picture which Doc Savage took with him when they left the apartment.

THEIR departure from the apartment was about as peaceful as a riot. It began when Monk suddenly charged into the apartment. Monk was out of breath, so excited that he gobbled when he tried to talk.

"Cops!" the homely chemist managed to bark finally. "The whole neighborhood is full of cops. They're sneaking up on this place. Saw the squad cars unloading 'em. I tore out down the street to warn you. It was dark, and they didn't see me."

"The police," Doc Savage said grimly, "would be a perfectly logical development. Let's get out of here."

They went down the stairs in rattling haste, only to have a voice shout, "Stop, you three! This is the law!"

Doc whistled three times shrilly—the signal agreed upon to send Renny and the girl back to the river.

Blinding white light pounced upon them. The police had turned on searchlights.

"Smoke bombs," Doc directed. "Fill the street with them."

Monk, Ham and Doc Savage had all loaded their pockets with the little smoke grenades, past experience having taught them that the things were useful. They began digging them out of their clothing, slipping the firing levers, and pitching them right and left in the street. The little metal globules made popping noises and sprouted fat mushrooms of smoke. The searchlight beams faded out in the sepia pall.

"We better keep hold of each other," Doc said. They moved down the street. There was yelling, a few

shots and considerable confusion. But Doc Savage and the others arrived, unharmed, on the river bank something near thirty minutes afterward.

Lion Ellison and Renny were there. The girl explained, "We were hidden, and the police didn't see us. We heard your whistle and left."

Standing on the baked-mud bank of the river, Monk made a growling noise. "Those cops were tipped off."

Renny's rumble was violent. "Holy cow! Course they were. Just like when we landed in Kirksville."

Chapter XI. PICTURE CLUE

LIKE a frozen bird, the plane stood on the cold river. There was a white fuzz of frost on the wings, and the river water itself was steaming in the cold. With no regrets whatever, Doc and the others quitted the unstable little collapsible boat; they folded the tiny craft, hauled it inside after them. Then, standing in the cabin, they windmilled their arms to restore circulation, and blew on their fingers.

Doc Savage produced the photograph which he had taken from Dan Meek's assortment; he passed it to the girl.

"That's him." Lion's tone was strained, and her face had even become a trifle pale as she looked at the picture. Still without making comment, Doc Savage took the photograph back. He stowed it away carefully.

Ham said, "I still don't see where that picture is gonna do us any good."

Doc Savage did not volunteer any explanation. He went forward to the control cockpit and got the motors turning.

As soon as they were in the air, the bronze man began making adjustments on the radio. Watching closely, Monk perceived that Doc was shifting the transmitter to the eighty-meter amateur phone band.

Cutting in the microphone, Doc began repeating, "Calling Kansas City. Calling Bill Lerner, or any twenty-meter phone in Kansas City."

Later, he signed with the call letters of Johnny's plane, and listened.

Lion looked at Monk, asked, "Who is Bill Lerner?"

"Why, he's—" Monk hesitated, finally said, "He's a fellow who sometimes works for Doc Savage." Which, as Monk well knew, was a somewhat negative description of Bill Lerner. But to make the girl understand all about Bill Lerner would have taken a great deal of description. For instance, Monk would have had to tell her about the strange institution which Doc Savage maintained in upstate New York for the curing of criminals—a hidden place, the existence of which was unknown to the outside world.

To this remote spot, Doc Savage sent such criminals as he happened to catch; there they underwent delicate brain operations at the hands of specialists trained by the Man of Bronze, operations which wiped out all memory of the past. After this, the "patients" received a course of training calculated to fit them as useful citizens. Monk and the others frequently referred to the place as the "college."

Bill Lerner was a graduate of that college; once he had been the associate of a notorious criminal, but Bill Lerner himself did not know this. He only knew that he hated crime and criminals, and that Doc Savage was the symbol of his own belief.

Eventually Doc Savage got in touch with Bill Lerner, who was an amateur radio bug, and asked him to investigate, then make a complete report of the murder of the banker, Ellery P. Dimer.

WHEN Bill Lerner called back—it had taken him hardly more than two hours, and the plane was again at rest on the Missouri River, this time near Waverly, Missouri—he had a fairly complete preliminary report. Doc Savage listened for some time, aware that he was not receiving anything of value. Then suddenly he interrupted, "Hold it, Lerner. Repeat that last item."

"Police have ascertained," said the distant voice of Bill Lerner, "that just prior to his death, Banker Ellery Dimer went to the collection department of his bank, which is nothing more or less than the banks' private detective agency, and had them get all the dope they could on three people. The three were named Burdo Brockman, Elmo Handy Anderson, and Danny Dimer."

"What did the investigation show about the three?" Doc asked.

"Haven't found out."

"Continue investigating."

"Sure. Will you keep tuned in on this wave-length?"

"Each hour on the hour, whenever we can."

"Swell. Signing off."

Monk had overheard. He said thoughtfully, "Burdo Brockman, Elmo Handy Anderson, and Danny Dimer. Never heard of them before. Danny Dimer. . . . Ellery Dimer was the banker's name. Might be some connection there. Father and son, or something."

"Are fathers in the habit of having detectives collect information on their sons?" Ham demanded.

"Suppose you explain it, then," Monk snapped.

Doc Savage had turned the controls over to Renny—all of the bronze man's associates were skilled pilots—and had moved back to the big chart-table used by whoever was navigating. Switching on the light, he scrutinized the picture he had taken from unfortunate Dan Meek's collection.

Ham said, "That thing still don't mean anything to me."

"Notice the pool," Doc suggested. "The reflection on the water."

Ham grunted excitedly, thinking he was going to see something sensational, and stared. He turned the picture to different angles, frowning.

"House," he muttered finally. "Reflection of the door of a house. Apparently a front door, because you can make out the street number of the house."

"The number is 4786."

Doc Savage's flake-gold eyes were excited in a quiet, tense way as he said, "The ugly little man looks perfectly at ease, as if he had been round that house a great deal. If we can find the house, perhaps we can locate someone who will put us on his trail."

"But just a number won't find a house for us," Ham grumbled. "It may take a long, long time to locate a house with a door that looks like that one. It's a common kind of a door, anyway."

Doc said, "Not a common street number, though. A number like that means the house is in the forty-seventh block. How many streets in Kirksville are forty-seven blocks long?"

"Not many," Ham admitted. "Hey! Wait! How you know it's in Kirksville?"

Doc indicated the photograph. "That is a very clear picture. Dan Meek might have been mixed up in something mysterious that got him murdered, but he was a wizard with a camera and dark room. Those rocks—notice their texture. Native stone is limited around Kirksville. This happens to be the best type found around there; in almost any other part of the State, a fountain pool would have been built of a better grade of stone."

ASSORTED parts of the United States have received praise from time to time on their merits as the ideal spot in which to live, Florida and southern California contesting for the tops in climate, New York City with the fastest night life, New Orleans the most delectable cooking, and the Jackson Hole country of Wyoming claiming the honors for scenery.

Almost entirely overlooked is northern Missouri, particularly the section around Kirksville. And what does this district excel in? Why, it's probably the most placid and lowest-priced part of the United States in which to reside; possibly it is the most economical in the world, for it is certainly lower-priced than France before the second great war, when France was highly touted for its low-cost living.

If a man wanted an utterly peaceful spot in which to seclude himself for leisure and cogitation, he could hardly do better than the section around Kirksville, Missouri. The town itself is slightly collegiate because of a State Teachers' College and an osteopathy college, but otherwise it is benevolently rural. The big night is Saturday, when the farmers all come to town. And the farmer is the most important article around there; everyone else lives off him.

William Harper Littlejohn met Doc Savage and the others when they landed. Johnny had been contacted by portable radio.

Lion Ellison said nervously, "This radio talking you're doing—isn't there danger of being overheard? And can't they locate your transmitters with direction finders?"

Monk explained that. "Our transmitters have got tiny scramblers on them."

"Scramblers?"

"Little gadgets," the homely chemist told her, "that mix up the voices until they can't be understood, then unscramble 'em at the other end. If you'll tune in a radio broadcast receiver on the very short wave bands, such as the thirteen-meter band, you'll probably be able to pick up stuff that sounds like somebody squawking through a tin horn. That's scrambled radiophone conversation."

Doc Savage asked Johnny, "Found out anything?"

"Not a thing, except that there is only one street in Kirksville with a forty-seven-block number. It's named Gibbs Street."

GIBBS STREET, the outer end of it, had once been a subdivider's dream. It began downtown as did the other streets, but it extended out beyond any of them, and for the last twenty blocks there was hardly a house; in fact, the end of Gibbs Streets was remote enough to be one of the local Lovers' Lanes. It was not even graveled; grass grew in it, except for a pair of ruts.

"Here it is," Monk whispered, and the words were spurts of steam past his lips.

They got down and crawled. Frost speckled their clothing and chilled their hands. The ground was frozen a little.

The house stood half out of an amazingly thick grove of trees. A house like something that was ancient and had started to creep out into the light, then changed its mind.

"Older'n the Civil War," Renny breathed.

It wasn't. But it was predepression at the least, and a virgin as far as paint was concerned. It had bulk, enormous bulk; two full stories and a garret, rooms that sprawled and meandered in all directions with the big colonial doorway as a starting point. That doorway had what everything else in the house lacked—distinction.

The door, and the pool in front of it were undoubtedly the same that had been shown in unlucky Dan Meek's photograph.

It was getting daylight. Off in the distance a dog was barking, and roosters were crowing at a farmhouse somewhere.

Doc said, "It won't hurt to watch the back door. I'll do that."

He crawled away from the others. The weeds had not been cut all that summer; they were high enough to conceal him.

There was one thing noticeable when you got very close to the house—the thing wasn't really as dilapidated as it looked from a distance. And it was inhabited; there was a path from the rear door in which no weeds whatever grew, an indication the path had been used all that summer.

Renny beat on the front door. Thunder like that could only come from the engineer's big fists. After the clamor, there was silence—

The large, benign gentleman who came out of the back door was in a hurry.

Doc Savage stood up and said, "Good morning."

The man stopped, growled, "What in the devil is this?"

Doc Savage made a mental note. This benign old fellow was scared. He had nerve. But he was nevertheless scared.

"We are looking for—ah—the proprietor," Doc explained.

"That's me—Burdo Brockman."

BURDO BROCKMAN announced his name with a crochety abruptness, as if it was supposed to mean something. And Doc got the feeling the name should carry weight. He searched in his memory, knowing the name was familiar, but failing immediately to recall it. His own failure to pull the correct recollection out of his memory cells was vaguely irritating; he had spent countless hours training his mind in an effort to make it an efficient filing cabinet. Grope as he would, he couldn't think why Burdo Brockman's name should mean something.

An ample man was this Burdo Brockman. He was like a big bulldog, somewhat old and of pickled disposition. His hair was white and as tousled as freshly picked cotton; his whiskers were reddish and hadn't been cut for a week or more. He had clear eyes. His clothes were old, slouchy, had been very

expensive when he bought them.

Monk came ambling around the house muttering, "Doc, we can't raise—" He halted and stared.

"This is Burdo Brockman," Doc explained.

"Burdo—" Monk grinned suddenly. "Ain't this somethin'! Burdo Brockman is one of the guys that bank was havin' investigated."

Burdo Brockman interrupted sharply, "Say, say, what goes on here, anyhow?"

"Did you know Ellery P. Dimer?" Doc asked.

"Who's he?"

"A banker who was murdered in Kansas City under—well—odd circumstances, to say the least."

"I never," said Burdo Brockman, "knew him."

"You knew he had been murdered, though?"

"I think," said Brockman, "that we had better do some talking."

Monk said, "Yeah. We can talk about why you went sneaking out of the back door when we turned up."

They entered the house. Doc Savage watched closely when Burdo Brockman met Lion Ellison, but if the sturdy old gentleman had ever seen the young woman before, he was actor enough to conceal it. Lion glanced at Doc, shook her head slightly; Brockman was a stranger to her.

Brockman abruptly pointed a finger at Doc. "I think I know who you are—the fellow they call the Man of Bronze. Clark Savage, Jr. Am I right?"

Monk said, "That's right. And the rest of us are his assistants. Now—why were you taking a sneak?"

Ham punched Monk, said, "Listen, you homely wart hog, suppose you keep your bassoon out of it this time. You had no luck with Dan Meek."

Brockman made a grunting noise. "Dan Meek—I believe I know him." He frowned at them. "Amateur photographer, isn't he?"

"He *was*."

"Eh?"

"He's dead, too." Monk scowled. "Under, like Doc said, circumstances that were—odd."

Brockman suddenly sat down and took his face in both hands. When he looked up at them, there was something intense in his eyes. He said, "You better tell me about these murders."

Doc Savage described, in a steady voice that had no noticeable emotion, the weird death of Dan Meek. He slighted no details in telling how Meek had been murdered before their eyes. The bronze man's account of the affair acquired drama from the complete calmness of the recital to such a degree that the others were holding the edges of their teeth together by the time he had finished.

"That photograph," Brockman said hoarsely. "Have you got that?"

Doc handed him the picture. Brockman took it, stared at it, holding it assorted distances from his eyes, then shook his head.

"My glasses," he apologized. "Have to get them. This desk here."

He went to the desk. From there, it was only one long jump to the door. He made it.

Chapter XII. THE SUDDEN ASHES

MONK emitted a roar and made for the door like a torpedo. But he had underestimated the strength of the seasoned wood of which the door was constructed. He bounced back, sprawled on the floor, dazed.

Ham took one window. Renny took another. They were outside, and the room was full of the jangling of breaking glass.

Lion cried, "I saw a flashlight!" and ran for the spot where she had seen it.

Doc Savage did nothing very drastic; he merely stood and listened. His sense of hearing was acute. He caught a faint thump of a noise, got down and put his ear against the floor.

He decided that Burdo Brockman, instead of rushing wildly out of the house, had gone into the basement.

Monk got up off the floor, full of rage, and yelled to see whether he was hurt. The yell was satisfactory. Monk hit the door again. This time, he broke it down. He galloped around through various parts of the house and finally howled. "The place is empty. He got away."

Doc went to the back door, stood there. He heard a grating sound, decided it was Brockman opening one of the basement windows to crawl out.

The bronze man wondered how Brockman expected to escape from the house. He got the answer to that almost at once, when he heard a whine that was quickly stifled. A dog. Brockman had a dog in the basement; apparently he was lifting the animal out of the window.

Doc distinctly heard Brockman growl, "Go get it, boy!" After that, there was a slight thud some distance from the house. The man had thrown a stick and sent his dog after it.

Renny and Ham saw the dog. It was a large, dark animal, and in the foggy murk preceding dawn, they thought it was Brockman.

"There he goes!" Ham roared.

They set out after the dog. Monk and Johnny and Lion joined them. The dog got scared, fled. They chased it.

"Heck, it's a pooch!" Monk barked, halting.

They raced back to the house, and Ham yelled, "Watch it, Doc! This was only a dog."

There was no answer. They searched, cautiously at first, then with growing consternation. For there was no trace of Burdo Brockman, nor of Doc Savage.

THE old house was furnished, they discovered, to fit a man's idea of complete luxury. There was nothing filly or fancy, no article that would break easily. Nor were many of the articles cheap.

"Fellow had money," Ham remarked.

"And he liked to take it easy," Renny agreed.

The kitchen was well stocked with food, and there was canned stuff in the cellar. But nowhere was there anything to give them a line on Burdo Brockman. The desk was empty, except for a litter of old Kirksville daily papers, pen and ink, and some stationery.

Johnny stared at the stationery.

"I'll be superamalgamated," the big-worded archaeologist and geologist remarked.

"Huh." Renny came over and stared. "Holy cow!"

The stationery was printed:

RAJAH HUNTING LODGE,

SIMLA, INDIA.

Monk remarked, "Funny kind of stationery for a farmer in Missouri to have."

"This Brockman wasn't any farmer, I'm betting," Ham said. He prowled through more drawers in the desk. "Hey, look! More photographs!"

They fell upon the pictures eagerly, giving them a thorough inspection. They were hunting pictures. Burdo Brockman was in all of them. In some, he was standing upon a dead elephant, holding a rifle. In others, he crouched beside a slain tiger, with the rifle. In fact, all of the pictures had the same theme—Burdo Brockman and a rifle and a slain big-game animal.

It was big-worded Johnny who eyed the pictures and snorted.

"What's wrong?" Monk asked.

Johnny explained, not using big words. "You fellows know that I'm a geologist, and that as a geologist I have some knowledge of what India really looks like, not only the rock formations, but the vegetation as well."

"What are you trying to say?"

"That I would know a real Indian jungle if I saw one," Johnny said with dignity.

"Isn't this one real?"

"Phony."

"You mean—"

"I mean," said Johnny firmly, "that the jungle in these pictures was probably never any nearer India than some New York photographer's studio."

Monk grabbed the prints, eyed them closely. His knowledge of chemistry extended to photographic printing papers; once he had worked several weeks developing a high-speed bromide projection paper of high contrast for press use.

"This is a bromide paper," Monk said, "and it is American paper—not English, as you'd expect to find

used in India."

"The animals in the photographs looked stuffed, now that you start thinking about it," Lion Ellison said. "I've worked with real animals enough to know a stuffed one when I see it."

"The pictures are phonies," Ham announced flatly.

"Which proves what?" Monk asked.

Renny consulted his wrist watch, grunted and made for the door.

"Where you going?" Monk demanded.

"You remember Bill Lerner in Kansas City?" Renny reminded. "He is going to call us by radio every hour on the hour. It's that time now."

They had driven from the spot where they had left the plane in one of the cars which Johnny had rented, and in the machine was Johnny's portable short-wave radio outfit. The apparatus—it was as compact as a suitcase, including batteries—had been developed by the fifth member of Doc Savage's group of assistants, Major Thomas J. (Long Tom) Roberts, the electrical wizard, who was not with them this time. Long Tom was in England, working on some kind of a super-detector for submarines.

Bill Lerner was enthused; they could tell from his voice that he had accomplished something.

"You remember those three men the murdered banker was having investigated—the men named Burdo Brockman, Elmo Handy Anderson and Danny Dimer?" Bill Lerner asked.

"Sure. You got anything?"

"Well, I got some dope—say, this isn't Doc. Who is it?"

"Renny Renwick."

"Oh, hello, Renny. I should have recognized your voice; better work on this receiver of mine, hadn't I? Hi! Well, I got the dope that the bank-collection department turned up on Burdo Brockman."

Renny said, "Swell. Brockman is the one we're most interested in right now."

"Brockman is a rich New Yorker," the distant radio voice advised. "Owns factories and corporations and things. Richer than chocolate cake, but not very well known because he doesn't seem to be much of a society guy. Kind of the retiring type. Right now, he's in India, big-game hunting."

"He is like hell in India," Renny rumbled.

"This report said he was."

"The report is wrong."

"Well, I wouldn't know, would I?"

Renny asked, "What else you got on Brockman?"

"Nothing. Nothing on the others, either. I only got the report on Brockman this time. Could only cop one envelope when I went down to the bank to get a story, claiming I was a newspaper reporter. I'm going to make another trip and try to cop a second envelope. Think I can only get one at a time. This one was

on Brockman. Next time, I'll get one on Elmo Handy Anderson or Danny Dimer."

"Thanks, Bill," Renny said warmly.

"Oh, that's all right," said Bill Lerner. "Doc Savage has done a lot for me, hasn't he?"

After the radio was switched off, Monk looked at Renny and grinned and said, "Bill Lerner only knows about half of what Doc has done for him."

The reference was to the fact that Bill Lerner, as a graduate of Doc's criminal-curing "college," had no idea that he had once been a bloodthirsty crook of a type he had been taught to hate while in the institution.

Bill Lerner merely thought he was a man who had suffered the loss of his memory in an accident, and had been educated in Doc Savage's institution as an act of kindness on the bronze man's part.

Monk and Ham wandered off together.

THE separation from the others precipitated Monk and Ham into an experience that came near standing their hair permanently on end, but that was not their intention. The reasons for their getting together were probably twofold. First, each wanted to get the other out of the company of attractive Lion Ellison. Second, they were in a state of mind over the vanishing of both Burdo Brockman and Doc Savage, and they wanted to soothe their feelings by indulging in a good, satisfying quarrel.

They wandered around behind the house and came upon a path, and a little later discovered a bulk in the trees ahead. Ham quickened his pace and then snorted.

"A strawstack," Ham said.

"Yeah." Monk was thoughtful. He advanced, shoved an arm deep into the strawstack, then looked knowingly at Ham. "I feel boards," he explained.

"What?" Ham explored. "Say, there's a building of some kind inside there."

"Sh-h-h."

They listened, caught no sound. Monk backed away a few yards and gave his attention to the frost-whitened ground.

"Hey, look here." The homely chemist pointed. "Tracks."

Undeniably there were footprints, and they led around to the back and ended against the strawstack.

"Must be a door there," Monk whispered. "Stand back where you'll be safe, and I'll try it."

"I'll try the door," Ham corrected.

"*You* get back."

The solicitude they were showing for each other's safety apparently struck neither as being an incongruous contrast to their attentions, wordlessly expressed a few moments earlier, of tearing each other limb from limb.

It was then that the event occurred.

The strawstack was in flames before their eyes. Not only in flames—practically burned to the ground.

They had been looking at an innocent-appearing strawstack which they knew wasn't innocent. Now it was blazing, practically consumed.

Monk and Ham did what was perfectly natural under the circumstances—they got up and ran.

Chapter XIII. THE UNEXPECTED PRISONER

IT is an accepted fact in psychology that the human mind is largely a creature of habit and the product of experience, which is probably another way of saying that a man will believe only what he has learned to be possible. That a man will accept only what experience has taught him is usual, is borne out by credibility that small children place in fairy tales; after a man grows older, and fails to encounter either fairy or miracle, he concludes neither exists.

Monk must have been thinking somewhat along that line, judging from his remark after he stopped running.

"If this stuff keeps on happening, I may get to believe it," he said.

Ham said hoarsely, "Did you see what I saw?"

"The strawstack turned to flames and ashes in front of our eyes?"

"I didn't see it turn—*it just suddenly was flames and ashes.*"

"

On second thought—I don't believe it."

"Neither do I. Let's go back and look."

They went back through the woods and stood staring. There was no doubt about there having been a strawstack, and there was less doubt about it being in the advanced stages of burning down.

Renny, Johnny and Lion Ellison came dashing up, panting and wide-eyed with curiosity.

"We were in the house," Renny puffed. "Didn't see the fire at first, I reckon."

Monk pointed at the flames and asked in a hollow voice, "Do you see a fire now?"

Renny peered at him doubtfully, finally turned to Ham and asked, "Has Monk got hit on the head again?"

"Getting hit on the head never hurts him," Ham said soberly. "I guess you see that fire, all right."

"What kind of crazy talk is this? Of course we see a fire. Looks like it was a strawstack. Why'd you set it on fire?"

"Us set it on fire?" Ham gaped at him.

"Well, didn't you set that fire?"

"That fire," Monk said, "*just suddenly was.*"

Monk and Ham circled the flames dubiously. The heat of it was intense against their faces; the smoke from it made them cough. There was no doubt about its reality, although they were having difficulty accepting the concrete existence of anything about this strawstack.

Additionally, it became increasingly evident that there had been some kind of a structure inside the

strawstack. But the nature of the thing they would not be likely to learn, they concluded, because it developed that they were not going to be able to remain in the vicinity until the ashes cooled sufficiently for them to make an investigation.

A man ambled out of the trees. They had never seen the man before, and he had no distinguishing feature except that he wore overalls and was cross-eyed.

"Gee whizz!" He stared, his crossed eyes very wide. "Lot of dry leaves this time of year! Figure I better call the fire department. Don't want no forest fire."

"Sure," Monk said gloomily. "Call the army and navy if you want to."

The cross-eyed man—they presumed he was a native who had seen the smoke—galloped away. He had been gone four or five minutes when Monk gave a nerve-shattered jump.

"BLAZES!" Monk exploded. "He went after firemen. We can't stay here. We'll get arrested!"

Being a fugitive from the law, particularly on a charge of complicity in murder, was a new experience for Monk; he had momentarily overlooked existence of the fact.

They dashed for their car and lived through several sweating minutes before they loaded themselves and the two pets in the machine and got safely clear of the vicinity. The fire apparatus—it was a small chemical truck—passed them, and it was trailed closely by a car containing two State-highway patrolmen, which did nothing for the peace of their nerves.

"I'm sorry about all this," Lion Ellison said glumly. "It's my fault, involving you in such a mess."

"That's all right," Renny told her kindly.

"I don't care—I feel bad about it," Lion said. "If I hadn't gone to you for help after being accused of murdering the governor, you wouldn't be fugitives from the law."

"This kind of thing is our business," Renny reminded her.

Johnny said sourly, using small words, "And sometimes strikes me that a darn poor business it is, too."

The car was a sedan, neither large nor new, but fairly comfortable riding. They were traveling a side road that was dirt, but it had been dragged and was smooth. Around them were barbed-wire and hedge fences, open fields, not many barns or houses.

"It wouldn't be so bad," Ham complained, "if it made any sense. Miss Ellison here was framed for the murder of the governor. A banker in Kansas City was murdered in a way that looks impossible. Then a photographer was killed the same way. I ask you—does that make sense or hook up together?"

"The death of the photographer makes sense, all right," Renny rumbled. "He was killed because we were about to give him truth serum and get some facts."

"All right—take Burdo Brockman; where does he come in?"

"He ain't in India," Renny said meaningly.

"You know what I think?" Ham asked thoughtfully. "I think those letterheads of a hunting lodge in India, and those phony pictures of Burdo Brockman standing with animals he had shot were part of a system Brockman was using to make people think he was in India."

"Could be, at that," Renny admitted. "Brockman could write a letter about the hunting he was doing, writing like he was in India, and inclose a fake picture. Then he could mail the letter to somebody in India, who would remail it to the United States."

"Which would mean," Lion Ellison interrupted, "that Burdo Brockman is a crook."

Monk had been unusually thoughtful and silent. He came out of his muse suddenly and poked Ham.

"I just remembered somethin'," he said. "You recall when we was standin' at the strawstack? Well, the next thing we knew, it was about burned down. But when we saw that, *we were sittin' down*. We should've been standin', shouldn't we? We had been standin'."

"Well?"

"Maybe that means somethin', huh?"

"You figure it out," Ham said sourly.

The car rolled along, turned onto a red shale road that was rough. Johnny drove, keeping a close watch on the road. The others were silent. All of them were worried.

When a calm voice spoke to them from a spot near their feet, Monk all but jumped out of the car.

THEY had in the excitement overlooked the portable radio, which reposed on the rear floor boards. The receiver portion of the machine had been left switched on and turned to the wave-length which the bronze man's group usually employed for communication. "Calling Monk or Renny or one of the others," the voice said. "Hello, some of you."

Monk snapped on the transmitter, grabbed up the microphone and waited for tubes to warm.

"Doc!" he exploded. "Where on earth are you?"

It was undoubtedly Doc Savage's words, but he did not answer the question. Instead he said, "You might tune in on the State-police radio station at Macon."

"Why?"

"Tune in, and you'll see. Then come back to this frequency."

Monk shifted the receiving frequency to the police bank immediately below the broadcast wave-lengths, and fished with the tuning knob until he had a loud signal and a voice saying:

"—height over six feet. Very large man. Particularly huge fists. Sad-looking face. This man may be dangerous. Use care."

Monk looked at Renny, said, "Sounds like he means you."

"These four men and the girl," continued the radio announcer, "were last seen at a burning strawstack near Kirksville about twenty minutes ago. There appears to have been some kind of building inside the strawstack, so it is believed this was the hide-out of the gang, and that it burned."

Monk snorted. "So now our hideout burned!"

The State-police radio man finished, "These persons will probably be riding in a 1935 model Superior sedan, black color. License Missouri 007-936."

"That's this car!" Monk roared. He stared at the others.

"You know what I think?"

"Same as the rest of us, probably," Ham said grimly. "That cross-eyed fellow who turned up at the strawstack fire wasn't as innocent as we figured. He recognized us, got the license of this car, and turned it over to the police."

Monk nodded, muttered, "We better see what Doc says about this," shifted the wave-length back to their accustomed frequency, and picked up the transmitter mike. "Doc, the law is wise to us," he said. "What'd we better do?"

"You want to help me collar Burdo Brockman?" Doc asked.

"Great blazes! You find him?"

"I trailed him," the bronze man admitted, "to a spot several miles south, on a small lake." Doc described the location of the lake accurately.

"We'll be there pronto," Monk said.

"Be careful of the police. They are looking for that car."

Johnny leaned back to say, "Yes, but they don't know I rented four cars—or I hope they don't."

It was a small lake surrounded by trees and with a railroad close by; seen from the road, the water was like a glint of steel. Renny guided the car—they had exchanged another machine for the one in which they had been riding—off the highway on to a byroad some distance from the lake, and hidden from it by the thick trees.

Doc Savage came out of thick scrub-oak brush. Dry, brilliant fallen leaves lay thick on the ground, but his big bronze form moved with very little noise.

Monk alighted from the car and threw out his chest. "Like to see that fellow give me the slip again," he growled.

They moved through brush, stooping and twisting to evade branches, stepping high and carefully to lessen the rustle of leaves.

Abruptly there was a lane. A car stood there, a big touring car with a wooden box built on the back so that the vehicle resembled a makeshift delivery truck.

Doc said, "This is Brockman's machine. He kept it in a shed in the woods some distance from where that strawstack burned."

"Kept it in a shed, eh?" Monk frowned. "Looks as if he was fixed for a quick getaway."

"The man was badly worried before we got there." Doc opened the big box constructed on the rear of the coupé. "I managed to get in here without being noticed. So following him was no trick. Look."

Doc indicated a collection of stuff that might have been found in the car of any man who liked outdoor life—a fishing rod, tackle box and some camping equipment that included a cook kit. All of the stuff was worn; the cooking pots were black.

"Fingerprints!" Ham grunted, and seized upon a sooty pot lid.

"Exactly," Doc said. "Brockman left some fingerprints on the steering wheel, and we had better compare them to be sure."

The prints were the same; they determined this easily, for they were clear prints, and all of Doc's men knew something about the science of fingerprinting.

"Boy, his hands were dirty." Monk ran a finger along the wheel's rim. "Soot. Hey, this is soot!"

"So what?" Ham said.

"Well, that strawstack burned," Monk reminded him. "And Burdo Brockman has sooty hands. Kind of a coincidence, don't you think?"

"What do you make of it?"

"All I make of any of this," Monk said gloomily, "is that my head is beginning to ache."

Doc Savage said, "Brockman should be down by the lake."

A CABIN stood on the shore, built out partially over the water. It was a rambling shack of a thing, made of boards that had badly needed paint for five years or so.

Daylight had come, but clouds were piled up in the eastern sky to make a dark rampart in front of the sun. It was gloomy. Fog covered the lake surface to a depth of fifteen or twenty feet, very thick and dark fog that was like a layer of newly shorn, unwashed wool.

"A hide-out," Monk surmised.

"Scatter," Doc suggested in a low voice, "and watch all sides of the place."

Lion Ellison moved away, took concealment behind a tree from which she could watch the west side of the shack. But she did not give her attention to the house immediately; instead, she kept her eyes on Doc Savage. She was remembering how she had been somewhat skeptical of the bronze man's ability at first. He was much different than she had thought. He was a man of amazing ability; just how remarkable he was she had only begun to realize. Or hadn't she felt this way earlier?

He disappeared while she watched him, merging with the shadows in some skillful fashion; later she suspected that he was moving in the fog close to the lake's edge, but she was not sure.

Doc Savage reached the cabin. The lake fog swirled around him, clammy and as cold as frost. He listened for a while, and decided there was one man moving inside. He advanced slowly. The ground underfoot was soggy, and covered with a frozen crust that broke with a faintly audible crushing underfoot.

Then the dog came. It was a big dog, and it came fast, making one

"woof!" noise before it tried to take Doc by the leg. He moved fast, diving and getting the animal by both ears, holding its jaws away, which would have settled the thing had not two more dogs arrived. The first dog had looked big and fierce, but these two must be his pop and mom. Doc heard them coming, saw them bulking big in the fog.

Both dogs hit him together, and he was upset. The animals were big and well trained. They took hold of him, and their teeth hurt.

The noise the dogs made was loud enough to be heard fully a mile away.

A man crashed the cabin door open and bounded out on the porch with a repeating shotgun.

JUST how Doc Savage had managed to follow his peculiar occupation and still remain alive as long as he had was a point that was puzzling to persons not intimate with the bronze man. To those who knew Doc, it was not a mystery, but a source of wonder. The reason was very careful planning. Forethought against every emergency, and advance preparation.

Typical sample of his precaution was the assortment of small grenades which were packed in flat metal cases and used by himself and supplied to his aids. These bombs were tiny and of great variety.

The grenade—it was not very much larger than a marble—which he crushed between his fingers was made of thin-walled glass and contained a combination of chemicals which had been concocted to frighten almost all animals. The principle of their concoction was simple. All animals have some odor which frightens them—bear smell, for instance, being terrifying to most breeds of dogs. Doc had duplicated the odor with chemicals, added those frightening to other common animals—he had even added an acid typical of a deadly, stinging sea growth which was the thing most feared by sharks—and the result was the little grenade which he now broke.

The dogs let loose, growled in fright and backed away.

On the porch, the man peered downward. The porch was high; he was trying to see what was below in the fog. He had unsafetied the shotgun, held it ready.

"What's wrong?" a voice called from inside the cabin.

"Dunno. Maybe the dogs caught a coon, or somethin'." The man with the shotgun strained his eyes. Abruptly he growled, "Hell! I'll take a shot or two and scare the thing away." He lifted the shotgun.

Doc Savage threw another grenade. This one was high explosive. He planted it against one corner of the cabin and there was an ear-splitting moment when the cabin corner came apart and the porch ceiling jumped up, gave a big flap as if it was trying to be a wing, then fell back.

The shotgun wielder got up from where he'd been toppled, made noises like a big frightened hog and went into the cabin.

Men inside the cabin got organized quickly, for almost instantly shotguns began going off with cannon violence.

Doc retreated. He had a great deal of respect for a shotgun.

From behind a tree, he called out sharply in the Mayan tongue. "Do not try to use gas. The wind."

A chill breeze was blowing from across the lake. It would sweep gas back upon them if they released the stuff.

On the higher ground, among the trees, there was less fog. Monk, doubling low and zigzagging, joined Doc and demanded, "How many guys in there? Did you see anybody when you trailed Brockman here?"

"Brockman walked straight into the cabin and closed the door. He had a gun in his hand when he entered. I got the idea there were four or five men in the cabin, maybe more."

At this point, there was a commotion at the cabin. Angry shouting. Shots.

Renny's voice bellowed, "They had a prisoner!! He's gettin' away!"

Doc had seen the man. He seemed to have both ankles bound. A rope dangled from one wrist. He was hopping, falling down, heaving up, hopping again. He had a shotgun.

The man came out of the fog some distance from the cabin, miraculously unhit by shotgun fire, and toppled behind a tree.

Monk barked, "I'll see who he is," and raced toward the man.

Suddenly Monk was squalling in rage, and heading for the most convenient tree.

The prisoner they had just seen escape from the cabin had thrown down on Monk with his shotgun and peppered the homely chemist.

Monk got behind a tree, scratched the spots where the shot had gone in, and said many loud words that he could never have taken to Sunday school.

Renny boomed, "Hey, you—" at the hobbled man with the shotgun, but let it go at that when the man sent a charge of shot that knocked bark off the tree which sheltered the big-fisted engineer.

There was some more shooting. But none of it from the cabin. A minute or two must have passed.

Doc Savage was moving warily, approaching the man with the bound ankles and the shotgun. He could see the man distinctly, could have winged him, except that he had no gun. For a long time, Doc had made it a practice not to carry a gun, feeling that the possession of one would lead him to put too much dependence on the weapon in an emergency—he had seen how helpless professional gunmen became when disarmed.

The man with the shotgun began staring at the cabin. Something seemed to dawn on him. He turned wildly in the direction of Doc's men.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Maybe I've made a mistake!"

Monk said, "You sure did!" and added some choice sulphur-coated words.

"I'm Burdo Brockman!" the man shouted.

Chapter XIV. BURDO BROCKMAN, CRIMINAL

HAM called softly to Doc, "He sure ain't the Burdo Brockman we followed down here from Kirksville."

The new Burdo Brockman had not decided they were friends; he held his shotgun warily. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Ham called, "Doc Savage's party."

The new Brockman's groan was audible to all of them. He threw down his shotgun.

"Come here," he wailed. "I've made a terrible mistake." He stared hopelessly at them while they ran to his side and sank in the shelter of a tree clump.

"I broke away from them," the man said. "When the shooting started, I figured they had fallen out among themselves. I got my hands loose, grabbed a shotgun, clubbed a man over the head and jumped out of a window."

He was a long-legged, long-armed man who had a short body. His face was somewhat red, his nose was

slightly on the beak side, and he had a mouth that was wide, grim, lipless. He was the kind of man who gave the impression of always going around looking grim and forbidding. You looked at him and instinctively knew that he worried over details.

He pointed toward the cabin. "While I was shooting at you," he said, "they got away."

Monk stared at the cabin. "How do you know they got away?"

"You don't hear them, do you?" The new Brockman shook his head gloomily. "They had three canoes on the back porch. All they had to do was drop them in the water, get in, and paddle away."

Johnny growled, "I'll be superamalgamated!" He dashed forward, holding his arms up before his eyes as he ran. He did not fear the shotgun pellets, except in his face, because he wore a light undergarment of alloy chain mesh that was impervious to ordinary bullets.

He was almost to the cabin door when Doc Savage caught him and stopped him. "Use our heads," the bronze man warned.

Johnny understood. He ran around to the lake edge, stood there listening. The bronze man was beside him. Johnny whispered, "Hear anything?"

Doc nodded. He said, "They are heading straight across." Then he spun, called, "Ham, you and Renny are fast on your feet. Go north around the lake and try to head them off."

"Where'll you be?" Renny demanded. "We don't want to be jumping on you by mistake."

"Swimming."

Renny looked at the water. There was a fringe of ice like glass along the edges. He said, "Br-r-r!" and ran away with Ham.

Getting into the water was like entering a bath of sharp needles. The bronze man's routine of exercises—the regular daily two-hour period which he devoted to scientifically developing his physical and mental faculties—had conditioned his body to intense shock; nevertheless, he had to keep his teeth clamped tightly to prevent them from rattling.

He swam a fast crawl, arms coming up and lunging out ahead with machine regularity, a long line of swirling water and foam trailing out behind.

When he came out on a muddy shore, it was close to three beached canoes. Paddles had been flung down carelessly beside the craft. He listened.

A motor car was leaving the vicinity, traveling fast.

Enough frost still remained on the grass to show footprints. Doc followed the tracks of the men who had been in the canoes, a trail that led him to an old cowshed. From there, tire tracks led to the road.

Ham and Renny arrived, puffing, clothing muddy.

"They got away," Doc said quietly.

THEY walked back to the canoes, paddled across to the cabin, and Johnny met them. Johnny looked shocked, and was perspiring slightly in spite of the cold.

"It's luck-lucky you stopped me from charging into that cabin," he muttered, using small words.

"What ails you?" Renny peered at him. "You look as if somebody had taken the lid off and let you see the works."

Johnny beckoned, and walked to the cabin. He leaned in through a window from which the glass had been broken, pointed. "Just suppose I had opened that door."

He meant dynamite. There was almost a case of it. On top of the dynamite had been scattered a box of caps. A heavy crowbar was propped against the door where a slight shock would dislodge it, causing the heavy bar of steel to fall on the caps. The shock would doubtless have detonated the caps; the dynamite in turn would have exploded. It was an ingenious quick job of fashioning a death trap.

Renny said hoarsely, "We better fix that thing before it takes a notion to go off by itself." He clambered in through the window.

Doc Savage and Ham searched the cabin rapidly. They found evidence that a number of men had used the place for some time. Judging from the stock of food on hand, they had intended to use it for a considerable period.

In a table drawer, they found a number of bills. They were made out to Elmo Anderson.

"Elmo Anderson." Ham rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "This hitches together, Doc. One of the three men the murdered banker was having investigated was named Elmo Handy Anderson."

Monk and Lion Ellison entered the cabin, accompanied by the new Burdo Brockman. They had freed the man's ankles, although the bit of rope still dangled from his right wrist.

Doc said quietly, "So *you* are Burdo Brockman?"

"Yes." The man moved his gaze from Doc to the faces of the others. He must have seen disbelief. He seemed embarrassed. "I don't blame you," he said. "It is a fantastic thing."

"You don't blame us for what?" Ham asked.

"For not believing me."

"You haven't told us anything yet."

Monk said, "He told me and Miss Ellison his story." The chemist glanced at the long-legged, sour-looking man. "Maybe you better tell it again."

The man took a deep breath and seemed to recite his whole story without coming up for air. "I am Burdo Brockman," he said, "and this is a fact you can ascertain by consulting my lawyers, my brokers or any of my business associates in New York City. I am—ah—well, I own a few factories and things. Three weeks ago, I was seized by four men I had never seen before, put in a plane, and brought here. They've been keeping me here since. I do not know why. I do not know who the men are." He scowled darkly. "It is all a confounded mystery to me."

Doc Savage made no comment; instead, he walked through the cabin, making another quick search, after which he joined the others and voiced a warning. "There was a great deal of shooting here," he reminded them. "Someone is sure to come to investigate."

"Yeah, and the cops will probably get tipped off again," Monk muttered.

They went back to their car. There were seven of them now, including the man they had rescued, a

well-packed load for the machine.

The car rolled in silence. The sun had climbed above the bank of clouds and was pouring cold-white light over the khaki-colored cornfields and the brilliant foliage of such trees as had not yet lost their leaves. The car had no heater; it was cold enough in the machine that they could see their breath. The windows and shield soon fogged so that Doc, who was driving, had to keep rubbing the glass with a palm.

The new Brockman spoke suddenly. "I think I am supposed to be in India."

"Eh?" Monk stared at him.

"That's the trick they worked," he explained. "I saw some stationery with the name of a hunting lodge in India on it. I think they were using it to write letters to my folks in New York."

Monk said, "But that picture—" and Doc kicked him on the shin. "Ouch!" Monk finished.

"What did you say about pictures?" the long-armed man asked.

Monk could think fast.

"Why, we got a picture of a little wizened guy," he said. "I wonder if you know who he is?"

They passed the picture of the mysterious runt, as Monk had taken to calling him, back to their passenger, and he examined the print. He pursed his lips, sucked at a tooth, scratched his chin with a fingernail. "No."

"No what?" Monk asked.

"Never saw him before." The man looked up. "Is he involved in this?"

"That little runt," Monk said grimly, "is involved in something, all right. Maybe he *is* the something. He reminds me of the guy who popped up when they rubbed the lamp in that Aladdin story. To tell the truth, we don't know—"

Doc Savage interrupted quietly, asking. "Mr. Brockman, have you ever heard of a man named Danny Dimer?"

"Never," said the man promptly.

"Or a banker named Ellery P. Dimer?"

"No."

Monk had been watching Doc Savage curiously out of the corner of one small, quizzical eye. It had occurred to Monk that he had better keep still and let Doc conduct this conversation.

Doc said, "Mr. Brockman, do you know a man named Elmo Handy Anderson?"

Their passenger reacted to that. He gave a jump, sat up very straight.

"Why, that's my old handy man," he said. "Handy worked for me for years. He's a short, small man. Or haven't you met him?"

Ham, who also rode in the front seat, opened his mouth and got as far as, "We haven't"—before Monk stopped him with an elbow jab in the ribs.

Doc said. "That doesn't quite answer his description. By the way, did you know the cabin we just left was occupied by Handy Anderson?"

"

What?" The man looked stark.

"Apparently it was. There were grocery bills made out to that name in the place."

The other frowned. "Handy Anderson isn't short or small. I told you that because I—hah, hah—was testing you. Handy is an elderly fellow with white hair that is always tangled, and he'll remind you of a bulldog more than anything else."

Monk leaned over to Doc and whispered excitedly, "That guy he just described is the first Burdo Brockman we met. The one at Kirksville, where the strawstack burned."

Doc turned around to look levelly at the man in the back seat. "Testing us, you say?"

"I—I'm sorry." The man grimaced. "This is all very mysterious and confusing."

Doc said, "Have you any idea why the man whom you have just described as Handy Anderson should be masquerading as Burdo Brockman?"

The long-armed man leaned back in the rear seat.

"I'm dumfounded," he said.

MONK was completely confused—Ham, Renny, Johnny and Lion Ellison were in the same boat with him—and he could not have suggested their next move. They would, of course, have to avoid the police and arrest, for once they were in jail there was little chance of Doc's influence getting them out, even on bail. The charge was murder—murder of the State's governor. That Doc had contrived an escape from the Kirksville jail did not mean a jail could not be constructed strong enough to hold him. Monk was confident there were quite a few bastiles which could hold the bronze man.

Monk could see nothing that they could do now except try to keep out of jail.

He suspected Doc had more tangible ideas. The bronze man had turned off the highway and was taking dirt roads north and west heading in the general direction of the spot where they had left the plane.

Certainly there was nothing in Doc's movements to enlighten Monk after they reached the field where they had left their plane. The ship still stood there. Several farmers were walking around the big streamlined craft, but there were no police in evidence.

Doc drove past without stopping, continued until he came to an abandoned farmhouse. It was not difficult, in this part of Missouri, to find abandoned farms. Monk opened a barbed-wire gate, and Doc drove through tall dead weeds to the barn and ran the car inside.

"Machine will be out of sight here," he explained.

"It occurs to me," Renny rumbled, "that our plane is going to get some attention. A strange ship abandoned in a pasture several miles from town is certain to arouse comment."

"Well, I'll be superamalgamated!" Johnny exploded. "Once the police come, they'll investigate and find out the plane is registered in Doc's name."

"Which will make it too bad," Renny agreed.

Doc Savage volunteered no comment. He walked to the farmhouse, which was in fair condition. After working on the lock with a piece of wire, he got inside. He looked around and registered satisfaction.

"This will do," he said. "Mr. Brockman and myself can stay here while the rest of you go and get those fellows."

"Go get what fellows?" Renny blurted.

Doc brought his hand to his mouth and made a sound that was apparently clearing his throat. Actually, the noise was a few Mayan words, the equivalent of, "Don't give this away."

Renny blinked, understood, and said, "Oh, sure. I get you."

"Take the car," Doc continued. "Leave the plane where it is. Mr. Brockman and myself may need it for an escape."

"Right," Renny agreed.

"You will have plenty of time," Doc explained. "They do not suspect that we have the least idea what it is all about. Certainly they won't dream that we have a great deal of dope on them—enough to seize many of them."

The bronze man smiled. He was aware that the long-armed Brockman was staring at him in droop-jawed amazement.

"They don't know we've solved the mystery of those killings and the rest of the stuff they've pulled," Doc added. "So get going, fellows. Bring them in."

Renny asked, "You mean all of us? Monk, Ham, Johnny and myself? Everybody?"

"Yes."

Amazed curiosity got the best of long-limbed Brockman. He clutched Doc's arm, demanded, "What on earth does this mean?"

"It means," Doc said, "that we've solved this mystery. And now we're going to lay our hands on most of the men really responsible for these murders."

Chapter XV. A TRICK PAYS OFF

MONK, Ham, Renny and Johnny had one thing in common—they were not mind readers. Hence they had no idea what Doc was talking about, and they were as surprised as anybody, but they had the judgment to make their astonishment look as much as possible like eager enthusiasm. Lion Ellison was probably less amazed; she had seen just enough of the bronze man's remarkable ability to be willing to expect anything.

"All right, Doc," Monk said. "We're off."

Renny and the others walked to the barn and climbed into the car. They were silent—there didn't seem to be anything to say. The sedan rolled through the tall weeds to the dirt road, bumped over the grader rut and turned left.

Monk said, "That was one of the most unexpected things I've seen Doc do."

Renny, Ham and Johnny wrestled silently—and vainly—with their thoughts.

Lion Ellison said, "What are we supposed to do?"

"What we usually do in a case like this," Monk told her, "is stick around and keep an ear cocked at the short-wave radio. Guess we'll do that."

They drove on down the road.

Back in the abandoned farmhouse, Doc Savage went through the motions of making himself comfortable. The place was bare. Going out to the barn, the bronze man came back with an armload of dry timothy which he had collected from the loft; he heaped this in a corner. "Do for a bed," he explained.

The long-armed, long-legged Brockman stared at him in astonishment. "We going to be here that long?"

"It will take time."

The other seemed to be in the grip of complete astonishment. He went through the usual puzzle motions—scratching his jaw, rubbing his head and screwing his face around in thinking shapes. Finally he muttered, "You have solved the whole mystery?"

"Practically."

"What is back of it?"

Instead of answering the query, Doc Savage seemed not to hear. He leaned back, half closed his flake-gold eyes, and after a moment indulged in what appeared to be philosophy. "You know, it has often occurred to me to wonder whether the human race might not be fundamentally evil. Otherwise, why should social behavior apparently be controlled by fear?" The bronze man's flake-gold eyes rested on the other. "You do not understand what I mean, do you? Take this situation, for example. The thing could have been a great boon to mankind, but due to the evil texture of certain minds, it is going to be anything but a boon, unless we can stop it."

"What you're saying doesn't make sense to me."

"You'll understand when my associates come back with the prisoners."

The bronze man got up, moved to the door and stood there for a while.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Not very."

"I am." Doc stared off into the distance. "There is a farmhouse across the field three-quarters of a mile or so. It might be a good idea to go over there and buy a chicken or something we can cook. Want to go along?"

"I—hm-m-m—guess not. I'm kind of tired."

"Be with you soon."

The bronze man moved away from the house and was soon lost from sight in a cornfield.

The man who had said he was Burdo Brockman stood in the door staring after Doc. Nothing on his face was pleasant.

"This plays hell with our plans," he growled.

THE man who had said he was Burdo Brockman forced himself to remain where he was until Doc Savage had been out of sight for some moments. By that time, impatience had got a little perspiration out on his body. Finally, deciding it was safe, he lunged off the rickety old porch, galloped through the weeds, hurdled the barbed-wire fence and took out down the road. His haste-frenzied feet knocked up little dust puffs.

The plane—Johnny's ship, which Doc's party had been using—stood in the pasture, a great glinting metallic insect in the morning sun.

Several curiosity viewers—they were neighborhood farmers—were examining the plane or loafing about discussing crops and prices. A wagon and two cars had stopped on the dirt road.

The long-armed man studied the scene carefully.

"No cops," he grunted aloud. He seemed very relieved.

The man straightened his clothing, brushed off the weeds and walked out boldly. He approached the plane.

"Hi-yah," he said to the farmers.

"Howdy," they greeted, and stared at him curiously.

"My plane." The man gestured at the ship carelessly. "Broke a little gadget in the engine last night and had to land. Been to town and got it." He spoke airily and with excellent convincingness. The farmers seemed unconcerned, not even greatly interested in the machine. As a matter of fact, planes were not unusual to any of them, and they were standing around visiting, not gaping in awe at the aircraft.

The man climbed up on the wing and unsnapped a port in the streamlined cowling that gave access to the vitals of one engine. He fumbled therein for a while, making a pretense of repairs, but actually being careful to touch nothing.

Later, when he went to the plane door, he found it locked. He swore under his breath, then demonstrated that he was quick-witted.

He fumbled in his pocket, pretending to look for a key.

"Hell! I've lost my key," he said loudly. "Guess I'll have to force the door."

He got in easier than he had expected. One hard wrench snapped the door open. He clambered inside, scrambled forward to the controls.

The practiced manner in which the man fingered the controls showed he knew flying, but apparently he lacked experience with this type of ship. He expended several moments familiarizing himself with the instruments. All the time, he kept throwing sharp glances over the vicinity. But the farmers did not seem interested.

He tried the starters. They growled briefly, then motors coughed blue smoke and noise. Later, the plane took the air in a manner that caused the man to breathe, "Sweet!" under his breath. As soon as he was lined out on a course, he began using the two-way radio.

THE little radio transmitter had a frequency-marked dial, so that setting it to a definite wave-length was a simple matter. The man moved down into the short-band past twenty megacycles where a little power was sufficient for transmission over tremendous distance, then disconnected the "scrambler" attachment.

The man began calling, not using any call letters, which was a violation of Department of Commerce law. As long as he was operating a portable, there was little chance of a radio inspector with a direction-finder locating the transmitter.

The man consulted his wrist watch, noted that it was exactly eleven o'clock; he began at the figure one and lettered the alphabet around the dial—he started A, B, C, and so on—until he reached the figure eleven, which proved to be the letter K. This was the key to a code, it developed, because he began speaking into the microphone words that began with the letter K. He gave them in a rambling fashion, as they entered his mind.

His calling went something like, "Knee, knack, kidnap, kid, keg, keep, kaffir, kick—"

After he had called for a while, he signed off by simply saying, "Come in."

His first call got no response, so he scowled and tried again. He kept it up for almost thirty minutes, and twice during that interval rage so overcame him that he pounded the empty seat beside him in fury.

"All right," a voice out of the ether said finally.

The man recognized the voice. He snarled, "Where the hell have you been?"

"Keep your shirt on," the voice advised. "We just went out for lunch."

"I told you, damn you, to keep that radio on," the man yelled.

"What are you squalling about? I just talked to the boys who were in that cabin on the lake, and they got away in fine shape. So everything goes smooth."

The man in the plane swore violently.

"I've been trying to get hold of you to tell you that Doc Savage's men are on their way to pick some of you up," he shouted.

"Pick who up?"

"I don't know which ones. But Doc Savage has found out a lot more than we thought he had."

The distant man was inclined to be skeptical and critical. He said, "What's the matter with *you*? Did they find out you weren't what you pretended to be?"

"They never suspected me."

"Then why didn't you kill Doc Savage? That was why you jumped out of the cabin, pretending to be a prisoner, wasn't it?"

"I didn't have a chance," the man explained sourly. "They were all together until the last, and then Doc Savage pulled out after a chicken before I could get a chance at him."

"Weren't scared, were you?"

The man in the plane swore violently. "The fact that we're both mixed up in this thing doesn't give you any right to be impertinent. If you know what's good for you, you'll keep a civil tongue."

"O. K.," the other said soothingly. "I didn't mean anything by it. What have you got on your mind?"

"Get the men together. Assemble at headquarters. I'll join you."

"This must be serious," the other said in an impressed voice.

"It is."

THE man picked up a doubletracked railroad and followed it until he reached the outskirts of Kansas City. He swung over to the river and trailed it around until the flat expanse of the municipal airport was discernible—then he changed his mind about landing.

"No use taking chances," he muttered.

It had occurred to him that Doc Savage might have reached a telephone at Kirksville and in some fashion have spread an alarm for the plane.

He set down on the river itself, cranking up the landing gear and handling the plane gingerly, for he had never manipulated a seaplane before. He sent the ship against the bank with jarring force; the hull slid far up on the mud.

The man bounded out, lost no time about leaving the spot.

Almost immediately, an apparently solid section in the wing of the plane heaved up, and Doc Savage clambered out of the recess that was exposed. The thick streamlined wing had been equipped with that recess specifically for stowaway purposes, such tricky devices being a part of the bronze man's stock in trade.

Doc's usually expressionless face showed pleasure. It had worked very nicely: The sending of his men away on a trumped-up mission of seizing their enemies—that had frightened the man who said he was Brockman into taking flight. The departure of Doc, ostensibly to get a chicken for lunch, had given the man his chance to flee. Watching the fellow, Doc had known immediately that he was heading for the plane. He had gotten there first; there had been barely time to explain to the farmers that they must act as if they hadn't seen him get into the plane. Probably the farmers hadn't understood; but what they had comprehended were the ten-dollar bills he had distributed to pay them for their trouble. Yes, it had worked very nicely so far.

Doc got on the short-wave radio, put it on his usual wave-length, and said, "Monk?"

"Yes?" Monk's voice said.

"The action in this thing is swinging to Kansas City," Doc said swiftly. "Burdo Brockman lived in Kirksville—that's why the thing started around there. But now they're moving in on Kansas City. You and the others had better get down here."

"May take us some time. We'll have to drive down in the car. Might have some cop trouble."

"Do your best."

"Right. Where'll we meet?"

Doc explained where the plane lay. "However, I will take one of the small radio outfits with me and try to contact you en route."

The radio which the bronze man carried away from the plane was a compact little outfit of the "transceiver" type, not much more bulky than a good-sized folding camera, very efficient to horizon

distance. It had a carrying strap.

It was snowing; the ground was white, flakes were whizzing through the air like particles of glass.

Going up the river bank, he carefully stepped in the tracks of the long-armed man—a forethought, in case the man should come back.

There was brush at the top. Doc moved rapidly. There was a busy street off to the south, and the quarry had made for that. When Doc located the fellow, he had just reached the boulevard and was waiting beside a sign that said, "Bus Stop." He was beating his arms in the cold.

The bronze man had a trained muscular ability that made him very fast on his feet—but his speed was remarkable only when in competition with another human; against a bus, he did not think much of his chances.

So he veered left, ran, and managed to find a taxicab—it was his idea to board the bus before it stopped for the long-armed man, if he had to—and followed his quarry through the storm without difficulty. The man got out in the downtown district, not far from Seventh and Grand.

Chapter XVI. PENTHOUSE STORY

IT was one of Kansas City's largest buildings; even in New York City, it would have been rated a skyscraper. There was a bank of eight elevators, all operating, any one of which a visitor might take.

Since the day was rapidly turning into a blizzard, they were using the revolving doors. Sidewalks were crowded. Doc was close to the man—thirty feet or so back—when the fellow entered the revolving door, and all set with what resembled a small rubber ball in his hands.

He threw the ball; it struck in the compartment of the rotating door with the man near his feet. It burst, as it was designed to do, and released a small spray of chemical that splashed on the fellow's shoes and trousers cuffs.

The man glanced down, but the rubber container, having collapsed, resembled a pencil eraser; he shrugged, went on.

It was fortunate, Doc reflected, that he had used a tube of darkening stain on his face and hands, and turned his coat inside out. The coat was lined so that it reversed a different color and cut. Also he had changed the color of his eyes by using the little tinted glass optical caps such as he had employed in disguising Lion Ellison much earlier. He had done this in the taxi.

He walked into the warm lobby of the building and watched the indicator over the elevator. The first stop the cage made was on the sixteenth floor. That helped.

Doc took another cage, rode to the sixteenth, got out and produced a sealed metal canister which looked like a talcum-powder can, and in fact was labeled as such.

He sprinkled powder on the floor in front of the door of the elevator which the long-armed man had taken. Nothing happened, so he took the stairs to the next floor.

He repeated the operation until he reached the topmost floor, and still nothing happened.

Doc leaned against the wall, disgusted and puzzled. The acid which had been in the rubber container was very potent—its vapor, present in unbelievably minute quantities, would cause the normally bluish powder to turn red.

The acid on the man's shoes would leave vapor wherever he walked for a while, and the vapor was heavier than air so that it remained close to the floor. But it hadn't worked.

While Doc was pondering, a rising elevator went past. Went *past*. Something strange about that, because this was supposed to be the top floor.

There was a stairway and a steel door that he had presumed led up to the elevator-machinery housing on the roof.

The door was locked. He started to pick the lock, then became cautious.

He detached a small gadget of wires and tubes which had been affixed inside the lid of the radio. A wire ran from this, and he plugged it into a jack on the radio which utilized only the receiving amplifier. He ran the gadget around the edges of the locked door.

The door was wired with a burglar alarm—one of the most effective types which utilized a circuit continuously charged with a small current which would be broken the moment the door was opened. The gadget had registered presence of the tiny electrical field surrounding the alarm wires.

THERE was a frost-glazed window at the end of the corridor. Doc opened it, and biting cold wind and cutting snow particles whipped his face. He studied the brick wall, the ornamental coping, with no enthusiasm whatever.

He climbed out and began going up, closing the window behind him. There were hand holds—cracks between the stones into which he could wedge fingertips—and ordinarily climbing would not have been treacherous, if one discounted the fact that to slip was death, and the half-inch width of the fingertip supports.

The cold wind pounded his clothing against his body; it pushed at him, and made a doglike whining around the carved facets of the ornamental coping above. There was ice in some of the cracks where his fingertips had to grip; at first, when his fingers were warm, it was easy to tell when they were resting on ice, but soon the cold and strain made it nerve-shatteringly difficult.

At length he swung over the coping and lay there on a narrow tarred ledge; he had only to get up and clamber over a low wall onto the roof. He was safe now.

There was a penthouse atop the skyscraper.

Some of the trees in the penthouse garden were stunted evergreens; the others were scrawny and naked of leaves. There were flower and plant boxes, the stringy contents looking as dead as bits of binder twine. The snow had drifted over everything.

Doc moved carefully, using a hand to wipe out traces of his footprints as best he could.

He did not try to enter the penthouse, feeling that opening a window or door would send a chill betraying draft racing through the place. He found a niche, an angle between two walls, where the snow was deep and a window was convenient.

And now he made use of another accessory of the radio, this one a contrivance no longer than an overcoat button. It was a microphone, equipped with a suction cup which would hold it to a windowpane; wires ran to a small plug which fitted the receiver amplifier jack on the radio. It was an ultra-sensitive eavesdropping device.

Doc Savage attached the contrivance very cautiously to a windowpane—he selected a window which he

judged from the proximity of a fireplace was a den or living room—and quickly settled into the deep snow. He used his hands to fill his tracks, then covered himself with snow as best he could.

Within a few minutes, the howling wind would obliterate traces of his coming.

FOR a long time in the room, they talked about race horses and racetracks and gambling joints.

When the talk swung to circus life, Doc sharpened his interest. After a while, he had catalogued at least part of the men as to profession—evidently they belonged to a group of daredevils who traveled with planes, furnishing advertising and thrills for a circus.

There was a circus background in the mystery somewhere, Doc knew. Lion Ellison's brother had been a flying-circus employee, and Lion herself had belonged to the circus. The circus thread even extended to Ellery P. Dimer, the murdered banker; he'd had a financial and personal interest in various circuses and carnivals, Doc recalled from a newspaper account of the man's life.

The gang was assembling in the room. That accounted for the idle waiting. From time to time a new arrival appeared.

But at last an authoritative voice spoke out. "All right, guys. We're pressed for time. The bunch hasn't arrived from Kirksville yet, but we won't wait on them."

Doc recognized the voice. It belonged to the long-armed man he had trailed here, the fellow who had said he was Burdo Brockman.

"We've been working in separate groups," said the pseudo Burdo Brockman. "Some of you may not know everything that's been done. Part of you went to New York with Danny Dimer after the girl. Some of you were in Jefferson City. Others were here in Kansas City. And of course the boys from Kirksville haven't shown up yet."

The man cleared his throat noisily.

"We'll have kind of a roundup of the situation," he said. "But first, I want to make damn sure everything is safe. Some of you go out and look around the terraces."

Several men left the room in obedience to the command. The microphone pickup was very sensitive; Doc could hear the men howl when they stepped out into the biting cold. His unaided ears picked up the grinding of their footsteps as they walked around the terrace.

At least two men walked directly past Doc, while he remained tense, ready to explode out of the snowdrift the instant their footsteps stopped. But the men continued on.

They assembled inside again, and a man reported, "Nothin' out there but the cold."

"Here's a roundup of the situation," the false Brockman announced. "When we started this, it looked perfect. Brockman didn't suspect a thing. It looked like everything was getting off to a smooth start, until that damned Neddy Ellison had to go pure on us. Neddy, the young sap, had been working in Danny Dimer's flying circus for quite a while, and Danny thought he was O. K. We needed O. K. guys, so we rung this Neddy Ellison in. As soon as he found out there were to be killings, Neddy turned sanctimonious on us. We had to croak him, and Dimer did that by fixing Neddy's parachute."

The speaker stopped to swear impressively. "That fixed that," he said, "except for one thing. After Neddy Ellison's parachute split and he hit the ground, he took about fifteen minutes dying. He talked. Nobody but Dimer heard him talk, so that didn't do any harm—but we learned something that put us in a

hell of a spot. Neddy Ellison made a dying statement that he'd wrote his sister the whole story."

"It then became necessary," continued the speaker inside the penthouse, "to put Lion Ellison where she couldn't do any harm. Some of the boys were squeamish about killing a girl, so we decided to frame her. We didn't know her address; we just knew she lived in St. Louis. And we knew she was a circus performer. So we advertised for a circus performer that fitted her description, and sure enough, she turned up."

The man suddenly began laughing.

"You know how the framing was done," he reminded.

Then the speaker's joy died a rather cold death in his throat. "The damned police didn't arrest the girl in the Kirksville drugstore after we tipped them off," he said. "And she stole a plane and struck out for New York to get to Doc Savage, the little devil." He swore violently. "So our troubles commenced."

"Where is Brockman now?" a man asked.

"Oh, he got suspicious and rushed down to that cabin of mine on the lake, and I had to grab him. The boys coming down from Kirksville are bringing him. Don't worry about Brockman."

"The guy to worry about is Doc Savage, eh?"

"He's been lucky so far, damn his hide! His men grabbed Dimer in New York, and Dimer figured he was lucky to even get away. We tipped off the police, had Doc Savage put in jail when he came to Kirksville, but he got out."

"I've heard a lot about that bronze guy," another man volunteered.

"He moves fast," growled the long-armed man who had masqueraded as Brockman. "He turned up in Jefferson City, and grabbed Dan Meek. He was about to use truth serum on Meek, which would have been too bad for us. Fortunately, some of the boys were around there, and they took care of the situation although they had to kill Meek. They would have killed Doc Savage too, except one of them was using a meat cleaver from the kitchen, and the blade broke off, which left them without a weapon. They had no other weapon they were willing to tackle Doc Savage with, so they beat it without finishing him. You dopes! You realize what an opportunity you passed up?"

"You let Doc Savage and his men get away; and they came back to Kirksville and found Burdo Brockman. Brockman was suspicious. Brockman burned his laboratory so they couldn't find what was in it—"

"So Brockman burned the laboratory!" a man ejaculated.

"Sure. Brockman didn't want the truth to get out. He was scared, and worried."

"Was that when Brockman got wise that you had stolen the thing?"

"He was sure then. Before, he had just suspected."

"The way I understand the rest of it," someone added, "you joined Doc Savage with the idea of getting rid of him yourself. What happened to that scheme?"

The man who put this query was the fellow who had just been criticized for the failure in Jefferson City.

The leader did not relish the criticism. He swore. "There was no chance to carry out my plans. But I

found out the bronze guy was sending his gang to grab part of our outfit. I put a stop to that, didn't I?"

"Let's stop this bickering," interposed a fellow who had not taken previous part in the conversation. "What comes next?"

"Plans."

Chapter XVII. THE PRINCE

DOC SAVAGE disconnected the eavesdropping microphone from the radio amplifier, and put the radio in regular operation. He held the microphone very close to his lips, so that his voice was no louder than a whisper, inaudible outside the snowdrift. It was a little difficult to work under the snow, but efficiency of the short-wave radio should not be hampered a great deal. The height of the skyscraper roof should improve operation of the set.

"Monk," Doc said.

The homely chemist's response over the radio was almost instantaneous. "Yeah, Doc."

"How near are you to Kansas City?"

"We got a lucky break. Got to a town named Brookfield, saw a plane on a little airport there and rented it off the guy. We landed it on the edge of Kansas City, and we just rented a car from one of those Drive-It-Yourself places. What's up?"

Doc Savage told him what was up.

"You understand fully?" Doc asked.

"I think so."

"What about Ham?" Doc inquired.

"R'aring to go," Ham advised.

The bronze man switched off the radio, reconnected the sensitive eavesdropping device.

"How long will it take those guys to get down from Kirksville?" the fellow asked.

"Not more than another half hour," said a voice.

Doc Savage recognized that voice—not directly, but from the description which had been given him both by Lion Ellison and Monk and Ham.

It was the small, wizened man. The mysterious runt, Monk had called him. The little fellow who had vanished under such fantastic circumstances in the basement garage of the bronze man's New York headquarters.

Doc continued listening, but there was a silence that struck him—unfortunately, he did not realize this until it was too late—as being peculiar. He turned over suddenly, dug a hole in the snow, and put an ear against the cold tiling of the terrace floor. But that was too late also.

There were seven or eight men, and they all landed on the snowdrift at once, driving clutching hands into the snow.

Doc tried to evade them, keeping under the snow. He kept the radio apparatus in his hand. But a man

got hold of each of his legs.

"Don't kill 'im!" a voice yelled.

After the shout, Doc Savage stopped trying to keep under cover. He came to his feet, deliberately used the radio as a club—and struck. The little radio was tough, downed two men, and Doc kept on using it violently as a club, his idea being to mangle the apparatus as completely as possible, so that they would not recognize it as a radio. When the radio was broken, he dropped it and they trampled on it some.

The bronze man kept on fighting, not with his full ability, but enough to make it look good. Sufficient to keep them from realizing he was shamming.

He was beaten down, held arm and leg, and carried into the penthouse, to a room that was long and rather shoddily furnished, but warm from a blaze leaping in a fireplace at one end.

Nearly a dozen men were present. Doc studied them, decided most of them were strangers to him, and none of them important other than they fell into the general classification of the enemy. There were two exceptions.

The wizened little man stood there, an unlovely grin on his strange and rather mystical face.

"Danny Dimer," Doc Savage said dryly. "You operate a flying circus which does advertising and stunts for the common garden or three-ring variety of circus."

Dimer showed his teeth. "If I could have gotten to you in New York, I would have been spared this meeting."

"You might have, at that," Doc agreed. "Not knowing your mysterious method of murder, I would have been lucky to escape."

Dimer said, "So you've figured everything out?"

"Not everything."

"He hasn't," interrupted the long-armed man, "figured out how he's going to get out of this mess."

Doc studied the long-armed man. "You are Elmo Handy Anderson."

"So you figured I wasn't Brockman?"

"Yes. You were Brockman's assistant. Brockman is a scientist and inventor. When he perfected the thing you wanted, you stole it from him."

Handy Anderson scowled. "How'd you figure that?"

"Brockman was worried when we found him in Kirksville," Doc said. "He already suspected you. He escaped from us and went to your cabin—probably to confront you with the truth."

Handy Anderson's anger showed how close to truth the guessing must have come. He got up swearing, yelling, "Half of you guys scatter! Get out and find how many guys this bronze devil brought with him."

"I was alone."

Anderson scowled at Doc. "I'll bet."

"I stowed away in the plane." Doc explained the exact location of the plane on the Missouri River.

Anderson was unconvinced. "Look this place over," he ordered. "Give those elevator operators hell. They're getting a hundred a week not to let something like this happen."

At this point, another man entered. He had a bundle of newspapers under an arm. He stopped and stared at Doc in astonishment.

"Well, well—snap out of it!" Anderson rapped impatiently. "What do the newspapers say?"

The man handed over the newspaper.

"The schedule of the prince has been decided upon," he said. "He will register at a hotel, attend a banquet, and be at the automobile show."

Anderson said, "That's good. Just so we know where he'll be."

A man looked puzzled and asked, "Is this prince—"

"He's the next victim in an instantaneous murder," Anderson said grimly.

DOC SAVAGE craned his neck, got a look at the newspaper and identified the prince referred to. He could have made an accurate guess, anyway. Front pages of late had been devoted almost entirely to that prince.

Doc didn't approve of the prince's visit. The prince himself was probably a nice-enough guy; at least, he was patriotic enough to be making this American tour.

He was Prince Axel Gustav something-or-other of a neutral nation in war-torn Europe, a little dab of a country that was about to be gobbled up by the wolves. Prince Axel was making a "good will" tour of the United States. That shouldn't have fooled anybody for a minute, really. What Prince Axel Gustav something-or-other was doing was capitalizing on the well-known fact that the Yankee public is generally a pushover for the royalty racket. The Rumanians had worked it back in the 1920s, the English had worked it in 1939, and now Axel was trying it.

Putting it over, too. The newspapers and newsreels were giving him a lot of notice. True, as the royal purple went, he was small fry. But he was a nice, photogenic kind of a guy with a big grin and a good brand of English that was almost Yankee. His publicity men had dug up some gags for Prince Axel to use, so he was a wow.

The real idea, of course, was to dupe your Uncle Sam and make him the goat by getting him to intervene in the coming crisis in which Axel's country was fairly certain, unless Uncle interfered, to get gobbled up.

The fact that Prince Axel's country had been manufacturing cannon and guns and shells by the shipload and selling them to the enemy of the nation that was about to do the gobbling—well, that might have had something to do with it. But Axel was careful not to mention it.

Doc Savage watched Handy Anderson and Danny Dimer.

The pair were looking at each other, and getting excited while they were doing it. They were like two cats visioning a mental mouse, and licking their chops.

A man picked up the newspaper, examined it, said, "It says here the police have nothing new on the murder of Banker Ellery P. Dimer."

Danny Dimer swore cheerfully. "That banker was my half brother, and a fool. He had a name of being a right guy in the circus business, so I figured he would be glad to finance us on this scheme. Hell—he knew too much before I found out he wouldn't touch it. So we had to put him away."

Danny Dimer said, "Nice combination, too. We had to kill him, but he was also prominent enough to give us the kind of a front-page murder we wanted."

"Like the governor, eh?" said the man with the newspaper.

It was Handy Anderson who swore this time. "That damned governor got me a stretch in the penitentiary while he was prosecuting attorney. That was years ago, before he got to be governor. I swore I'd pay him off."

A man was tying Doc Savage's ankles, doing a slow but painstaking job, while two more stood by with sawed-off shotguns leveled.

The bronze man fitted together what he had been hearing. Murder of the governor, murder of Banker Dimer—those crimes had been for a double motive. In the banker's case: Silencing and publicity. In the governor's instance: Revenge and publicity— Publicity!

They had been killing, it appeared, for publicity which was a motive as incredible and hideous as the murders themselves.

The behavior of Anderson and Dimer was peculiar. The two were staring at each other again, and smirking with increasing pleasure. At last, Anderson burst out in cackling mirth.

"Ten million," he chortled.

"Should be that much," Dimer agreed, and rubbed his hands together.

"We may be able to raise the ante."

"We can try."

Doc Savage watched them. He had guessed at a great deal about this affair; much of the surmising had proven correct. But one thing still puzzled him—the motive behind it.

Dimer got up and walked around the room excitedly, his evil little face warped with greed. "The killing of this prince should be enough for us to move into Europe," he said. "The thing will get worldwide publicity. It alone may be enough to fix things so we can make the deal."

Anderson nodded.

"First, we'll go to Washington," he said, "and approach the diplomats of nations on both sides in the war. We'll put our proposition before them, and make the deal with the highest bidder."

Dimer kept pacing. "Swell, swell."

"I think we can get more than ten," Anderson continued. "Why, hell, if we walk in and kill off the leaders and main guys on one side of the war, that'll end the thing, won't it? The other side should pay up—well—hell, the ceiling is the limit."

The man tying Doc Savage said, "This bronze guy is listening to you."

"Fat lot of good it'll do him," Dimer said.

Anderson suddenly leveled an arm at Doc and roared gleefully, "We'll knock him off like the prince. Make some more good publicity for our system."

Doc Savage was grimly silent. He understood the rest of it now. Murder to advertise! That was what they had been doing. A governor, a prominent banker, had been killed to publicize an unusual and incredible method of murder.

And once this murder method was built up, once the world was convinced these men had an incredible and unfailing way of inflicting death, they were going to approach one side of the warring coalition in Europe and try to get themselves hired to kill the leaders of the other side!

The bronze man must have looked utterly amazed, because Danny Dimer laughed at him.

"Something new under the sun, eh?" Dimer said.

The part of the gang that had been in Kirksville arrived a moment later. Burdo Brockman was with them, a prisoner. They were disheveled; two of them were slightly cut about the face and hands.

"What happened?" Anderson asked sharply.

"Ah, dammit, we had an automobile accident," a man explained. "Some lamebrain ran into us. Crossbow, here, got banged over the head by the guy who ran into us. An ambulance came and got Crossbow and started off with him to a hospital, but Crossbow got out again."

The man referred to as Crossbow was the cross-eyed fellow who had appeared at the burning strawstack near Kirksville, the man whom Monk and the others had mistaken for a local citizen.

Crossbow was excited. He had something else on his mind.

"I didn't tell you guys," he barked, "but coming up here, I saw those four Doc Savage helpers and the girl."

Dimer made gurgling noises, howled, "Where?"

"In front. Watching this building."

"Can we grab them?" Dimer yelled.

Crossbow wore a bandage over one eye, but his other orb glittered with enthusiasm.

"I don't see why not," he said.

Chapter XVIII. TROUBLE FOR HAM

DIMER howled, charged out of the penthouse, and was trailed by all the gang but four. This quartet, armed with shotguns, remained behind with Anderson to guard Doc Savage and Burdo Brockman.

Brockman was slammed down on the floor beside the bronze man.

Brockman said, "I made one hell of a mistake. In Kirksville, I should have told you the whole story. Instead, I thought I could settle it all myself."

"You already suspected Anderson, here, had stolen the stuff?" Doc asked.

"Yes." Brockman nodded. "I went after him, thinking I would get it back. I didn't know he had a gang."

Brockman was bound hand and foot. Doc's wrists were also tied by now. He tested the lines, but not even his strength would budge them.

Brockman groaned. "I've always been a fool. Like to go off by myself and work in my experimental lab." He glanced at Doc ruefully. "Being rich gets to be a devil of a bore. I've been slipping away. Rigged it so my family would think I was in India, big-game hunting. Love my family, and all that. But they bore me. Kids are grown. My wife gone all the time chasing around in society." He groaned again. "But everything would have been all right if Handy Anderson hadn't been a crook."

He fell silent and scowled gloomily.

The gang which had gone after Doc's men—it seemed impossible that they could have accomplished their purpose so soon—returned, howling gleefully over their success.

Monk, Renny, Johnny and Lion Ellison were marched in, hands above their heads.

Monk glanced at Doc, said sadly, "The crooks! They sneaked up on us. Couldn't have managed it if it hadn't been so cold. Heater in our car must have had us dopey, or something."

Anderson scowled. "Where's the other one?"

Dimer looked uneasy. "The fancy-dressing one, you mean? Ham Brooks, or whatever his name is. He wasn't with them."

Anderson came over and slugged Monk demanding, "Where is this Ham?"

"I don't know," Monk said angrily.

The cross-eyed man, Crossbow, stood back and smirked and looked proud of himself.

"Remember, it was me that got 'em caught," he reminded.

"We won't forget that," Dimer told him. He wheeled to Anderson, said, "We're fools to let 'em stay alive. Thing to do is get rid of them now."

Anderson nodded quickly. "You bet."

"What about having their dead bodies appear all of a sudden in—well—how would the police station strike you?"

Anderson licked his lips. "O. K."

Dimer said, "I'll get the stuff. Rest of you wait here."

He went out of the room.

Doc Savage said, "It seems to be now or never."

The man called Crossbow sidled around until he was clear of the others and facing them. He had picked up a sawed-off shotgun. He lifted this weapon, swept the group with its menace.

"Everything better be slow motion," he said.

Crossbow, it seemed, was Ham.

THE silence felt as if it was ready to split.

Burdo Brockman broke it, asking, "But how did this man—"

Monk said, "Ham took the place of the real Crossbow. We staged that automobile accident they mentioned. A friend of Doc's named Bill Lerner helped us. Doc gave us the idea over the radio. Seems he had noticed Crossbow and Ham were the same build. Only difference was Crossbow's crossed eyes. So we fixed that with a bandage."

Doc said, "Throw me a knife, Ham."

The knife landed at the bronze man's feet. He got it, cut himself free and heaved erect. He loosened Monk and the others.

"I will go after Dimer," the bronze man said.

Dimer had gone into another part of the penthouse, Doc surmised. The bronze man moved in that direction.

He found Dimer on his knees in front of a large and obviously new steel safe. The man had opened the safe, and had taken a cardboard box therefrom, placed it on the floor in front of him and was removing cotton packing carefully.

Doc went silently for him.

The thing might have ended there, except for the yell and the blasting reports of a repeating shotgun that came from the room where Doc had left the others.

Dimer whirled, saw Doc, clawed a gun out of his clothing. He was like a scared dog; he went over on his back, arms and legs flying about, as he tried to get the gun in action. Doc fell on him. Dimer had luck, and kicked the bronze man in the face. It hurt. Pain blinded Doc momentarily. Dimer fired. Missed. Doc got hold of the gun arm and there was a dull breaking sound and Dimer began shrieking in agony. The shrieking stopped when Doc stroked the man's jaw with a fist.

Doc leaped up, hesitated. There was plenty of fight noise from the other part of the penthouse, but no more shooting.

Turning to the safe, the bronze man searched.

There were about two dozen gas masks of an ingenious type. They were of rubber so thin that it was transparent, and they pulled entirely over the head. The respirator portion of the masks was a chemical filter not much larger than a pocket watch. As masks, they were probably more ingenious than efficient; but at least they would function for five or ten minutes.

The gas masks had another ingenious feature. They folded into little packets which were mounted on adhesive tape, so that they could be stuck to the skin anywhere under the clothing, preferably in a spot where they were not likely to be found in a search.

The second item in the safe was the score or more of cardboard boxes. Each of these—Doc guessed that, after opening two—held a good-sized bottle of particularly villainous-looking liquid.

Doc put on one of the masks.

He took a bottle of the liquid and went back to the fight.

EVIDENTLY Monk and the others had collected all the shotguns but one and thrown them out of the

window before the fight started, only to have the last man endeavor to make a break when they sought to disarm him. That accounted for the absence of firearms in the fray.

It was a complete battle. Chairs, pictures, table legs, vases and other knickknacks were in the air. Renny was in a corner, flailing furiously with his enormous fists. Ham was down. A man was choking Lion Ellison, but not very successfully, for she had her thumbs in his eyes. Johnny had wrapped his elongated self around two opponents.

Doc uncorked the bottle and threw the entire contents out into the air of the room.

Results were almost instantaneous, and peculiar.

Monk had torn himself free of an opponent, knocked the man down. Monk remained with his fist cocked.

As if through uncanny magic, all action ceased. Johnny kept his long arms and legs wrapped around his two foes, and they made no effort to free themselves. The girl and her assailant froze exactly as they were.

No one, friend or foe, seemed to have the least realization of what was going on, or have any emotion left, neither hate nor rage nor fear.

Doc Savage watched curiously. The effects, he decided, were about as he had thought they would be. But his guessing had been only of a general nature.

It was the perfect anaesthetic. That much, he knew. Science had sought this thing for generations, and doctors had hinted it would be one of the great contributions of all time.

The perfect anaesthetic. Odorless, colorless, producing an instant state of insensibility, with no sensation whatever. No pain, no nausea afterward—not even a consciousness that the patient had entered an anaesthetized condition.

A gas which doctors could use with such smooth effects that the patients would not even know when they had been gassed.

A boon to surgery. And a sinister weapon in the hands of crooks.

Doc walked over to Johnny, said loudly, "Let them go! Take your hands off them."

Johnny made a very slight move toward releasing the two men whom he had been fighting.

"Let them go," Doc repeated loudly, and this time he took hold of Renny's arms and untwined them from their victims.

Johnny obeyed the command, very slowly, and without anything approaching mental understanding. He did not know what was happening, would not remember afterward, so that this interval would be a complete blank in his mind.

But the period of Johnny's unconsciousness would be more than a blank. It would be a gap of which he was not aware. Awakening, he would not realize he had been gassed, would have no suspicion that he had stood for minutes with no awareness of what went on about him or what happened to him. The anaesthetic was undoubtedly odorless and colorless; its effects seized upon the victim instantaneously, without even the sensations of becoming sleepy.

This stuff accounted for the weird murders. It explained how the wizened little man—Danny Dimer—had escaped from the basement garage vault in the New York skyscraper—he had simply had some of the anaesthetic concealed on his person where Monk and Renny had failed to find it when they searched. Dimer had ejected some of the anaesthetic from the vault, possibly through the ventilator in the door so that Monk and Renny had been gassed. The vault door had not been locked at the time, and Dimer had experienced no trouble in walking out.

This gas accounted for all the mysterious murders.

In the case of Banker Ellery P. Dimer—and the photographer Dan Meek, for that matter—the anaesthetic had simply been used to stop the mental processes of a roomful of people while the murderer, wearing a gas mask, walked in and committed the crime.

The ideal anaesthetic, undeniably.

Doc opened the windows wide, letting the cold wind roar inside; carrying hard particles of snow, and sweeping the gas out of the place.

He got ropes, tied the prisoners. Then he waited. He had no idea how long the effects of the gas lasted. Only a few moments, probably, unless the stuff was administered repeatedly, in which case the victim probably could be kept under its effects for days. Lion Ellison had been certain she had been out for at least two days—and it was fairly certain they had kept her under the effects of the anaesthetic long enough to take her to Jefferson City, where the governor was murdered, and the anaesthetized girl placed in posed photographs, so that she could be framed with the murder. Evidently it was then that her fingerprints had been planted, and the knife placed in her purse, as well. Later, she had been taken back to Kirksville and permitted to revive in the same spot where they had gassed her.

Monk seemed a little confused when he awakened.

He peered at the man he had hit just as the anaesthetic got him. The man was now tied hand and foot. Monk looked at his own fist.

"When I hit 'em," he muttered, "I sure wrap 'em up.

PRINCE AXEL GUSTAV something-or-other went back to Europe and his country wasn't invaded because the American government sent some very threatening notes, so Axel's tour landed under the heading of a great success.

But long before that happened, Doc Savage's unique criminal curing "college" in up-state New York got a fresh batch of patients which included Dimer and Anderson and their associates.

And Burdo Brockman had made a decision. "I can change their anaesthetic formula," he said. "I can do it. I'll use one different chemical, and that will give it an odor and anybody who takes the stuff will certainly know they've been gassed. We'll destroy all the present gas."

"You won't make as much money out of it," Renny reminded him.

Burdo Brockman grinned. "What the hell—I've got plenty of money."

THE END