



THE WHISKER OF HERCULES

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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*Scanned and Proofed
by Tom Stephens*

Chapter I

THE heavy-faced man took a .22-caliber rifle out of the golf bag. And then the younger man, without saying anything or asking anything, hit the heavy-faced man. The young man hit the other first with his fist. Then he got a flashlight out of the dashboard compartment of the car and let the heavy-faced man have it again. Twice. The flashlight lens broke.

The driver of the car kept turning a scared face to look. But he continued driving.

The three men in the machine—the driver and the two who had fought—were silent for a while. That is, there were no words. The young man who had done the hitting had asthma badly, and it was worse when he was excited. He wheezed. The heavy-faced man who had been hit had fallen over on the seat cushion. He was not unconscious. He was merely lying still, trying to figure what he should do.

“She is my sister, damn you!” The young man rattled a little with his wheezing.

“Charley, I—”

“You were going to shoot her!”

“Charley, you're crazy!” The man with the heavy face was scared. “What gave you such an idea?”

“You got that gun out.”

“I was only going to look at it, Charley.”

“Sure, sure! I saw you look at it before we started out.” He stared at the other. “I ought to fix you.” He hefted the flashlight. “I ought to brain you.”

The young man's facial expression, his wheezing, his gray hard grip on the flashlight which made his hand tendons show up like bone, were frightening things to the other.

“No, Charley, no! Listen, I only just bought that rifle and I was going to look—”

The young man made a cutting gesture as if the flashlight was a sword.

“You get this through your head!” he said. “If anybody touches Lee, if anybody lays a finger on her, I'll smear the lot of you.”

He looked violently at the heavy-faced man, and glanced as violently at the driver.

He repeated: “I'll smear you, so help me! You and all the others. And that goes for the boss, too!”

There was more silence.

The car moved slowly, trailing a taxicab which was now about two blocks ahead. The cab was black, and no different from a passenger car except for a TAXI sign on each door and in front above the windshield. But across the back of the machine was a yellow banner advertising the Cedar County War Bond Drive. And this conspicuous banner made the cab easily followed.

Bitterness was around the young man's mouth. “This asthma may have kept me out of the army,” he gave each of the other two a fierce look, “but it won't keep me from messing you up plenty if anything happens to Lee.”

“The trouble is,” said the driver, “she knows that story about Hercules.”

“Yeah,” said the heavy-faced man. “And it's plain as the nose on your face she's going to do something about it.”

“She don't get hurt.”

“Sure, Charley. She don't get hurt. Sure.”

The heavy-faced man was vehement with his assurances. It occurred to him, as he felt tenderly of the spots where the flashlight had hit him, that he might have been too emphatic, so that it would arouse Charley's conviction that he was lying. Which he was. He thought: *We've got to kill her, even if she is Charley's sister. She doesn't know what that wild tale about Hercules means, but she can't be allowed to carry the story around. She has to be killed. Maybe we can do it as an accident, to fool Charley.* His thoughts kept prowling in that vein.

SHE was a long, dark girl who had a perpetually pleasant face. The unvarying agreeableness of her facial expression was unusual, and nice. The makeup of her features somehow kept them from looking sour even when—as she was doing now—she frowned or looked grimly worried.

“Taxi.”

The driver turned his head. “Yes, Miss.”

“Is that car behind following us?”

“Which car?”

“The sedan. The gray one.”

After a while, the car driver became troubled. “I think it is, Miss.”

The girl compressed her lips. She leaned forward. “Driver, my name is Lee Mayland. I live at 134 Highland Drive. I am a photographer by profession. That is, I worked for Mr. Leeds of the Hillside Studio until Mr. Leeds turned the business over to me to run and went off to war.”

The driver was more troubled. “Why you telling me that?”

“The police might be asking you for the information. Also make a note of the license number of that car following us. The police might ask that, too.”

“What's going on here?”

“I think I'm getting into some serious trouble.”

“Shall I call a cop, Miss?”

“No.”

The driver was silent a moment. His voice was suspicious, unfriendly, as he demanded, “Why not call a cop?”

The girl did not answer immediately.

“I would have to tell them a story about Hercules,” she said. “A story they wouldn't believe.”

The cab driver thought it over, then did what a life of hard knocks had taught him was the prudent thing to do. He pulled up to the curb, reached over, unlocked the cab door and threw it open. “I don't know what this is. I don't want any part of it. This is as far as I haul you.”

“But—”

“Sorry, Miss. Get out!”

LEE MAYLAND paid the cabby and said, “Thanks, anyway,” without resentment to the driver. The driver flushed and was sheepish, then he drove away.

There was a neighborhood drugstore near. The girl stood in the doorway and saw the car which had been trailing her go past. As nearly as she could tell, there was only the driver in the machine, but other men might have been out of sight, ducked down in the rear seat. The car went on and vanished along the curving boulevard. Lee was a little astonished, not sure now that the car had been trailing her.

She pinched her handbag thoughtfully with her fingers.

Anyway, she thought, I've learned not to talk too much to cab drivers. They seem to be fellows who look out for themselves.

She went into the drugstore, after glancing at the TELEPHONES sign.

She put a ten-dollar bill in front of the cashier. “All of it in quarters and dimes.”

She took the change to the telephone and dialed long distance.

“I want to talk to a man named Doc Savage, in New York City,” she said. “I think he is also known as Clark Savage, Jr. I’ll hold the wire.”

It was not long before the operator said, “I have Doc Savage in New York. Deposit one dollar seventy-five cents, please.”

Lee poked coins into the slots. “Hello.”

“Savage speaking,” said a voice over the telephone.

Lee felt easier. The voice had a quality—later she was surprised at how quickly the voice reassured her—of firmness and amiable sureness that was reassuring.

“I am Lee Mayland, speaking from Cedar County, from Center Lake. You do not know me, Mr. Savage. I am calling you because I once met a man who spoke very highly of you. The man was named Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, but I think the first thing he said was to call him Monk Mayfair.”

“Monk Mayfair is one of my associates.”

“Yes, I know. Mr. Mayfair said that if I was ever in trouble, to call on him for assistance.”

“Mr. Mayfair is here. Do you wish to speak to him?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Mr. Mayfair seemed to be very susceptible to even a moderately attractive young woman.”

The voice of Doc Savage, which had been without particular expression in spite of its warmly friendly quality, now had an unmistakable sly amusement.

“I see your point,” he said. “You have something which you wish judged on its merits, without your appearance being an influence.”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“First, tell me this: Mr. Mayfair said your profession was an unusual one. He said your business was simply helping people who got into unusual trouble.”

“He used the word unusual?”

“Yes.”

“It is not the exact word. But it is something near the right one. It will do for the time being. . . . You have some unusual trouble?”

“I’ll say I have!” Lee Mayland said fervently. “It is such a screwball thing that I’m afraid to tell the police. Because I’ve heard they sometimes send people—people who have a story like this one of mine—to a psychopathic hospital for examination. And I . . . well, I’ve got another reason for not going to the police.

Don't misunderstand me—I'm not a crook.”

“This sounds interesting, but not very definite.”

Lee took a deep breath. “If you want something definite—who was Hercules?”

“HERCULES?”

“Yes. H-e-r-c-u-l-e-s.” She spelled it out.

“What about him?”

“Who was he?”

“Quite a figure in ancient mythology. He performed superhuman tasks which were forced on him by an enemy. Providing that is the Hercules you mean.”

“That's the one I mean.”

“What about him?”

Lee asked grimly, “Did he ever exist?”

“Hercules was a figure of mythology.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means he probably didn't exist in the form in which we know of him now.”

“Did he exist at all?” The girl's question was serious and pointed.

“Perhaps. It is hard to tell about mythology.”

Lee turned her head to look about the drugstore uneasily.

She said, “I guess I sound silly. But this is so serious it has me just about crazy. If I come to New York, could I see you immediately?”

“You think you need help?”

“I certainly do!”

Doc Savage said, “There is a plane out of Center Lake for New York at two o'clock. Could you make that?”

“Yes. But what about a priority?”

“Is this important?”

“Very.”

“We will see that you get a priority.”

“Oh, thank you!” Lee said fervently.

“You sound,” said Doc Savage quietly, “as if you are scared.”

“As a matter of fact, I am. I think my life may be in danger.”

“Who from?”

Lee Mayland hesitated.

“I don't know,” she said.

After the conversation ended, Lee sat staring uneasily at the telephone. The way she had hesitated, she realized, must have told Doc Savage that she was lying when she said she didn't know from whom she was in danger. She regretted the lie. She should have told the truth.

THE three men in the sedan—Charley, the man he had clubbed, and the car driver—had parked one street over, in the middle of the block.

Another car, occupied by a single man, pulled up and parked behind them. The man came to them. He was a small young man with yellow hair.

“I got a break,” he said. “I saw her get out of the cab, so I parked in a hurry and went into the drugstore ahead of her. There were two telephone booths. She went in one. I was already in the other. Boy, was I lucky!”

“Who did Lee call?” Charley asked.

“Somebody named Doc Savage, in New York.”

The car driver bolted up in his seat. He paled and kept losing color until he had a pallid blue hue.

“Blazes!” he said. “Oh, damn!”

Charley and the small man with the yellow hair stared at him. Charley asked, “What's wrong?”

“Haven't you heard of this Doc Savage?” the driver asked.

Charley shrugged. “I've heard Lee mention the name. I think she met a guy named Monk Mayfair, who works for Savage or something, and who made a play for Lee.”

The man licked his lips. “And you didn't say anything about it?”

“Why should I?”

The man started to speak, but did not. Then he got out of the car, pulling at the knot of his necktie. His face was not healthy. He leaned weakly against the car, sagged down and sat on the running board. “Somebody—got—a drink?” His voice was thick.

“What the heck?” Charley got out of the car. “What's wrong, Spencer?”

The man put his face in his hands. “I'm sick.”

The small yellow-haired man laughed. “I suppose hearing about this Savage made you sick?”

“That's right.” The other spoke through his fingers. “You dumb fool! Wait until you hear the kind of man

he is.”

The small man lost his mirth.

Charley said, “Get in the back seat, Spencer. I’ll drive. We’ll get you to a doctor.”

“Never mind the doctor,” Spencer muttered. “I’ll get over it.” He waved a hand. “I’ve been scared before. Let me alone.”

The heavy-faced man—the one whom Charley had earlier struck with the flashlight—asked a question. “What did the girl tell this Doc Savage? You hear?”

“Asked him if there had ever been such a fellow as Hercules.”

“What answer did she get?”

“Evasive, I gathered.”

“What else did she say?”

“That she was coming to New York by plane. I think Savage is going to get her a plane seat priority on the two o’clock plane. She gave Savage a general idea the thing was big, without telling him anything.”

Charley groaned. “If Lee didn’t talk freely, it means she suspects I’m in on it.”

“Sure, she suspects you are,” the yellow-haired man said violently. “Why the devil do you think she got to prying around in this in the first place?”

The heavy-faced man swore. “We’ve got to stop her.”

Charley faced him grimly. “I won’t have Lee hurt!”

The small man took off his hat and ran fingers through his yellow hair. “You giving orders, kid?”

Charley looked frightened. But he said again, “I won’t have Lee hurt!”

“This goes to the boss, you know.” The small man looked at him coldly. “He’ll do the deciding.”

Charley seized on that eagerly. “Let’s go to him. Maybe he will have an idea what to do to stop Lee.”

They got rolling.

The heavy-faced man sat sullenly in the corner of the seat. He touched his bruises where the flashlight had hit him, and scowled at Charley.

“Your sis is a slick chick,” he said. “But considering what she’s mixed up in, I wouldn’t give much for her chances.”

Chapter II

LEE MAYLAND found another cab which took her to the airport. She did no wild talking to the driver. She was less frightened, now.

She told the reservation clerk, “I am Lee Mayland. I wish—”

“Yes, Miss Mayland,” the clerk said. “Your reservation is for the two-o'clock plane.”

“You have it already!” Lee was astonished.

“The priority notice just came through from New York. Is there anything else we can do for you, Miss Mayland?”

Lee glanced at the clock. It was only a little after eleven. Nearly three hours until plane departure.

“Thank you, no,” she said.

She stood for a moment, lost in thought. Then she went out and caught a bus which went to the midtown section. Lee got out in front of the public library.

She told the librarian, “I want you to help me, because I haven't much time. Between now and one o'clock, I want to learn all I can about Hercules.”

“Hercules?” The library attendant was surprised.

“You know, the old-time Hercules. The one in mythology.”

“Yes, of course. I'll help you with the index.”

THE reservations clerk at the airport was named Warner, and he was proud of his job. The army had missed him, not because he was physically disabled, but because he had a wife and baby, and also because he was an essential airline employee. Airline employees were being deferred as essential workers, for much the same reason as railroad men. Warner, however, had done one thing of which he was ashamed; when his number came up in the draft, he had asked for deferment, citing his work, and his request had been granted. The exact truth was that he was neither a courageous nor patriotic young man, and he was afraid of going to war.

When a small young man with very yellow hair walked up to the reservations window at the airport and said, “Hello, Floppy!” Warner jumped violently. And not happily.

“Cornsilk!” he gasped.

The yellow-haired man laughed. “Nobody has called me Cornsilk in ten years. Not since I was a kid.”

Warner moved his hands about uncomfortably. “Hah, hah, it's the same with me. I haven't heard that nickname, Floppy, for ten years myself.”

The other grinned. “Not since we robbed that warehouse on Grant Street, eh?”

Warner didn't jump at that. He sagged. His mouth moved unsurely, finally forming itself into a round hole of pain.

“Remember that, Floppy?”

Warner said hoarsely, “Shut up! That was the only bad thing I ever—”

“Sure, sure, you were always pure as driven snow.” The yellow-haired man grinned at him. “No guts, that was your trouble. Remember how you went to pieces on the warehouse job? You sure lived up to the nickname, Floppy, that night.”

Warner held to the shelf inside the grill with both hands. "You want something, don't you?"

"That's right."

"What?"

The small man glanced around cautiously. He lowered his voice. "There's a girl. Lee Mayland. She has a plane passage to New York. Cancel it."

"Then you'll let me alone?" Warner asked eagerly.

"Sure, Floppy. Nobody will ever know about you and that warehouse deal. Too bad there is still proof that you did that warehouse job, incidentally. Too bad, but you needn't worry about it, as long as you've got friends."

Warner was frightened.

"All right, all right, I'll cancel—" He stopped, swallowed, said, "You say Lee Mayland?"

"That's right."

"But I—I can't cancel that. It came from New York. A man named Doc Savage, who owns a big slice of this airline. And more than that, the army has put out orders to cooperate with Savage fully."

The small man looked at the other unpleasantly. "Remember Put Williams? He's in State, serving a life stretch. He wants me to help him get out, and he'd jump at the chance to rat on you about that warehouse thing if I gave him the word."

Warner thought it over. He looked ill.

"Maybe I can give her reservation to a soldier, and claim I thought I was doing my patriotic duty," he muttered. "But the soldier would have to have a good story. I don't know of one."

The small yellow-haired man grinned.

"I know where I can get a soldier suit, Floppy. So start making out that cancellation."

BY half past one, Lee Mayland had dug a confusing amount of fact about Hercules out of the public library.

She had written down a portion of a statement which she found in the encyclopedia. This was:

Probably a real man, a chieftain of Tiryns in Mycenaean times and vassal to Argos, lies behind the very complicated mythology of Heracles (Hercules).

She found this statement, or one similarly worded but meaning the same thing, in five different reference volumes. She seemed to consider this important, and was somewhat frightened by the fact.

She managed to find a taxicab which took her to the airport, and she reached the reservation window about fifteen minutes before departure time.

Warner, looking more than somewhat sick, said, "I am sorry but your plane reservation has been given to an army officer with an urgent priority."

Lee stared at him blankly. "But I thought I had passage assured."

"I know. These are war times. This soldier had a higher priority than yours, Miss Mayland."

"What am I going to do?"

"I am afraid we cannot help you, Miss Mayland. There are no more plane reservations available. I would suggest a train."

There was much nervousness in the way the girl's fingers were biting at her purse. And not a bit of happiness in her voice.

She said, "This is important. It is a frightfully vital matter."

"I am awfully sorry," he said.

"Isn't there any way I might get a plane ticket?"

"It isn't the ticket. It's the space reservation you need. But I'll tell you what. You might hang around. Someone, at the last minute, might cancel out. It happens occasionally."

Lee Mayland seized on this eagerly. "I'll wait around. If there is a cancellation, give it to me. You will, won't you?"

"If there is a cancellation, you get it."

"Please! I just have to get to New York."

Warner twisted his mouth in shapes which he hoped meant sympathy, but meant shame and fear, only the girl did not notice because she had too many troubles of her own.

Lee Mayland noticed the small man with the very yellow hair as she turned away from the reservations window. He was standing close. Close enough to overhear.

"Pardon me," he said.

The girl thought that he was asking pardon because they had almost bumped together. She walked on. The yellow-haired man followed her and said, "Pardon me," again. And he added "I couldn't help overhearing that your reservation has been canceled. Perhaps I can help."

Lee Mayland stopped and looked him up and down. He was a man she couldn't tell much about.

"Rogers," he said. "My name is Rogers. Private flier. I have a plane."

"You have a plane!"

He nodded. "Here is the situation: I am making a flight to New York this afternoon. I have room for a passenger."

The relief that came into the girl's voice made it shake. "Oh, I see what you mean by helping me."

The small yellow-haired man registered embarrassment. "The truth is that I came over here hoping to find somebody who wanted to fly to New York. Somebody who would pay the regular passenger line fare, but pay it to me instead. I need the money."

"How long would it take you to get me to New York?"

“We can get in about an hour after the time of the airliner you would have taken.”

Lee put out her hand. “It’s a deal.”

They shook.

Lee went back to the reservations window to turn back her ticket and get the money. She handed Warner her ticket, told him what she wanted. Warner became pale, and slid down out of sight, falling on the floor. He had fainted.

The yellow-haired man grinned. He wiped off the grin when Lee looked at him.

“Poor fellow,” he said. “The heat must have gotten him.”

It was not hot.

Lee was puzzled. “He seemed to look at someone behind us, and grow terribly scared.”

“Nonsense,” the yellow-haired man said.

But Lee turned and looked for anyone that Warner might have seen, anyone who might have frightened him.

There were only two men in that part of the waiting room, and they were devoting their attention to each other. They seemed to be quarreling. One was a very lean, dapper man with a large mobile orator's mouth. He wore an afternoon outfit, possibly the first afternoon outfit that had been seen in this town. The second man was a very large fellow with a long, sad face, and a pair of large hands. Neither of his hands, made into a fist, would have gone into a quart pail.

Lee said, “Do you suppose he would look at those two men and faint?”

The yellow-haired man, who thought he knew why Warner had fainted, smiled.

“Could be,” he said “Maybe they're bill collectors. Let's get going.”

There was another incident before they left the waiting room. Lee met her brother, Charles Mayland.

Charles Mayland pretended surprise. “Lee! What are you doing here? What on earth?”

He didn't sound genuine.

The girl did not fool around with evasion.

“You can't stop me,” she said. “You can't do it.”

Then she added, “You are my brother, Charley, which is all the more reason for my going ahead with it.”

Charley had expected something like that. He took a flat package out of his pocket, a package the length and width of a legal-size envelope, and not much thicker.

He shoved this packet into his sister's hands.

“Take a look at that before you bite anybody,” he said.

The girl said nothing more. She kept the package, wheeled, and walked outside behind the yellow-haired man.

The yellow-haired man wanted to leave the airport at once, but the girl had other ideas.

The man said, "I don't keep my plane at Municipal. It's too expensive."

"Wait," the girl said. "I want to make a telephone call."

LEE MAYLAND got Doc Savage's headquarters in New York on the telephone, but not Doc Savage.

The voice she got told her, "Doc isn't here, nor can he be gotten hold of at once. This is Long Tom Roberts, his associate. Or rather, one of Doc's five associates."

Lee was cautious. "I am sorry. This is a private matter with Doc Savage."

"You are Lee Mayland, calling from Center Lake. You have something mysterious troubling you. You are supposed to be headed for New York by plane, because Doc got you a plane priority." Long Tom Roberts, having given her this information about herself, tried to think of something else. "Oh, yes, you are interested in Hercules."

"How did you learn all that?"

"Doc Savage isn't just Doc himself. We're an organization, of which I am one."

"Oh."

"If you have something on your mind, you might as well tell me," Long Tom said.

"I am in trouble," Lee confessed.

"So we gathered."

"I mean—it's suddenly a lot worse."

"Tell me about it."

Lee said, "My plane passage was canceled. I think there was something phony about it. The man at the reservations window looked at two other men and fainted."

"What did these two men the reservations clerk saw look like?"

Lee described the pair—the dapper man and the man with the sad face and big fists—with good detail and accuracy.

She added, "A man, a small man with yellow hair, has appeared and offered to fly me to New York in his private plane. I do not know the man. Somehow I do not think he is all right. I do not know what to do."

Long Tom Roberts asked, "Are the two men, the well-dressed one and the one with the big fists, still around there?"

"Yes."

"Go along with the yellow-haired man."

"You think that is wise?"

“Quite wise,” Long Tom said.

Lee said, “I hope you're right,” and hung up.

THE yellow haired man had a car waiting outside. “As I said, I don't keep my plane here, because it is too expensive,” he explained.

They drove away in the car, a small coupé. Lee held the packet which her brother had handed her, held it in her lap, handling it, pressing it with her fingers. She seemed to be pondering whether to open it now, and she didn't.

The yellow-haired man began to talk complainingly. He grumbled about the cost of airplanes, the restrictions on flying because of the war, and the high rent of hangars, high cost of overhauls. He moaned about the tanglefoot of red tape which a man had to go through to do any civilian flying.

The girl knew—after half an hour—that all the talk was to keep her from noticing where they were going.

“You can cut it out,” she said.

“Cut out what?”

“I know we're not heading for another flying field,” Lee said.

The man glanced at her, with admiration for her courage. “You're a steady chick.”

Lee eyed him. “You're trying to tell me I have nerve?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you're wrong. I was scared stiff until it dawned on me that you were one of Doc Savage's aides.”

The idea that he was being accused of being one of Doc Savage's aides hit the man slowly, as if he had a dose of poison.

“Eh?” he said.

“I talked to Savage in New York at eleven o'clock,” Lee said. “A fast plane could get here in a little more than two hours. That gave you plenty of time.”

Unnerving the man for a minute, the machine went off the road, took the ditch, knocked a cloud of dust off the bank, and leaped back onto the road. The man kept it on the road.

“So Savage told you he was sending somebody to meet you,” he said, as if he hadn't noticed what had happened to the car.

“No.”

“But—”

“However, it was logical. And it was clever of him.” Lee leaned back. “It was exactly what I expected of a man of his repute.”

The man swallowed. “Well give me feathers and call me a bird!”

Lee smiled "So you can just stop pretending you're not a Doc Savage man."

"Don't worry, I will."

They drove seven or eight miles farther into a hilly country. They crossed two gurgling, leaping streams and passed a filling station which was closed. They saw no one and passed no buildings after the station.

The man pointed. "Look. Look up there."

When the girl turned her head, he landed a fist against her temple hard enough to make her unconscious.

A hundred yards farther, he turned off on a side road that was two tracks through brush, and shortly pulled up before a cabin. Four men came out of the cabin.

The four men were dressed as bird hunters, but their khaki and shotguns did not make them look like bird hunters.

They didn't seem to be at ease.

The yellow-haired man said, "You know a funny one? She thought I was a Doc Savage helper."

This didn't put anybody any more at ease.

The yellow-haired man alighted. "Get her out. Take her inside."

They took her inside.

"Two of you go down by the road and watch," said the yellow-haired man.

The two men he designated went outside. They were not giving any cheers.

"I don't like that Savage stuff," one said

"Me either," agreed the other. "Maybe we better just keep going."

"We might think about just that," said the first.

They stepped into the brush. Hands came out of the leaves and took them by their necks. There was some thrashing around in the bushes, but not much.

Chapter III

FOUR of the hands which had seized the pair belonged to the two men—the fashion plate and the owner of the fists—who had been in the airport waiting rooms. Another pair of hands belonged to Doc Savage.

Doc Savage worked on the seized pair. He did an operation, or manipulation, on their necks, using only the tips of his fingers and pressure. What he did made the men unconscious very quickly.

Doc Savage was a man of unusual size with very bronzed skin. His hair was a bronze slightly darker than his skin, and his eyes were like pools of flake gold, pools always stirred and in movement. His other facial features were firm, regular enough to be pleasant without being pretty.

The enormous physical strength of the man was indicated by the way the tendons played in the backs of his hands—they were like rippling bars—and the hawsers of sinew which sprang out occasionally in his

neck when he turned his head. His strength was shown also by the flowing way he moved, his lightness.

The well-dressed man was Ham Brooks. Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, the eminent lawyer.

The owner of the fists was Renny Renwick. Colonel John Renwick, noted civil and industrial engineer.

Both belonged to a group of five associates who worked with Doc Savage.

Renny Renwick had a deep rumbling voice which, when he tried to whisper, sounded somewhat like a couple of paving stones rubbed together.

He whispered, "What now? Go in and take them?"

"Might as well," Doc Savage said quietly. "But first, we will give these two to Monk to keep."

Doc Savage picked up both senseless prisoners, without seeming aware that it was a feat of strength, and carried them through the brush about a hundred yards, coming out on a small clearing where a car stood.

The one man in the car complained, "Blazes, is the excitement over?" after looking at the two unconscious men.

Renny told him, "These two just strayed into the brush, Monk."

Monk got out of the car. "Good. I'll go get the rest of them."

Doc Savage waved him back into the car. "You stay here, Monk. Watch these two."

"The two don't need watching."

"The girl knows you by sight, Monk," Doc said. "That might just possibly be inconvenient."

"You are trying to keep me from the fun," Monk complained.

Monk Mayfair barely pushed five feet for height. He wasn't equally as wide, but looked it. All of him seemed to be made out of beef and gristle and short red hair like shingle nails. His build was remarkable enough, but the homeliness of his face was really astonishing.

"Come on," he pleaded. "Don't make me miss this shindig."

Dapper Ham Brooks laughed at him.

"What're you snickering at, you shyster?" Monk demanded.

"I know you," Ham told him. "It's the girl and not the fight that interests you."

BEFORE they left the car, Doc Savage indicated the two prisoners and told Monk, "If you can revive one of them, try some questions on him."

Monk said sulkily, "I suppose I ask him what it's all about?"

"That would be a good place to begin. All we know is that a girl named Lee Mayland telephoned to New York in a frightened voice. The frightened voice—and the fact that she was willing to spend thirty dollars or so on a plane ticket to get to us in a hurry—was so interesting we thought of flying out here in a

hurry to meet her. So we did, and we found that her plane priority had been mysteriously canceled, and that a yellow-haired man was making her a proposition to fly her to New York in his plane. About thirty seconds checking with the Civil Aeronautics setup showed that no clearance had been given a private plane to fly to New York. So we trailed along to see what was happening.”

Monk nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Doc Savage moved away with Renny and Ham.

Monk called, “I think I’ll ask about Hercules, too.”

Doc said nothing. They worked through the brush, which was thick. The ground was damp.

The big-fisted Renny rumbled in a puzzled way, “Hercules? Holy cow!”

“What about Hercules?” Ham asked.

“Nothing, except it just keeps coming into my mind.”

No one said anything more until the cabin came in sight.

Renny blocked out his big fists. “Do we walk right in and mingle socially?”

Doc Savage indicated a small gadget which he had brought along from the car. This was a listening device on the order of electrical hard-of-hearing gadgets, except that it was more complex and several thousand times as sensitive.

“Wait here awhile,” the bronze man advised.

He went forward to the cabin. Weeds and brush were thick enough to readily hide him. Vines had grown up the side of the cabin and partially covered one of the windows. He got under that window, and cautiously fixed the tiny pickup microphone—it was fitted with a vacuum suction cup—to the pane. After the amplifier tubes warmed up, he could hear most of what went on in the house. Ugly things were being said.

The yellow-haired man's voice: “There isn't any need of this, kid. There really isn't. You won't look well without fingernails.”

Doc Savage had not heard the yellow-haired man's voice, but he felt this one belonged to the fellow. Doc had read the man's lips from a distance at the airport, and he judged the fellow's voice would be about like this. When you were an expert lipreader, you could tell somewhere near what the voice would sound like.

The girl: “I tell you, I only made two phone calls to Savage. You heard the first one, apparently.”

“What about the second?”

“I've told you all that was said.”

“Yes, and you confuse me not a little,” the yellow haired man said. “You say Savage told you to come ahead with me?”

“Mr. Savage didn't. One of his associates named Long Tom Roberts told me to do that.”

“Why?”

The girl's voice was weary. "I wish I knew."

"So do I. It bothers me. It makes me think you're telling one big lie after another."

The girl was silent.

The yellow-haired man complained, "You went to the library. You read up on Hercules."

"Naturally," agreed the girl. "And that proves I don't know as much as you claim I know. I was trying to find out what was what."

"No, it proves you know too much. You might as well admit it, and admit you told Savage everything."

"You brought me out here because you are afraid I had told Doc Savage enough to get you in trouble?"

"That's right. I wanted to find out."

"I didn't."

The man's voice, which had been ugly all along, grew more nasty.

He said, "Hand me those needle-nosed pliers, Chet. She doesn't care much for her fingernails, apparently."

There did not seem to be much point in hanging around outside any longer. Doc Savage stood up and beckoned to Ham and Renny.

MONK'S disappointment, a few minutes ago, when they left him behind, had been genuine. He had really resented missing the fight, although the girl had been a consideration, too. Monk had an eye for a girl.

Monk's liking for a fight was shared by the others. Monk was just a little more outspoken about it. Even Doc Savage, who did not admit of any lust for bouncing enemies around, was not noted for avoiding a fuss.

So Doc Savage, Renny Renwick and Ham Brooks went at the cabin with considerable anticipation.

They got along fine at first.

Renny had two small canvas sacks, open at the top. He handed Doc one.

"Monk gave me these," Renny explained. "He wants them tried out. You know what they are?"

Doc knew what they were.

"Put them through the windows," he said. "You go right. I'll take left."

Ham took the back door. There was a large flowering bush beside the door, and he got in that.

Doc Savage and Renny Renwick circled the cabin, running. The canvas sacks contained articles which resembled condensed milk cans. Every time they came to a window, they hurled one or more cans inside.

They met near the front door.

Renny, chuckling about the cans, said, "I guess Monk gets tired of being shot at."

Men were running around in the house. One opened the front door, saw Doc and Renny, popped his eyes, dodged back and slammed the door.

The man yelled frantically that there were visitors.

Doc Savage lifted his voice. Doc could put remarkable volume into a yell, and he did so now.

"Don't shoot in that gas!" he shouted. "The stuff in the cans is gas. A shot will set it off. It will burn you to death!"

Renny muttered, "It won't burn them to death unless Monk made a miscue when he mixed the stuff."

Doc, correcting himself, yelled, "A shot will fire the gas and it will burn you badly."

Evidently they didn't believe this inside the house. Because there was a shot. Following this—Doc and Renny could see the glow through a window—there was evidently quite a fire. There was then agonized screaming from one man.

Renny, in a great rumbling voice, said, "You see what happens!"

They gave those inside a few seconds to think over what they were up against. Then they went in.

THE gas was a typical Doc Savage gadget, but it was unusual. It was so unique that there was little likelihood of the men inside accepting it immediately as a fact. Nor did they.

Doc hit the door with a foot, planting his weight near the lock. The panel flopped inward when the lock tore out and the lock, with splinters, fell to the floor.

A gun roared. There was flame. It was orange, and seemed to burn like a cloud around the muzzle of the man's revolver. The flame did not spread over the room, but burned only within a short distance, not more than six feet, of the gun muzzle.

Monk, as a chemist, would have been pleased. He had spent a lot of time hammering his brains together trying to figure out a gas which would be made inflammable by the addition of the burned gunpowder gasses which came from a gun muzzle when it was discharged. The gas, to serve its purpose, had to be made inflammable instantaneously, so that the muzzle flame of the gun would also set afire.

It seemed to be working very well, the gas burning only over the area, and possibly a couple of feet more, where the muzzle gas from the gun spread.

Renny roared, "Don't shoot, you fools! You want to be burned to death!"

There was no more shooting.

The yellow-haired man came out of the other room—the cabin seemed to have two rooms—holding a short hunting rifle by the barrel. He saw Doc Savage. He threw the rifle at Doc, who dodged it.

The yellow-haired man turned and ran, having thrown the gun.

There were two men in the room. Neither was badly burned. But they were temporarily blinded, hands to their faces.

Renny punched one lightly in the stomach with a forefinger. The man jerked his hands away from his scorched face. Renny whacked him on the jaw. Then Renny repeated the performance on the other.

Doc Savage followed the yellow-haired man. The latter, aided by another man, tried to take up a stand in the adjacent room.

They got the door shut. Doc pushed against the door. It was solid. He could tell, from sounds and on the other side, that they were wedging something against the door. A table, probably.

Doc doubled a fist, started to smash the door panel, but changed his mind. He had a surgeon's regard for his hands. Surgery was his specialty. He didn't want to smash his hands.

Renny came over, looking sad the way he did when he was pleased with everything, doubled a fist, and easily knocked a panel off. When he hit the door panel with his fist, it was as if he had used a sixteen-pound sledge.

Doc reached in, jerked the table loose, shoved the door open. They went in, Renny bellowing, "If you shoot, you'll get burned to death!"

The yellow-haired man and the other man didn't shoot. The yellow-haired man made for the back door. He went through it, and Ham speared him.

Ham used his favorite weapon, a sword cane. It was tipped with a chemical mixture which, administered hypodermically by a prick of the sword, caused quick unconsciousness. The yellow-haired man ran about twenty yards from the back door before he went down.

That left one man.

He had wide shoulders, a thin-lipped cut of a mouth, a crooked nose.

THEY noticed the black hair and black moustache of the man who faced them. Later they had good reason to remember these.

The moustache was a waxed one with pointed horns. It was intensely black. Also unusually black was the man's hair. The hair, oiled, was disarrayed.

The girl was tied across a table. A rope was fastened to her ankles and ran under the table and was tied to her neck. Her hands were free. There were burned matches on the floor and blisters on the girl's hands and face which the matches had made when they had been burned. On the floor was a pair of pliers with thin snouts.

The man with the black moustache and hair had a long knife with a thin double-edged blade. He sidled at them, cutting and jabbing at the air.

He knew how to use the knife. Doc and Renny avoided him warily.

"I'll cut your gizzards out!" the man said.

Ham Brooks laughed as he came in through the back door.

"You can start on mine," Ham said.

The black-haired, black-moustached man looked at Ham's sword cane. The blade was three times as

long as his own knife.

He drew back to throw the knife at Ham, and threw it at Doc Savage instead. The knife certainly should have pinned Doc. But the bronze man, twisting and jerking his stomach back, managed to let the blade pass. The illusion, because of the speed with which the bronze man dodged, was a little as if the knife had gone through his middle.

There was a glassy crash and a wooden splintering. The knife-thrower had jumped through the window feet first.

Ham, chasing him, tried to lean through the window and spear the fellow with his sword cane while the man was floundering on the ground outside. He did not succeed, and the man ran.

Doc, Renny, Ham, all looked at the window, at the jagged glass still clinging to the sash. They decided not to jump through. Then ran out through the door instead.

The black-haired, black-moustached man sprinted for the woods. He pulled a revolver out of each hip pocket and threw bullets at them.

“We might accidentally have bad luck and he'd hit us,” Renny said, and stepped behind a tree.

Doc and Ham found other trees.

Shouting for Monk's benefit, Doc said, “One of them is loose in the woods! Be careful!”

No answer came from Monk. But they knew he had heard.

They waited—Doc, Renny and Ham—for the escaped man to make some sound. He had stopped running, and was not causing any noise.

Ham said, “We may have to bushwhack around after him for hours. Renny and I will get Monk. The three of us will start playing Indian, Doc, if you want to clean up inside and talk to the girl.”

It was a good idea.

Doc wanted to hear the girl's story.

THE girl was choking a little from the rope when Doc turned her loose. She rolled off the table and would have fallen heavily on the floor if he had not caught her. She sat on the floor, feeling her neck.

“In the other room!” she said thickly. “I thought I heard one of them move!”

It was possible that one of the two men in the first room had revived. Doc went into the room and found they hadn't. He stripped off their belts and belted their wrists together at their backs. He tied their ankles with their shirts. The whole job was makeshift, but would hold them for awhile in case they did revive.

The girl was burning some papers when he went back into the rear room.

When she saw him, she grabbed a sheet of brown wrapping paper and shoved it down in the flames.

“No! No!” the girl cried, when Doc went over to put out the fire.

He slapped out some of the flame, blew out part of it, picked up parts of the paper and extinguished it

with his fingers.

The girl gasped, "Please!" She tried to get the bits of paper away by pushing with a hand.

But there was no writing on any of the intact paper. He examined some of the charred bits, and saw that there had been writing on them. Whatever was on the paper and meant anything had burned.

"What was it?" he asked the girl.

She shook her head. Then she said, "Nothing." Her hands moved about nervously. "It's none of your business."

"My name is Savage. You talked to me on the telephone."

"I know."

"You wanted to see me. You said you had trouble."

"Yes," she said. "But I was mistaken."

"Mistaken?"

"I really didn't need to see you."

"There was really no trouble after all?"

She nodded eagerly. "No trouble. It was just imagination."

He indicated the thin-snouted pliers. "There is no trouble, but they were going to pick off your fingernails."

She did not say anything more. She put her face in her hands, not sobbing, holding her hands against her face with the fingertips digging at her cheeks.

Outdoors, Renny Renwick let out a bellow that contained pain and astonishment.

Monk Mayfair came in the cabin door. He was excited. "Doc, there's something weird out here!" he said.

Doc Savage looked at Monk sharply, feeling that there was more emotion of shock—awe, fear, disbelief, amazement, wonder—in Monk's voice than he had ever heard there before. Monk had a hair-on-end sound.

Chapter IV

MONK led the way outside. They went a rod or two into the brush, and found Renny Renwick sitting on the ground. Renny was groaning as he worked with his left arm, which was out of shape.

"What happened?" Doc asked.

Renny shook his head and moaned.

Doc sank to his knees and worked with Renny's arm. The arm was out of joint, not broken. Doc prepared to get it back in place.

Monk pointed at the air overhead. "When I saw him, he was up there."

There was only one tree near. Doc nodded at this. "You mean he was in the tree? Did he fall out, or get knocked out?"

"No, no, not the tree." Monk seemed uncomfortable about what he was saying. "He was up in the air. Just flying through the air."

"In the air?"

"About fifteen feet off the ground. I guess he jammed the arm when he hit the ground."

Doc Savage's expression was peculiar. He got Renny's arm in position, said, "This will make you think the earth is coming to an end," and set the arm back in joint. Renny's mouth made a wide, fishlike, gaping movement that was without sound, and gave no other sign of pain. Except that sweat suddenly greased his face.

"When you can talk," Doc told him, "you might tell us how you got up in the air."

Renny breathed heavily, made a sound that might have been an opera singer conditioning his throat, and felt of his arm.

"I was thrown up there," he said.

"By what?"

"A man."

Doc Savage examined Renny's bulk, more than two hundred pounds of it, considerably more. Throwing Renny fifteen feet in the air was a little hard to take.

"Holy cow! I know it's improbable." Renny shook his head, added in a foolish voice, "I saw the guy. He stood there in front of me. I mean—he was there all of a sudden. One minute he wasn't there. The next, he was. And the next, I was flying through the air. There wasn't any awareness—at least I don't remember any—of his actually taking hold of me and throwing me."

Monk, not believing, said, "You're dazed, Renny. Take it easy."

"I'm not that dazed. I'm telling you how it happened. It was all in one flash, like lightning hits." Renny suddenly paused and stripped up his shirt sleeves. "There! Look! I knew something was making my arms hurt."

They looked at the hand-prints on Renny's arms. The outline of the hands, palms and fingers, were crushed into the skin and flesh, one on either of his arms.

"Holy cow!" Renny said, himself amazed at the prints.

Monk glanced at Doc Savage. Monk's large mouth was round with astonishment.

"Whoever was talking about Hercules wasn't kidding," Monk said.

THE girl screamed then.

They ran to the cabin.

The two unconscious men were gone. The yellow-haired man, who had been lying senseless outside the cabin, was gone.

Standing in the middle of the cabin front room, her eyes distended, her hands making pointing gestures, the girl said, "He didn't come in! He couldn't have come into the cabin! He was just *there!*"

"Who was?" Doc asked.

The girl looked as if she was going to pass out. "His face was horrible!"

Monk took the girl's arm. "Miss Mayland—Lee Mayland, you remember me, don't you? Monk Mayfair."

She nodded. "Yes, you're Mr. Mayfair."

Monk had a small, squeaky voice which he did well at making soothing. "Now get hold of yourself. Just be calm, and tell us what happened to those men we had overpowered."

"I don't know." The girl shuddered. "He must have made them disappear."

"Who made them disappear?"

"The man. The man who appeared so strangely."

"Get hold of yourself. Don't be hysterical," Monk urged.

Renny's big voice rumbled. "She's not being hysterical. Miss Mayland, was this man short and wide with a black moustache and black hair?"

She nodded.

"Then it's the same guy," Renny said triumphantly. "The same one who threw me around."

Monk waved his arms. "What are you talking about, you two? That guy—black hair and black moustache—is the same bird who jumped out of the window. The one we were hunting outside."

"That's right."

"Then what is this stuff you're giving us about appearances and disappearances and such abracadabra?"

The girl, in a more rational voice, said, "Let me tell you what happened."

A loud metallic crash sounded and Monk yelled, "They've wrecked our car!"

Doc asked, "Where is Ham?"

"At the car." Monk headed for the door. "I persuaded him to watch the other two prisoners while I saw some action."

THE car was a wreck. It lay against a tree a few yards from where it had been standing before. It had hit the tree with enough force that the tree trunk was driven into the top—had caved the top in and smashed the steering column down to the floorboards—and the frame was bent, one wheel jammed out of shape.

Ham Brooks was standing looking at the car. There was no sign of physical damage on Ham, but he was staring fixedly at the car. He seemed too preoccupied to be in any way aware of their arrival, too occupied with staring.

Doc, Renny and Monk walked around the car, looking over the ground and in the bushes, not finding the two prisoners. They inspected the car interior. No prisoners.

Monk, by now indignant at the loss of all their captives, walked over to Ham. He kicked Ham, not too hard, in the pants.

“You blasted shyster!” Monk said. “You stand there dreaming and let them both get away.”

Ham jumped. It was as if he had been awakened from a trance.

He said, “What?”

“What the heck knocked our car into that tree?” Monk demanded.

“I don't know,” Ham said.

Monk said, “Don't give us a dopey answer like that.” Monk then wheeled and examined the ground around the car again. He inspected the grass, the low bushes, searching for tire tracks and not finding any. Monk's expression grew strained. “Doc, what the blazes! I thought they must have bumped our car with a machine of their own. But there are no car tracks here. That is, nothing but what our car made. What happened?”

“I don't know,” Ham said again.

“Where were you when it happened?” Monk asked him.

“Standing here.” Ham pointed at a spot about fifteen feet away, the point where the car had been before it was wrecked. “The man was standing there.”

Monk snorted unbelievably. “I suppose it was a wide short man with black hair and black moustache.”

Ham nodded. “Only his hair and moustache were more gray than black.”

The girl said. “That's the same man.”

“Hercules again,” Monk said. He sounded disgusted, but more awed with fright and disbelief than disgust.

TWENTY minutes later Doc Savage finished a complete search of the vicinity, a search which ended when he found some remarkable footprints leading off through the woods. He went back to where the others waited at the wrecked car.

Monk and the others stared at him as he joined them. Because the big bronze man was making a small, weird sound which he made only in moments of intense mental excitement.

The sound, a low and exotic trilling, was not loud, and had no tune, although it was definitely of musical quality. The trilling was one of the bronze man's peculiar characteristics. He made the sound unconsciously, without being aware that he was making it, and only when he was excited.

“Miss Mayland, would you explain exactly what happened in the house,” he said.

“Gladly,” the girl said.

She had been waiting in the cabin for them, she said. Frightened. The presence of the unconscious men, two in the cabin and the yellow-haired man outside, had worried her. She was afraid they would revive, and did not know what to do if they did.

The appearance of the short wide man with the dark moustache and hair had been unexpected, silent, completely without explanation. She would swear he had not come through the doors or windows, because she would have seen him. She had glanced at another part of the room, and when she looked again, he was there.

Seeing the man had frightened her, and she had whirled and picked up the only weapon of defense she had noticed handy. A chair. When she turned with the chair, the wide dark man—or apparition—was gone. So were the two prisoners. That was the way it had happened, she said, and she knew it sounded silly, implausible.

“But it's the truth,” she insisted.

Doc said, “Now go back and tell us why you called me and wanted our help.”

She shook her head and was thin-lipped with stubbornness.

“That was a mistake,” she said.

Doc looked at her thoughtfully for a while. He turned to Ham.

“Ham, just what did you see when the car was wrecked?” he asked.

Ham told a sheepish, but firm, story. It had about the same unbelievable note as the girl's tale, differing only in the detail that Ham had not seen the short wide man until after the car had hit the tree.

Ham had been standing a few feet from the car, watching the woods and listening for sounds, and wondering what had happened at the cabin. He had wanted to go to the cabin to find out, but had not dared leave the two prisoners, who were showing signs of reviving. There had been a loud crash. Ham had whirled. The short wide man—very gray of moustache and hair, not black—was standing there. Ham looked sheepish, pausing at this point in his story.

“I got the impression,” he said, “that the man had thrown the car against the tree.”

Monk's eyes popped a little. The story became too much for him, and he laughed foolishly.

“You've blown your top!” he said.

“I must have,” Ham admitted.

Doc asked, “Where did this gray-haired, gray-bearded man go?”

Ham made a defeated gesture with both hands. “I grabbed for my machine pistol. To do that, I had to drop my sword cane, and the pistol got tangled in the holster—just for a second—and when I got it out and looked up, he was gone.”

Monk snapped his fingers. “Like that, eh?”

“Like that,” Ham agreed.

“Hercules,” Monk said.

A small whimpering sound pulled their attention to the girl. Her eyes were shut tightly. Her face was drained. Monk sprang and caught her as she sagged. She had passed out.

Monk looked down at her, then at the others.

“When I mentioned Hercules, she fainted,” he said.

“COME with me,” Doc Savage said. “This is something you fellows might find interesting. At least, you can try to explain it.”

The spot to which Doc led them was nearly two hundred yards into the woods. Here there was low ground, low grass, dampness and the odor of the woods. The earth was soft enough to take tracks.

Doc indicated a footprint

Farther on—thirty feet—he pointed out another footprint.

A single track in each case. One a right foot, the other a left.

Farther on, about thirty feet again, there was another right-foot track.

The bronze man's face was expressionless as he said, “He seems to have been traveling.”

The others looked blank and foolish.

Monk's voice was hoarse with excited disbelief. “Tracks at least thirty feet apart.”

Renny Renwick had an idea. He jumped up and came down on one foot on the soft earth. Then he examined the track he had made. The track was not as deep as the other tracks which were thirty feet apart.

“Holy cow!” Renny moistened his lips. “The guy who made these was heavy.”

Ham said, “Maybe he was carrying all our prisoners in his arms.” Then Ham giggled foolishly.

A MAN with a horribly aged face and snow-white hair and snow-white moustache was lying beside the log off which he had tumbled when he died.

They found him after they had gone about three miles, laboriously trailing the widely spaced footprints through the woods. The following of the trail had been slow work. Doc Savage had done most of it.

They saw the body and went to it and found the man was dead.

“Stand where you are,” Doc said.

The bronze man walked about fifty feet, then began searching the ground. He searched a circle completely around the log.

“Four men, carrying a fifth,” he said. “They went on together.”

Ham said, “The guy I pinked with my sword cane, the yellow-haired man, wouldn't have snapped out of it yet.”

“Five men!” Monk was excited enough to yell without realizing he was yelling. “But we followed only one here!”

Doc Savage, his voice quiet, said, “There is no sign of how the five men got here. No tracks where they came. Only tracks where they left.”

Renny Renwick was staring at the body in fascination. “Doc.”

“Yes?”

Renny pointed at the dead man. “It's incredible, but this must be the father, or grandfather, of the short man with the black hair and the black moustache who jumped out of the cabin window.”

Doc glanced at Ham. “What about it, Ham?”

Ham seemed dazed. He closed his eyes tightly, as if trying to squeeze reasonable common sense into his brain.

“This looks like the man who—well—the car.” He closed his eyes again. “Only he looks fifty years older.”

Doc Savage turned to Renny. “You remember, back at the cabin, the short wide man with the black moustache and black hair had a knife.”

Renny nodded. “He dropped the knife before he went through the window.”

“Will you go back and get the knife, so we can check it for fingerprints.”

Renny went away. It took him about an hour to get the knife.

In the meantime, Monk and Ham had followed the trail of the men who had left the spot carrying a fifth man. They found that the trail was plain, that even they could follow it.

Renny came with the knife, bringing cigarettes he had found in the cabin. They used cigarette ash to make fingerprint powder.

Doc compared the knife-handle prints with the prints of the dead man.

“Same man,” he said.

“But the white hair and moustache—the age on his face!” Ham blurted.

THEY took the body with them. Renny had brought along a blanket from the cabin, and they made a sling out of that.

They did not talk much, probably because they were too busy thinking.

Monk dropped back, asked Ham, “Why is Doc taking the body along?”

“I don't know.”

“Been easier to cover it and leave it. That is what he ordinarily would have done.”

“Sure.”

Monk said peevishly, “You're always bragging about that legal intellect of yours. Why don't you know something once in a while when it's important?”

Ham sneered at him halfheartedly and said nothing.

Soon there was a road, and near the road a farmhouse. On the farmhouse porch sat an unhappy, slightly damaged farmer. His wife was washing and iodining a cut on his scalp.

“Five fellows came along here awhile ago,” explained the farmer indignantly. “They knocked me around some, and stole my car. Headed for town.”

Chapter V

CENTER LAKE, before gas rationing, had been a resort center. The resort business had frittered out. Center Lake had a railroad, airline, highways, bus lines—but the scenic section was not close to town. It was the surrounding hills and lakes, and with gas rationing, summer visitors couldn't get there. There was some defense work. But as a whole, times were tough. Doc and his party had no trouble getting accommodations at an elaborate tourist camp on the edge of town.

It was dark when they checked in. They put the body in one of the cabins without anyone noticing.

“At the airport this afternoon,” Doc told the girl, “you talked to a young man.”

The girl had gotten herself organized well enough to be sassy. “I talk to men frequently,” she said.

The bronze man was not disturbed. “This one came up and handed you a packet wrapped in brown paper.”

“Did he?”

“Apparently it was the packet you burned at the cabin.”

She made an elaborate business of pushing her hair around with her fingers. Doc did not ask her any more questions.

He called Renny outside. The night was warm, and the lack of a breeze made it seem hot.

Renny said, “She didn't talk very freely about the young guy, did she?”

“She seems to wish she had not called us into this.”

Renny nodded. “You did not mention that we already know the young guy was her brother.”

“There was no point. Such a fact might be a club to knock her off balance and scare the truth out of her, but it would not work now. She is feeling too composed.”

Renny chuckled in the darkness. “Reckon she'd be composed if she knew Johnny was trailing her brother.”

Johnny was William Harper Littlejohn, archaeologist and geologist. He belonged to their group, Johnny and his big words.

Doc had called Renny outside to ask him to go to the police.

“We have not exactly followed the law in carrying the body around,” Doc explained. “So you had better be frank with the police, and ask them to check on us. Have the police chief telephone New York at our expense and to talk to someone there—Commissioner Boyer would be a good man—to find out the truth about us. Boyer should straighten out matters so we will have no trouble.”

“Anything else?”

“Try to find out what has happened to Johnny.”

“He's trailing the girl's brother.”

“Yes, but we should have had a radio report from him by now.”

RENNY left, and Doc Savage worked the radio for a while in an unsuccessful attempt to raise Johnny Littlejohn. The radio was compact, transmitter and receiver and batteries all in less space than the usual portable broadcast receiver. There was not a whisper from Johnny.

Ham Brooks had gone to the airport for a half a dozen metal cases in which they carried their equipment. He returned.

Monk watched which equipment case Doc selected. He followed Doc into the room where the body lay.

“Yeah, that's what I figured,” Monk said.

“What did you figure?” Doc was opening the case.

Monk pointed at the body. “In the cabin, that guy was young and husky and his hair and moustache were jet-black. When the girl saw him, he was still older. When Ham saw him, he was still older. When we found him, he was dead and an old, old man.”

“Apparently.”

“You don't think there is any doubt? The fingerprints on the knife indicated it was the same guy.”

“Apparently.”

“What,” asked Monk, “do you think he died of?”

Doc glanced at the body. “It would be curious if we found he died from the infirmities of old age.”

Monk winced.

Doc said, “All the external signs point to death from the complications of old age.”

“I hope not,” Monk said, taking a look at the corpse and shivering. “If that's so, I'm liable to take to the weeds. The way I was brought up, people don't grow old that fast. I don't know whether I'm superstitious or what. But I hate to have what I think are truths, things I've always believed in, upset like this is going to upset â€œem.”

Doc was laying out instruments. "Is this going to disturb you?"

"I don't think it's going to soothe me," Monk admitted.

"Why not go in the other room and talk to the girl."

Monk grinned faintly. "Thanks. Only she doesn't seem to want to talk to us."

"She just thinks she doesn't, probably."

"She doesn't act that way."

"Ask her about Hercules."

"Sure," Monk agreed. "Maybe she will talk about a nice reasonable topic like Hercules." He went into the other room. Doc heard the girl tell Monk that she preferred her own company, and heard Monk ask her if Hercules was the old-timer with all the wives, or was that Solomon?

Then Doc glanced at the window and saw that the yellow-haired man was standing outside, raising the window preparatory to coming inside.

A FEW seconds later, Doc Savage was having the same feelings which Renny, the girl and Ham must have had earlier in the evening.

The yellow-haired man pushed up the window, climbed in, crossed to the body, picked up the body, carried it to the window, climbed out with it, and went away.

While the yellow-haired man was in the room, Doc made three moves. None of the motions were crowned with the least success.

First, Doc tried to intercept the yellow-haired man. He was too late.

Second, Doc sought to close with the fellow while he was picking up the body. Too late again.

Third, Doc endeavored to clutch the yellow-haired man en route to the window with the body, or at least block the fellow's departure with the burden. Also too late.

The thing was so manifestly impossible that Doc Savage laughed. No humor was in the laugh. The sound of mirth—it was disturbingly a cackle—did more to disturb the bronze man than anything which had happened to him recently. There was no reason for the laugh, and the fact that he had laughed seemed touched with insanity.

He leaned out of the window. Yellow-haired man and burden were gone.

Monk, bursting in from the other room, yelled, "What went wrong?"

Doc looked at his own hands, which he opened and closed.

"Gas," he said. "They must be using some kind of gas which slows up a man's faculties."

Monk did not understand. He pointed at where the body had been. "Where's Hercules?"

Doc asked, "Did you hear the window go up?"

“Yes.”

“You heard my laugh?”

“Sure.”

“How long between them?”

“Between the window rising and the laugh—they were right together. Not over a second or two between them.”

That was about as long as it had seemed to Doc Savage. He looked at Monk incredulously. He did not say anything.

THE head of the Center Lake police department was Chief Alexander Carey. He was a large quiet man whose hair had receded. He was no hick, even if he did smoke a corncob pipe.

“We thought there was a body,” he said.

Doc admitted there had been. “A man came in and got it.” He described the yellow-haired man.

Chief Carey shook his head, saying he didn't recognize the yellow-haired man from the description. “So he just walked in and packed off the body. I suppose we can charge him with armed robbery.”

“He was not armed—did not show any guns.”

The chief took the cob pipe out of his teeth. “Just came in and took it?”

“Yes.”

“What were you doing?”

“Trying to stop it. He moved too fast for me.”

“Which way'd he go?”

“He moved too fast for me to tell.”

Chief Carey whistled. He glanced at one of his men. The man was grinning a grin of disbelief.

“Well, well, this is quite a story,” Chief Carey said. “A man throws your car against a tree. He heaves one of your men twenty feet in the air. He carries off five of your prisoners, stepping thirty feet at a time. Now another one walks in and carries off the body of the first one before you can do anything about it. Is that what we're to believe?”

Renny Renwick said, “That's right, except that I was thrown about fifteen feet in the air, not twenty.”

“Fifteen feet, not twenty.” Chief Carey looked as if he was disgusted with himself for not being sensible enough to laugh at the story.

Doc Savage described the other men which they had captured—and lost—at the cabin in the woods. He located the cabin accurately.

He said, “Those men seized Miss Mayland here. You can charge them with kidnapping.”

The girl stepped forward.

“No,” she said. “You can't do that. I went with them willingly.”

“You knew them?” Chief Carey asked.

She had an answer all ready. “No, I didn't know them. I have been wanting to buy a cabin in the mountains. They said this cabin was for sale, and I rode out with them to look it over. That's all there is to what happened.”

Before he left, Police Chief Carey made a little speech for Doc Savage's benefit.

He said: “I had heard of you before, of course. I had heard that you were always involved in cases that were unusual. Tonight I talked to a New York police commissioner at Mr. Renwick's suggestion, and he said that anything you touched would be unusual. So I was expecting something unusual. Looks like I got it.”

He left with that.

“We didn't make such a sensible impression,” Ham Brooks said.

“We're not making a sensible impression on ourselves,” Monk told him. “What do you expect?”

Renny Renwick was looking at the girl thoughtfully. “So you went with them willingly. And they were going to pick off your fingernails with pliers. But they were just pals.”

She said nothing.

Renny added, “And you faint when you hear about Hercules.”

She winced at that. But she said nothing.

BY midnight, it was in all their minds that something unpleasant had happened to Johnny Littlejohn, the other member of their party, who had started trailing Lee Mayland's brother at the airport.

The fact that Johnny had not reported by radio in all these hours was a bad sign. His orders had been to report each hour on the hour as nearly as possible.

Renny, who was not susceptible to a shapely ankle, said, “I'm having trouble keeping my hands off that girl's neck. She knows what this is about.”

“She's scared,” Monk defended. “She's got what she considers good reasons for keeping quiet.”

“How do *you* know?”

“She's an honest girl,” Monk said virtuously.

“All pretty faces look honest to you,” Renny rumbled.

Ham added, “And the prettier the more honest, to Monk.”

“That's a lie. Anyway, you guys ain't got no romance.”

Renny said, “I've got a notion to turn her over my knee. You know what she's doing? Waiting for a

chance to give us the slip.”

Doc Savage looked at Renny thoughtfully. “Renny, could you get her shoes?”

Renny nodded. “You mean deceitfully, or otherwise?”

“Deceitfully. Tell her we are making casts of all our shoe prints so that the police will have an easier time identifying the footprints around that cabin in the woods.”

Renny got up and went in the other room, where the girl was sitting tensely by a window, holding on her lap a magazine which she was not reading. She didn't believe Renny's excuse for taking her shoes.

“You're just taking my shoes so I can't escape!” she snapped.

“Holy cow!” Renny said. “Who said anything about escaping? If you want to leave, go ahead. Go wandering around loose and get your fingernails picked off.”

She gave up the shoes.

Doc Savage, making sure the girl was not around to witness the operation, pried a heel off one of her shoes. He had to find the proprietor of the tourist place and borrow a brace and bit to drill a hole in the shoe heel. The heel was wood, leather-covered.

Monk snorted when he saw the capsule—a plastic capsule full of mechanism of electrical nature—which Doc was embedding in the shoe heel.

“That thing is a joke,” Monk said. “Long Tom Roberts stubbed his toe when he made it. The things never did work worth a hoot. If she gets more than half a mile away from us, blooey! We lose her.”

“Have you a better idea?”

Monk hadn't.

Doc finished concealing the tiny radio transmitter. Monk was correct about the thing. It was not in any sense a true radio transmitter, but it did generate a signal which was easy to locate with a direction-finder, although of very low power.

Renny returned the shoes to Lee Mayland. The girl was slightly courteous. “Do you men mind my staying here tonight?” she asked.

“We can stand it if you can,” Renny said.

She was too sweet.

Renny told Doc later, “She's fixing to set her sail.”

It was about two-thirty in the quiet and somewhat cooler morning when the girl pushed the screen out of her window and crawled out after it.

Chapter VI

WITHOUT the gadget at which Monk had sneered, they would have lost the girl. Or she would have lost them. She pulled a very neat trick.

Her hat was an important part of the trick. It was a pert hat with a distinctive bow effect on top. It had a definite silhouette.

She went into a house, and when the light came on in one of the rooms, they could see her—the hat distinctive—in a chair. She remained there, rocking.

But Doc had the radio direction-finder turned on. He noticed the signal getting fainter, and shifting direction.

“Better see who is in the house,” he said.

The young woman who answered the door said she was Iris Smith. Yes, she was a friend of Lee Mayland. No, she didn't know why Lee had asked her to sit in the rocking chair with the light on for half an hour. But Lee had asked her to do that, and Lee had obviously felt it was very important, so she had done so. No, that was all she knew.

Monk looked sheepish.

“You and your honest lady faces!” Ham told him.

Doc said, “Come on. She is almost out of range.”

They took up the trail again. The sky in the east had a faint reddish cast that would soon turn into daylight.

In the outlying, and swanky, residential district to which the girl led them, they could distinguish the prosperous shapes of the houses.

When the girl went into the grounds of an estate more pretentious than the others, Renny muttered, “Ah, we're coming into the sphere of prosperity.”

Unless they followed the path, there was a low stone wall which had to be climbed

The radio receiver—the direction-finder—was a versatile instrument. By changing a circuit, switch provided, it was convertible into a balanced bridge type of locator which—using another switch—could locate either nearby metal, or wires carrying current.

Doc explored the top of the stone wall with the apparatus, which registered the presence of a wire carrying a mild current.

“Capacity alarm,” he explained. “Wire around the inside of the wall, just below the top, apparently.”

“That means the gate will be alarm-wired too,” Monk said.

Doc said, “Renny, you have the best dog-calling voice. Wait about five minutes, then pretend you think your dog jumped the wall. Lean over the wall when you call the dog.”

Renny chuckled. “Lean over far enough to set off the alarm, eh?”

“Yes. Then you can watch the outside for us.”

Renny gave them five minutes to get set, then began shouting for his dog.

“Here, here, Foxy! Come back here!” he yelled.

He talked to the imaginary Foxy in no uncertain terms. He leaned over the wall near the gate, and called angrily for the dog.

A wide-hipped narrow-shouldered man came out of the darkness carrying a white cloth draped over his arm. The white cloth looked like a folded sheet.

“What's going on here?” the man asked roughly.

“My dog,” Renny explained. “I think he jumped over your wall.”

“You're waking up everybody. Get the hell out of here.”

“Nuts to you, sonny,” Renny said, and yelled loudly, “Foxy! Here, Foxy! Here, Foxy!”

The man came closer. He carried a gun.

“This is a fine time of the morning to be walking your dog,” he said.

“I work the night shift,” Renny said. “Don't fool with me, brother. I haven't had any sleep tonight.” He called the dog loudly.

“Go away,” said the man. “You want me to call an officer.”

Renny became indignant. “You snob-noses that live in these big houses! Think you own the world!” He wheeled and walked off.

He reasoned that Doc and the others had made it by now.

DOC SAVAGE, Monk and Ham approached a large house made of gray stone and brick painted white.

“Psst! Come here,” hissed Monk, who was ranging to one side. “Look at this thing. What is it?”

He meant a statue which stood in the shade—the moon shade, which was quite black—of a tall tree. The statue was a man-figure about twenty feet high.

“It scared an inch off my height when I saw it,” Monk said. “I thought it was a real giant. That's what comes from all this Hercules stuff.”

Doc Savage went over to the base of the statue, felt around with his fingers and located an inscription. He masked his flashlight beam carefully and showed just enough light to illuminate the name of the statue.

Monk said, “Hercules!”

They stood there wondering what a twenty-foot statue of Hercules was doing in the front yard of a house in Center Lake. But none of them said anything, probably because they did not have anything to say.

They walked to the house after Doc Savage said, “We might as well go right in. There is something about walking right in on a liar that discourages him.”

“Bet it won't discourage that girl,” Ham said.

The front door was a massive double affair on which was carved the figure of an over-muscled giant doing something or other—apparently standing with hands outspread to block entry.

“Hercules again,” Monk muttered.

The door was unlocked. They pushed it back and went in.

Monk yelled loudly, “The place is under arrest!”

Ham sneered and said, “You arrest a house, of course.”

A medium-sized elderly man came through a door into the large hall in which they stood. He looked worried. “What is it?” he asked. “What is wrong?”

Monk, in a mood to be sarcastic, said, “Please announce us to Miss Lee Mayland.”

“Mayland?” The man shook his head. “I know no one by that name.”

“Then,” said Monk, “announce us to the girl who just got here.”

The man blinked at them. “No girl came,” he said.

“You don't know Lee Mayland?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you know me?” Monk asked.

“No, sir.”

Monk said, “Take a close look at me, and decide what you see.”

The other was growing more puzzled. “I don't know you.”

“Maybe not,” Monk said, “but you should recognize in me a fellow who is liable to take an arm off you and slap you with it if you don't trot that girl right out.”

From deep in the house somewhere came a man's voice crying, “Help! Help! Help, whoever you are! Get the police!”

It was a strange voice, but a woman's voice which they recognized joined in the crying, “Help! Help!”

Monk said grimly, “Well, I guess we stop talking and do something.”

The woman's voice belonged to Lee Mayland. It was filled to the brim with terror and appeal.

The medium-sized elderly man to whom they had been talking lunged to the right to a tall ornamental hall cabinet. His hands went behind the cabinet and came out with a short repeating shotgun.

He fired the shotgun, putting the shot charge in Monk's chest between vest top button and belt buckle.

AT the shot, action swept through the house. They could hear feet pounding, and shouting. The noise was louder than Monk's moaning.

Monk had closed both arms over his middle and tilted forward, but he remained on his feet. He stood there swaying, arms over his chest, head drawn down and almost buried in his arms, making sounds of shock and agony.

Doc Savage reached the barrel of the shotgun and forced it upward. The gun discharged, and dug an ornate plaster design out of the ceiling, the plaster bits showering down.

The man did not fight Doc for the shotgun. The fellow let go, wheeled, went backward through the door. He slammed the door, got it shut, and they heard the lock clatter as it was fastened.

Then the man yelled, "Watch it, everybody! That's Doc Savage out there! Savage and at least two of his men!"

Doc Savage began hitting the door with a shoulder.

On the other side of the door, another voice, farther away said, "Why don't we clear out of here?"

"Good idea," said the man who had just escaped. "Get the word around."

Ham Brooks was saying anxiously, "Monk, Monk! Are you badly hurt?"

"Ugh—arg!" Monk said, gurgling.

Ham, driven to a frenzied rage by Monk's having been hurt, yelled, "I'll cover the back door!" He dashed outside.

Doc burst down the door he had been hitting with his shoulder. Beyond was a room which was empty, then another room occupied by two people—the girl Lee Mayland and a remarkable athlete of a man—who were tied to chairs. The two prisoners looked at Doc Savage with relief.

"The back door," the man said. "See if you can head them off!"

Doc went on through the house. It was a complex house, and not built according to the sensible plans which architects usually follow, so he got lost once, almost lost again, and heard shooting outdoors before he found the back door. Doc piled outside.

"Be careful!" Ham blurted from nearby. "They almost shot my ears off!"

"They got away?" Doc asked.

"Yes. They came out of the house as if somebody had dropped a match into a gasoline barrel."

"What direction?"

The question was answered by a flurry of shots, ten or a dozen, and a loud explosive expression of rage from Renny Renwick.

A car engine made a racket and left the neighborhood.

Renny Renwick, galloping up, said, "Holy cow! I've seen some scared and fast-traveling guys in my time, but those took the prize."

Ham asked, "They get away?"

"All of them." Renny nodded.

DOC went back into the house. Monk Mayfair was sitting on the floor. He had his shirt open, and was angrily removing his bullet-proof vest to inspect his midriff. "I think I've got some broken ribs, Doc," he

said.

“It looked to me like the shot hit you in the stomach, not the ribs,” Ham told him.

“Then I’ve got a ruptured spleen,” Monk declared.

“You keep your spleen emptied on me all the time,” Ham assured him. “So it couldn’t be serious.”

The girl was still tied to a chair.

The man—the stranger—was in the act of breaking loose. He was tied to a large, extremely stout chair, and the strands which held him were quarter-inch rope. Yet he broke loose without much trouble.

The stranger, Doc and the others realized, was really an extraordinary physical specimen. The fellow was a silver-haired man, wide shouldered, long-limbed, lean to gauntness, and with muscles which looked like bundles of steel wire covered with a good grade of buckskin.

The exhibition—and it was an exhibition—as he broke loose from the chair was remarkable. Ham’s eyes popped. Monk even forgot his own trouble to watch. It wasn’t often that you could see a man, using muscular strength alone, snap quarter-inch rope as if it was wrapping string.

The athlete stood up and shook off pieces of rope and fragments of chair.

“Poor Miss Mayland!” he exclaimed, going to the girl. “What a shameful thing to happen.”

Doc helped him turn the girl loose. When that was done, and the girl was rubbing her wrists—she hadn’t said anything as yet—the athlete extended his hand to Doc Savage, saying, “Western is my name. Marvin Western. You are Doc Savage, aren’t you?”

Doc nodded.

Western said, “Do you mind if we see how my two servants are faring? I think they were locked in a closet in the rear.”

Doc Savage followed Marvin Western, and they found and released two men. One was a medium-sized elderly man, and the other was younger. Both looked scared. The closet was small, and they were disheveled.

“They threatened to kill us!” wailed the older man.

Renny Renwick charged in from outdoors.

“That guard,” Renny reported, “got away with the others. I tried to stop him when the shooting began, but he lit out like a scared cat.”

Marvin Western caught Doc Savage’s eye, beckoning. The bronze man, together with Monk and Ham, followed Western out on the front terrace. Renny Renwick and the two servants remained inside with Lee Mayland.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Western said, “without that girl overhearing.”

“Eh?” said Monk. “You suspect the girl?”

Western nodded. “You know what I think about that girl? I think she’s a very sly baggage. I think she’s masterminding this thing. I think she has started something, something that has turned out to be a great

deal more than she thought it would be, and now she is trying to play innocent, and at the same time keep on directing the thing.”

Doc Savage said, “But she called us into the affair.”

“Of course! She had to.”

“Why?”

“Because I was going to call you if she didn't,” Western said grimly. “And I told her so. So she called you. What else could she do?”

Monk was displeased by the accusation against Lee Mayland. He scowled at Western. “Suppose you tell us who you are and what you know.”

WESTERN was a professional strong man. He claimed, he explained, the title of Best-developed Man In The World. There was actually such a title, but he did not hold it officially, having been flim-flammed out of it by favoritism in the one contest held in recent years. Since he considered the contest an unfair one—he was rather violent when he told Doc and the others about this—he believed himself justified in ignoring the results and claiming the title.

The others got the impression he probably sold strength-through-exercise courses by advertising in the magazines. This proved wrong. Marvin Western didn't sell anything, exactly.

He was the head of a cult of physical culture. Mental and Moral Strength Through Physical Fortitude, he explained, was the name of the organization. It had branches in a number of cities, and his only income—he made a point of this rather proudly—was from gifts freely given by people who believed in what he taught.

The story was quite believable. The man had a great deal of personal magnetism, and he was so obviously a remarkable physical specimen, that it was understandable that he could impress people. He was quite a showman.

The statue in the yard, he explained, was really a giant reproduction of himself. So was the carving on the front door. They would find, he reminded them, other examples of his self-expression throughout the house.

“Now,” he said, “you know about me. Let's go back and talk to the girl.”

“You believe she isn't innocent?” Doc asked.

Western nodded vehemently. “Yes. I want you to keep in mind that she is guilty while we talk to her. You will notice, I am sure, that she acts like a guilty person.”

Renny Renwick said, “As much as I'd like to hear the rest of this, I think I'd better go outside and keep lookout. Those fellows might come back.”

RENNY went outside.

The others went in to confront Lee Mayland. The young woman was sitting in a chair, hands tied together in a knot. She was pale, and chewing a lower lip.

“I have been telling Mr. Savage who I am,” Marvin Western explained to the girl. “I have told them something of my work in physical culture. I thought it better if they knew who I am. I was hoping they had heard of me before, but apparently they have not.”

“What was Miss Mayland's story?” Doc asked.

“She had better tell you that herself.” Western turned his personality and melodious voice on the girl. “Tell them.”

She said she wouldn't. She said it twice.

“That isn't wise,” the athlete assured her. “This man is Doc Savage, who has an international reputation for helping people out of unusual trouble. You can trust him fully, as fully as you were willing to trust me, I assure you.”

She said she wouldn't.

Western said, “Then I am going to give him the story myself.”

The girl was silent.

The athlete then told the story, using his melodious voice to make parts of it—the parts in which he appeared, or where his judgment and good qualities were exposed—rather dramatic.

He had known the girl, Lee Mayland for a long time. A year or two, anyway. He had known her brother, Charles Mayland an equal time or somewhat longer. So it was natural that Lee Mayland should come to him for advice which required action and involved a danger.

What the girl had actually told him on her first visit was that her brother, Charles, was in a mess. In trouble. She had not specified the exact nature of Charley's difficulty. But she suspected Taft Davis of getting Charley in the mess.

Taft Davis was a small, dapper, quick-moving, quick-talking man with yellow hair. He had been a boxer, welter class, and a wrestler—the type of a job called a musclehead in the lingo—with carnivals and circuses.

At one time, up until about two weeks ago, Taft Davis had been a hanger-on around Marvin Western and the physical culture class. But two weeks ago, Western had expelled Taft Davis from the society. There had been no definite reason for the expulsion. Taft Davis, in the opinion of Western, had just not been sufficiently sincere, and for that reason had been asked not to hang around any longer.

The girl hadn't explained what Taft Davis had done that had gotten brother Charley into a mess.

That there was danger involved, and a need for action, was something Western had gathered from the girl's voice and manner rather than from what she said. He made a point of being sure they understood this.

He smiled at them at this point, saying the next was rather silly, in his estimation.

The girl had wanted to know about Hercules.

Western knew something about Hercules.

“Being a strong man myself, I have naturally been interested in the strong men of the past,” he pointed out.

HERCULES, the silver-haired man explained to Doc Savage and the others, was the latinized form of the Greek name of Heracles. Heracles was a notorious Greek hero, but whether or not he had actually ever lived—the girl had been most concerned about this point, Western said—was a question of some uncertainty.

Western explained that he was inclined to believe that Hercules had been a real man, although the legend of his birth was fantastic.

The same tone of legendary exaggeration must be subtracted from the rest of the tale of Heracles, if one wanted the approximate truth. For example the snakes which Hera sent to kill Heracles in his cradle, and Heracles' dispatching of the snakes—this should be denuded of its fantastic side, and accepted merely as a very young fellow killing some snakes, then it became reasonable enough.

The other feats of Hercules—the seizing of the Lion of Nemea, the Hydra of Lerna, capture of the stag of Arcadia, capture of the boar of Erymanthus—these and other feats had a touch of realism. In fact, of the so-called Twelve Labors of Dodekathlos, there were only two—the bringing of the apples of the Hesperides, and the fetching up of Cerberus from the Lower World—that were downright fantastic, and some spinner of tales might just have added these for the touch of the supernatural.

“To make the story short,” said Marvin Western, “I am inclined to believe that the legends were the exaggerated stories of the life of a real man. But the real Heracles must have been a wonder.”

Western now looked apologetic, and said, “All this talk about Hercules is not as senseless and aimless as it might seem.”

“We were interested, all right,” Ham told him. “There has been some reference to Hercules before.”

Western nodded.

“Exactly,” he said. “I now want Miss Mayland to tell us both about Hercules' whiskers?”

Doc was watching the girl, and he saw her wince.

WHEN it became evident that the girl was not going to speak, Western said, “On her first visit to me, Miss Mayland said something about Hercules' whiskers. She said it as if it was important, as if it meant a great deal. Then she became abruptly silent. That was all she said.”

Ham looked at the girl. “What about it?”

She shook her head slightly, said nothing.

Western tried pleading.

“Miss Mayland, this is a terrible affair, apparently,” he said. “And you have involved me by coming to see me. I do not know why you came. I do not know anything about the mess. But I want to know. I have a reputation with my—my followers—and I want this thing straightened out at once. I am not knowingly implicated in this thing, and I want people to know it.”

There was fright in her eyes as she stared at them. Enough fright to make all of them feel uncomfortable. But she was silent.

Monk shook his head slowly. The girl, he was deciding reluctantly, looked remarkably guilty.

Marvin Western spread his hands palms up.

"I feel so foolish," he said. "This childish talk about the whiskers on somebody named Hercules who lived thousands of years ago. It is such an idiotic—"

Renny Renwick came in from the outside, to announce, "Johnny is on the radio. He wants you, Doc. Wants to talk to you."

Chapter VII

WILLIAM HARPER LITTLEJOHN knew most of the big words that other people didn't know, and liked to use them. He said, "I'll be superamalgamated. An intransmutably predestinative enigma."

Then he realized he was talking to Doc, and dropped the jawbreakers. He never—for what reason was not quite clear—used the words on Doc, although he plagued everybody else with them.

In normal English, Johnny said, "I began to think the girl's brother was something in perpetual motion. Believe it or not, he has been moving, and I have been following, ever since he left the airport."

Doc asked, "Where did Charles Mayland go?"

"He walked," Johnny explained. "He walked the streets, he walked in the park, and he walked in the country. If you ask me, he is a boy trying to get away from his conscience."

"Did he meet anyone?"

"Not until half an hour ago, when the kid went to a spot on the lake—it's a rowboat—where he met some other men."

"Is a yellow-haired man one of the others?"

"Yes."

Doc got the description of the rowboat and the part of the lake where it lay from Johnny, who said, "They're just drifting along the lake shore. It looks as if they're waiting for someone else, before they go wherever they're going."

"What about Hercules?"

"Eh?"

"Heard any references to Hercules, or seen anything which reminded you of him?"

"This Hercules you're talking about the same as the ancient Greek named Hercules?"

"Yes."

"This is the first I've seen or heard of him. What do I do about this rowboat full of guys?"

"Give me twenty minutes," Doc said, "to get out there."

THE girl was pale and desperate.

Doc Savage, glancing at her, said, "You really should talk, Miss Mayland. We have your brother and his friends cornered."

She lifted out of her chair, hands to her lips. Her cry of horror was wordless.

Doc asked, "What is it all about?"

She stared with a wordless what-can-I-do-now apprehension. But she did not speak.

Renny beckoned Doc aside, to say, so that the girl could not hear him, "Western might be right about her, Doc. She kind of acts to me like a girl who had started out masterminding something—you can see she's clever—and what she started has gotten a lot bigger and more terrible than she expected."

Doc said, "The idea of her brother being involved is what is frightening her."

"Sure. But she isn't losing her head. And some of that emotion she's showing may be acting."

"Renny," Doc said, "you stay here. Keep an eye on her. Western says he wants to coöperate. Have him help you." He turned to the athlete, and asked, "That all right with you?"

Marvin Western said, "She is welcome to stay here," when Doc Savage glanced at him. Western then added, "Anything I can do to help you gentlemen, I will willingly do. I feel I owe atonement for the bad reception I gave you."

Monk felt of his stomach and muttered reception being a mild word for it.

Doc Savage went outside with Monk and Ham. The dawn reddened the clouds which packed the sky. They did not seem to be rain clouds.

TWO blocks south and a block east, Doc Savage stopped the car, a machine they had rented during the night, and told Monk and Ham, "We are not going to leave Renny and the girl alone in that house."

"Yeah, I was wondering about that," Monk said.

"You and Ham watch the grounds. Do not show yourselves unless you have to. But keep an eye on the place."

Monk and Ham got out. They were disappointed. "I might be able to help with that rowboat matter," Monk suggested.

"Blast you, you've had your action for the night when you got shot in the stomach," Ham said. "If anybody goes with Doc, it'll be me."

"Both of you watch Western's house," Doc said.

When he left Monk and Ham, they were quarreling.

The quarrel, which began mildly, and progressed to what a stranger would have mistaken for the verge of fisticuffs, lasted while Monk and Ham were walking back to the Western estate.

The squabble made them feel better. It let a certain amount of steam out of their systems.

“You know something?” Ham asked.

“Listen, if you're leading up to a wise crack about my intelligence—”

“I'm not—although plenty could be said about it,” Ham told him. “I just wanted to mention a feeling I've got about this whole thing.”

“What kind of a feeling have you got?”

Ham said thoughtfully, “Somehow I begin to get a sensation of size, of magnitude, of consequence. For a while I was more or less in a whirl because of the goofiness of the thing—Renny getting thrown fifteen feet in the air, the car dashed against a tree, something incredible and apparently human carrying off five men, and that body. And the aging of that fellow at the cabin, the way he became an old, old man in a couple of hours. But the whole thing, I've got a feeling, will tie in together. And when it does—we've got a gollywhoppus on our hands, I bet you.”

Monk had the same opinion, but disliking to agree with Ham, he was silent.

There was plenty of light from the early morning sun as they took positions where they could watch the Western mansion. The grounds went to wide stretches of lawn instead of shrubbery, so it was easy to position themselves where it was impossible for anyone to come or go without their noticing. A rabbit could not go from house to street, or street to house, without them seeing it.

They would have sworn to this.

There was one other thing that touched up the situation so that what happened later was even less believable.

Both Monk and Ham personally saw everyone in the house. They came out on a balcony, and had breakfast.

They were Renny, Lee Mayland, Marvin Western, the lackey who had shotgunned Monk, the lackey who had talked with Renny over the stone wall—with the latter doing the serving.

They finished breakfast and went inside. Lee Mayland was yawning.

Thirty minutes later, Renny came flying out of the front door and circled the house at a tearing run.

Monk and Ham immediately ended their concealed watching and scrambled over the stone wall and ran to the house.

Renny saw them and yelled, “You two been watching the place?”

Monk and Ham admitted this.

“Then which way'd they go?” Renny shouted.

“Who?”

“Everybody.”

“What the dickens happened?” Monk demanded.

Renny pointed at the top of his head. “I've got a knot there like an apple. I heard Western yell out, ‘Watch the infernal girl! She's got a—’ And I didn't find out what she had, because she hit me—it must

have been her—a clip on the noggin. I was out a minute or two, and when I got up, everybody seemed to have scrambled.”

“Which way did they go?”

“Holy cow! Didn't you see them leave the house?”

Monk said, “They must have left on Ham's side of the house.”

Ham shook his head. “Not my side. They probably took Monk's side, and Monk was asleep.”

“Who was asleep?” Monk yelled.

“Oh, don't deny it. You didn't get any sleep last night, and you were probably napping—” The expression on Monk's face halted Ham. Ham stared at Monk uneasily. “You *were* asleep, weren't you?”

“I wasn't even drowsy.”

“Nobody left?”

“Nobody.”

“Not on my side, either,” Ham said. “They must still be in the house.”

Nobody was in the house. The house was big, not as impressive by daylight as it had been at night. The manifestations of Western's ego scattered about the place—there was more than the statue of Western in the front yard and the muscular carving of Western on the front door—gave a cheap carnival touch.

The girl, Western, the two men, had mysteriously disappeared.

Chapter VIII

UNTIL ten years ago, there had been no lake at Center Lake. The big dam on the Cedar River had been completed, and the resulting lake had been a scenic as well as an economic addition to the town and to Cedar County.

In the vicinity of the dam, the lake was not picturesque. But about three miles back the hills began—the natives called them mountains for the benefit of the summer vacationists who'd been plentiful before gasoline rationing—and the lake was as scenic as any. The hills were steep enough to pass as mountains. And, for some distance along the south shore of the lake, there were sheer cliffs which had been called the Cedar Palisades. They made an impressive sight to anyone boating on the lake. A path led down the face of one of these precipices to a houseboat which was tied to a pine tree growing out of a stone ledge which formed a natural dock.

When a tin can was tossed off the cliff top and came clattering down to land in the water a few yards from the houseboat, a man on the houseboat porch was considerably concerned. He sat there tense, one hand on the fishing reel which was hanging over the back of his chair. There was a revolver in the creel.

Another man with the same frightened expression on his face as the first, put his head out of the deckhouse. “What was that?”

“Somebody tossed something. That can there.” He pointed. “Over in the water.”

The other glanced up at the cliff, then at the can. "Get it you mutt!"

The lookout got a long cane fishing pole off the houseboat roof and worked along the face of the cliff trying to reach the can. He fell in, making a splash. Three more men had come out of the houseboat interior. When the man fell in, all of them laughed.

The lid was fastened on the can with adhesive tape, they discovered, to keep water from reaching the handwriting covered paper inside.

They gathered around the paper.

One laughed. "Lucky Charley isn't here. He might recognize his sister's handwriting."

They read farther.

"Hey, from the boss!" one said, surprised.

"What the hell did you think?"

Halfway through the missive they turned as one man to stare at the other side of the lake.

The rowboat was loitering along the distant shore, about a hundred feet from the beach.

The guard dripped water on the deck. "Bless me, you reckon Savage is there watching that rowboat already?"

A yellow-haired man came out of the houseboat cabin. He looked weak, ill. His hair was not as yellow as it had been, for now it was streaked somewhat with gray. There were more lines, lines of age, on his face than there had been.

He asked, "What's this?" weakly.

"The boss heaved a note down the cliff, Davis," one told him. "It's got bad news."

"Why didn't he come himself? Why the hell the note?"

The man gestured, in a cautious fashion as if he was afraid of someone seeing him, at the rowboat on the other side of the lake.

"Savage is probably over there watching the rowboat," he said in a frightened voice. "Savage and one of his helpers named Johnny Littlejohn. The boss didn't want to be seen."

The yellow-haired man became more ill-looking. "Where'd you get that?"

THEY had gotten it out of the note, they told him, whereupon he seized the missive and read it. The beginning surprised him, the middle alarmed him, but the end made him lick his lips.

"It could work." He examined all of them. "You fellows all read this?"

They had.

"You game to follow instructions?"

They were agreeable, one muttered, "If it gets rid of Savage, I'm ready for anything. That guy is beginning

to get my goat in not a small way.”

They went into the houseboat cabin. The place was sketchily furnished with odds and ends of house furniture. None of the fittings were boat stuff, so that the effect of the whole was landlubbery.

The yellow-haired man, gesturing, said, “Get the diving gear.”

The diving equipment was not true diving stuff, but escape “lungs” of the type kept on submarines. Evidently they had been stolen from a naval supply depot, or possibly from a plant manufacturing them for the government, because they were still in the factory cartons.

“How we going to know these'll work?” asked someone who was apprehensive.

“Oh, they'll work, all right. They were tested at the factory.”

A man took a mirror off the cabin wall.

“Ready to signal the rowboat?” he asked.

“Might as well. Better wait a minute, until we get better organized.”

They were worrying about their belongings, money and watches and such, which the water might damage. Someone hit on the bright idea of getting some small fruits jars out of the galley and sealing the perishable stuff inside, then pushing the jars inside their shirts.

The yellow-haired man took the note which had been heaved down the cliff in the tin can and tossed it on the table, open so that anyone could read it.

“What is Charley going to think when he reads that note and finds out his sister is behind the whole thing?” a man asked uneasily.

The yellow-haired man called Charley an unpleasant name.

“Charley needs his feet kicked out from under him,” he said.

“He's likely to blow his top.”

“Let him.”

A man took the mirror on deck, where he moved it about in the sun. Although the other shore of the lake, close to the rowboat, was three-quarters of a mile away, he could see the darting bit of reflected sunlight which the mirror threw on the shore.

He got the mirror reflection on the rowboat. Another man flapped his coat in front of the mirror, turning it into a crude heliograph.

They evidently did not know code, because they merely made four short flashes, then repeated them.

The rowboat began to approach the houseboat.

JOHNNY LITTLEJOHN watched the rowboat go into motion, and permitted himself a large word to express his relief. “Supermalagorgeous,” he said.

Johnny was a very long man who was remarkably thin and bony. His clothes fit him the way clothes fit

very thin men, as if they were hung on a pole. The monocle which he habitually wore attached to his left lapel was a relic of the past when he'd really had a bad eye. Doc had repaired the eye, and Johnny still wore the monocle, but with a magnifying lens.

Doc said, "It is heading for the houseboat. They got that sun signal from the houseboat."

Pocketing his binoculars, Johnny said, "Let's go," and as they ran through the trees, "Wonder why the rowboat hung around there so long?"

Doc Savage said, "Lookouts, possibly," and slowed his stride so that Johnny could keep up. "From where the rowboat was lying, they could watch both ends of the lake." He ducked under a branch, added as Johnny almost chinned himself on the bough, "Where the rowboat was lying is also the only place from which they could see the highway in both directions. Ideal lookout spot."

Johnny running was a grotesque figure, but he covered ground. "It was worrying me," he said. "Thought it funny they were waiting there."

In order to reach the houseboat traveling on land, they had to go about four times the distance which the rowboat need travel. The rowboat beat them. But not by much. The occupants were climbing on the houseboat.

Johnny slowed down to ask, "What do we do now?"

"Get aboard," Doc said. "Or at least get alongside and put a listening-mike aboard."

IN the houseboat, the yellow-haired man, who now had gray in his hair, distributed diving lungs to the newcomers from the rowboat.

He also kept an eye on Charles Mayland, watched the young man's curiosity lead him to take a look at the note on the table, upon which the yellow-haired man drew a revolver.

"Don't start anything," he told Mayland. "It's time you found out."

Pointing at the note, horror a huskiness in his voice, Mayland said, "That—is Lee—it can't be! I don't believe it!"

"We don't give a damn what you think. What are you going to do about it?"

Young Mayland put his hands over his face and said thickly, speaking in such a way that you thought only of how he meant it, not how melodramatic were the words, "I wish I could die."

Somebody laughed.

"You can die now, if you want to," the yellow-haired man said, and threw a diving lung at Mayland.

The apparatus hit Mayland's chest and fell to the floor.

Mayland stared at the diving lung dully, seemingly without awareness or any kind of decision, until the others had their lungs donned. Then he bent slowly, and picked it up. He was pale. His asthma rattled in his throat and chest. He put on the lung.

"Out we go," the yellow-haired man said.

They had a special hatch for escaping from the houseboat. The hatch was a well affair in the floor—the bottom of the hull—of the boat. Like a fish well, it extended up above waterline, and had a lid. By opening the lid, a man could drop down, leaving the boat without his departure being seen from the outside.

The escape hatch was of newer construction than the rest of the boat. It had been installed recently. A box, built at the same time as the hatch obviously, held window-weights attached to cords made into the shape of harness to hold the men on the bottom of the lake while they walked away.

“How deep is it?”

“Twenty feet.”

“That's pretty deep.”

“It won't hurt you. It will feel kind of black and scary down there for a minute.” The yellow-haired man got a rope and they all took hold of this. “Hang onto the rope,” he said. “We will stay under the boat for two or three minutes until the bubbles get out of our clothing. Then follow me.”

He showed them an illuminated compass on his wrist.

“There's a wire down there that we can follow where we're going,” he told them. “But if we get lost, I've still got the compass.”

They began going through the hatch.

It was dark on the bottom. And cold, bitterly cold. They had supposed the lake bottom would be clean and hard because the lake water was clean and clear, so the mud that welled up to their knees and rose in low rolling masses like something alive was frightening.

But the fear of Doc Savage was greater than any other fear, and they lined out and got going.

They had the troubles natural to men inexperienced under water. The lungs did not seem to deliver enough oxygen, and some of them got to gulping, which made it worse. And two of them lost their sash weights, thereafter having a devil of a time, only able to stay down by clinging to the rope to which they all were holding.

THEY walked, it seemed to them, for miles. The distance was actually no more than a quarter of a mile. Now and then they felt the wire which their leader, the yellow-haired man, was following.

When they came out, it was in a narrow gully which cut its way into the lake. They sank into the gully while still under water, then turned and followed it. Those who knew where they were going, knew this was near the end, pushed eagerly against the others.

The sunlight blinded them. They tore off the lungs, and hung to the stone sides of the gully, to roughness of the stones and to bushes, gasping.

The yellow-haired man was all in. He was very sick and messy for a while.

“Help me,” he gasped. “Help me up where I can see the houseboat.”

They aided him to climb a short distance. He watched the houseboat.

“I don't see Savage on board!” he said hoarsely.

He was afraid now.

He reached out and pulled some vines aside, uncovering a set of three storage batteries and a coil from which wires led away in the direction of the houseboat and the cliff which almost overhung it.

“Watch,” he gasped. “Watch for Savage. I'm dizzy as hell. I can hardly see.”

All of them strained their eyes. One had brought binoculars, but these were water-filled, useless.

Then one chanced to swing his gaze across the lake, and said, “Look over there!” and, “Isn't that one of them?” while he pointed.

Some of them watched Johnny, and the others watched the houseboat.

Soon Renny appeared and waved both arms feverishly while he stood facing the houseboat. After nothing happened, he shaped his hands in a funnel at his mouth to send his fabulous voice booming across the lake.

Mixed up with the echoes from the cliff, they could hear Renny's, “Hey Doc! Hey Doc, on the houseboat!” quite understandably.

The yellow-haired man's curse was as much a sigh of relief as profanity.

“I guess that Savage is on the houseboat,” he said. The yellow-haired man cursed again. He grasped a switch attached to batteries and coil and closed it with a fierce jab.

His, “Now let's get the hell away!” was mixed with the rumbling roar that rose up and became the greatest of sounds, and the quaking of the earth.

Chapter IX

THE blast, sight and sound of it only, drove Renny Renwick back several paces on the opposite shore of the lake. When he stumbled, sat down, he remained sitting.

They could not tell how, twenty seconds after the explosion, exactly how much of the cliff had come down. There was too much dust. Rock dust and earth dust, smoke from the explosive, black and yellow and brown, billowed out over the lake surface, chasing a tidal wave that gathered itself and gushed in a foaming crest that for a while barely kept abreast of the smoke, then drew ahead, rushing and twisting and piling over itself.

Monk—he spoke very calmly now, but in a few seconds he became almost hysterical—said, “The boat was mined, too. It blew up at the same time as the cliff.”

“T.N.T.,” Renny said. “I know what T.N.T. sounds like and looks like.” His voice was tiny, unnatural.

There was no sound now, except an occasional grinding as a rock slid, and the gobbling of echoes of the blast, dying away like summer thunder among the hills.

“Doc and Johnny were aboard,” Ham said. “We saw them go aboard. We didn't see them leave. So they were aboard.”

The tidal wave took some time to cross the lake, and horror was still holding them there when the wave came rushing up on the bank with a wet grunt, falling to pieces in a watery sheet.

Renny rushed for the water.

Monk and Ham each got him by an arm and stopped him.

“What you think you're going to do?” asked Monk.

“We've got to get over there. I'm going to swim.” Renny tried to reach the water, not struggling with them, just straining toward the lake.

Monk said, “Here, here, cut in your brains! It's three quarters of a mile. Suppose they want to shoot you? Swimming, you'd make a fine target.”

Renny shook his head with eyes pinched shut, then said, “Yes, sure,” as he wheeled and ran for the dam crossing.

BY midafternoon about a hundred men, including four divers rushed by plane from Chicago and Cleveland, had brought up a few fragments of the houseboat and the news that the rest of the wreckage, together with whoever had been on the craft, were buried under the twenty feet of lake water and stone, plus an additional thirty feet or so of stone, which the blast had tossed down from the face of the cliff.

Monk and Ham and Renny made arrangements for keeping the workmen on the job and paying for it.

“I can't bear to stick around here any longer,” Monk said, which was the way the others felt, too.

The Cedar County sheriff, a tall man who chewed tobacco and looked rural, but talked like an English diplomat, showed them the blasting batteries and coil. They had seen these before, but he showed it to them again, and said he had something else.

“Diving lungs like submarine men have,” he explained, indicating a small pile of the gadgets. “They seem to have been heaved into the water here. My men have been bringing them up one after the other.”

“That would explain why Doc thought they were on the boat,” Monk admitted.

“Another thing,” said the sheriff—his name was Calvin Stout. “We trailed the chaps up the road. There's a kind of a shed on the road. They've been keeping two cars there, a farm kid up the road says. He thought they were just summer sports. They've been around about a week.”

“The kid describe any of them?”

“Some of them. Some of the descriptions match the ones you gave us of the chaps who took Miss Mayland to the cabin in the woods.”

“Maybe that will help.”

Ham Brooks asked the sheriff, “What about Marvin Western?”

“No trace of him so far.”

“But there's a dragnet out for him?”

“You bet there is.” The sheriff looked at them over a cigarette he was making. “What do you fellows think is behind this?”

“If we told you,” Ham said gloomily, “you would think we had been taking an opium pipe to bed with us.”

“I probably would,” the sheriff admitted. “I talked to Chief of Police Carey about it. He gave me quite a dance about a man who could throw another man fifteen feet in the air, toss a car into a tree, carry five men off piggyback while taking thirty feet at a step, and packing off a body before Doc Savage could do a thing about it although Savage was in the same room at the time.” The sheriff held a match to the cigarette he had made. “That was really a wild and hairy tale. Any truth to it?”

“It's all truth, whether you believe it or not,” Ham assured him.

“Well, I'm damned,” the sheriff said, and went off shaking his head.

Monk and Ham walked toward the road where they would find a police car willing to take them into town.

“We should have told him there's something called the Whisker of Hercules,” Ham said grimly. “Then he would have been about half as confused as we are.”

They caught a ride into town in a State Patrol car.

THE tourist establishment was quiet. “We've got to get some sleep,” Ham pointed out. “Maybe after four or five hours the police will have dug up a clue of some kind.” And Monk and Renny agreed with him.

Remembering the explosion trap into which Doc Savage had stumbled, they split up in three different cottages for sleeping.

Ham Brooks sat on the bed in the north cabin for a while eyeing his damaged sword cane, then temporarily mending the sheath with bicycle tape, making what he considered a messy job of it. Then he lay back on the bed without undressing, something he would never have done in a state of mind anywhere near normal. He, contemplated the ceiling for a while, then said, “Blast it, my nerves must be going. I'm seeing things.”

He sprang on to the floor, goggling at the attic-hatch which was over the bed.

“Get down out of there!” he ordered.

The man looking down through the hatch—Marvin Western—asked, “Is it safe?”

“Come down!” said Ham, “before I ram this sword up through the ceiling.”

“Now wait a minute,” Western objected. “I want to know if that she-devil is around here before I come out.”

“Who?”

“Lee Mayland. We made a big mistake about that girl.” Western glanced apprehensively at the door.

“She isn't around,” Ham told him.

Western climbed down out of his attic hideout saying, "I thought maybe she had thrown in with you again with that innocent story of a brother in trouble."

Ham said, "Wait a minute," on his way to the door, where he called: "Monk! Renny!" And both Monk and Renny arrived in a hurry, Monk wearing nothing but his socks and a sheet.

Renny took several unbelieving looks at Western, then rumbled, "Holy cow! Good, good! Where did you catch him?"

Western struck a dignified pose, bulging his great chest impressively.

"I have been hiding in the attic, waiting for you to return," he told them.

Snorting, gathering his sheet about him toga fashion, Monk said, "Listen, strong boy, your story had better be convincing."

Western, after a moment, said, "You're not taking the right attitude."

"We're not taking the arms and legs off you yet. You're lucky," Monk stated.

"I'm not afraid of you." Western sounded afraid.

Monk, who wanted physical action too much to be reasonable, said, "You will be afraid, if I take hold of you."

Western made some muscles gather under his skin like rabbits. "I can break every bone in your carcass."

"If I was a carcass, you might," Monk admitted. "Don't overrate yourself, you muscle-bound wonder."

Ham, a lawyer and more inclined to be diplomatic than the others, put in, "This is not getting us anywhere. Calm down, Western. Monk, you chimpanzee, cut it out."

"I wish I hadn't come here to see you," Western said. "I expected a better reception."

Ham took over the questioning by asking, "Just why *did* you come?"

Western said, "First, you're probably wondering why I left my house. I didn't—not willingly. That girl held us up at the point of a gun. I don't know where she got the gun. She forced myself and my two employees out of the house. Against our wills, I assure you."

"With Monk and Ham watching the house, and me in the house," Renny said. "How'd she do that?"

"She simply hid us in—ah—a secret room where I take my exercises. You thought we had gone. After you departed, she took us away."

The man stopped and consulted his watch.

"Go on," Monk requested.

Western shook his head. "I want to show you something. I think we had better hurry." He looked at them appealingly. "I know I have not told you enough to satisfy you that I am an honest man. But, due to the urgency of the situation, will you come with me?"

Renny rumbled, "We're as urgent as any situation," and turned to the door saying, "Wait until I get my hat, and Monk gets his pants."

Monk and Ham felt the same way, a little desperate. The situation looked strange, but they didn't care.

MARVIN WESTERN guided them to an old touring car and peered anxiously at the gasoline gauge, muttering something about the injustice of his only having an A card.

Getting the car rolling, he said, "This is an amazing thing I intend to show you."

Monk was suspicious enough to be unfriendly. "Pick up the story where you left it—where the girl took you out of your own house."

"Myself and my two employees. Not myself alone."

"All right, start there."

"She took us on foot some distance to where a truck waited," Western said, unruffled. "The truck was one of those van types with a large enclosed body. It was standing in some thick bushes, and I escaped, simply dashing away from them. They pursued me with fervor, naturally. So I did what they did not expect, doubling back and entering the truck, where I concealed myself under some large quilts or padded blankets of the type used to protect furniture when in transit. I take it this was a furniture moving van. Failing to find me, they came back, entered the truck and drove to the spot where I am taking you."

This was so interesting it had Monk, Ham and Renny on the edge of the cushions.

"At their destination, they stopped the truck and everyone unloaded," Western continued. "After tarrying for a while in the truck, I crept to the rear and looked out."

He glanced at them, apparently to see if they were approving of his courage and ability, his sagaciousness.

Then he continued, "I then saw that the truck was in a large brick building, while everyone had gone up a flight of wooden stairs. So I also ascended the stairs, using caution, whereupon I saw the most remarkable sight."

He paused long enough for them to wish to the devil that he would go on, but did not quite give them time to start asking questions.

"I watched for some time, learning that they intended to leave in a body, and would be gone for twelve hours or so, whereupon I withdrew, left the building, went to my home, got my car, and began hunting you. I previously had learned—Mr. Renwick, here, told me this morning at breakfast at my home—that you were quartered at the tourist place. So I concealed myself in one of the cabins, and was still there when you found me."

Monk blurted, "Wait a minute! Is that the story?"

"It is."

"Didn't you say something about a remarkable sight?"

"Yes."

"We're a little curious about it."

Western sighed. "I know. Yes indeed, but I am not going to make you think I am crazy by telling you

about it. I am going to show you, let you see for yourselves.”

“Now that's a fine stunt to pull,” Monk said grimly.

Western glanced at them, said, “Remember Hercules.”

“Eh?”

“Just remember Hercules, and you will be somewhat prepared for what you will see.”

MONK, Ham and Renny had time to put no more than a dozen questions—unanswered—before Marvin Western wheeled the car to the curb and pointed.

They examined a large red brick eyesore, three stories, with the windows boarded shut on the first floor and scattered panes of glass broken out on the second and third floors.

“That it?” Monk asked.

“There is a rear door,” Western explained. “Perhaps we had better use that. I will drive around on the back street.”

Western walked straight for the grimy back door of the place, with Monk and Ham and Renny walking behind him.

Monk stooped without breaking his stride and picked something off the ground, a small round rock. He used the rock, which was not quite as large as a baseball, to hit Marvin Western behind the ear.

“What'd you do that for?” Ham demanded.

“A pixyish streak in me, I guess,” Monk said. He contemplated the old building. “I just thought he might be rushing us in there.”

Renny sank to a knee and examined Western, who was unconscious. “Well, it's a wonder you didn't crack his skull,” Renny said. “Someday you are going to kill somebody, picking up rocks and hitting them.”

Monk grinned. “You want to continue the lecture, or go in and see what awaits us?”

Renny indicated Western. “You've got to carry him.”

“That's right,” Ham said. “You beamed him. You carry him.”

Monk indignantly tried to vote them down, failed, and shouldered the unconscious man.

They passed up the door of the old building. Down the alley fifty yards or so they found another door into another building with a dark, stinking interior. Prowling around in this, they located stairs, then a ladder, and a hatch which put them out on a second-story roof.

From the roof, all they had to do was pick a few panes of glass silently from a window, and the way was clear into the old building which was supposed to house something so strange and unbelievable—according to Western—that a man's sanity would be doubted if he told about it.

Something to do with Hercules.

Chapter X

THEY climbed through the window, then lifted Marvin Western inside, then took off their shoes, then went to a door where they found themselves face to face with a large blue-eyed man. This man was one who had been at the cabin in the woods. He came through the door unsuspecting and happy.

Everyone was about equally astonished. But Monk and Ham and Renny got over it the quicker. Monk grabbed the man's mouth. Renny grabbed his throat. Ham used the end of his sheathed sword cane like a billiard cue and tapped the fellow senseless. They lowered the victim to the floor, and began breathing again.

With the lips only, Ham said, "So the place was empty, eh?" He went over, bridged his sword cane against Marvin Western's head, and insured Western remaining unconscious for a while longer.

Monk finished taking five guns—pistols and revolvers—out of the victim's clothing. He added a sheath knife and a pocket knife, both able to take a life.

"Commando," Monk said, also with his lips only.

"A scared crook, more likely," Ham said, the same way.

Doubled so low and stepping so lightly that it would have been funny at another time, they eased through the door by which the heavily armed man had entered. There was another door. They passed through. Then they fell over each other retreating.

"Holy cow!" Renny whispered.

"With exclamation points!" Ham agreed. "There must be twenty of them."

Monk crept back to the door and counted, reporting, "Only fifteen."

"The girl there?"

"Yes. Back in the corner, where it's dark, sitting in a chair."

"Anybody else we know?"

"All the gang who were at the cabin in the woods, plus those in the rowboat, plus Marvin Western's two employees, as he called them, who were at Western's house this morning."

"Some collection," Renny muttered.

"The jackpot," Ham agreed. "What do we do now?"

Monk said, "If you guys want to play detective, I think we can crawl into a spot where we can hear what they're saying to each other. And, if a fight does start, we won't be much worse off than we would be anywhere else."

"With fifteen of them, I can think of lots better places to be," Ham said. "But okay. Let's see if we can hear why they're all here for a pow-wow."

As Monk had predicted, they were able to get to a spot where they could get the general sense of what was being said in the gabfest.

THE yellow-haired man, Taft Davis, looking ill and quarrelsome and older and much more gray-haired, had the floor and was saying, “—not getting us anywhere. Your arguments don't hold water because you don't know what you're talking about. I've told you, and that should settle—”

A man interrupted with, “But Taft, you look older than this morning. You're still aging. Hell, look in a mirror and see—”

“I've looked in a mirror.” The yellow-haired man pushed all arguments away by waving a hand. “I don't feel any worse.”

“But—”

“Look, Frank, here's why it hit me so hard,” Davis explained patiently. “The idea of going up against Savage at the tourist camp scared me, but the boss said we had to have Staicu's body because Doc Savage, by doing an autopsy and analyzing, might have found out the truth. As I say, I was scared, so I took a little too much of it. I wanted plenty of effect. I overdid it. I got more than I needed. That's why it aged me about twenty years.”

The men sat around staring at him. They seemed to have something ahead of them about which they were not very happy.

“How much,” asked one of them, “will this job age us, do you figure?”

“Five years, about,” said the yellow-haired man. He gave all the impression of trying to sound more positive than he was.

“Does that mean five years off our lives?”

“It might mean a little off. Maybe not five years. But what's five years stacked up against what we're after?”

“Five years is eighteen hundred twenty-five days,” said a mathematician.

“Don't start being funny.”

“If it's funny to you, go ahead and laugh,” said the figurer. “It's a hell of a long time to me.”

The yellow-haired man fell back on logic. “It's five years you don't *live*, so you haven't lost it. Look at it this way, you fellows! Lots of times you've pulled a caper when getting caught meant a stretch, and more than one of you have served time. That was time out of your lives that didn't pass easy because every day was a day in jail. This is time that is easy because you don't live it.”

That seemed to satisfy them.

THE yellow-haired man now got down to business by hauling a photographic slide projector out of a box together with slides. What he had was better than a map. It was a series of photographs, in color, of the scene where they planned to commit the crime.

Two men hung a sheet on a dark spot on the wall, and the briefing of the operation got under way.

First picture was of a train, a streamliner.

“That's the Bluebird,” the yellow-haired man said. “She is the only blue, streamlined train that time of the day. She has a Diesel engine, and a whistle that sounds like a horn.”

He rigged up an electric phonograph and played a recording which was nothing but train sound—noise of the train, of the whistle.

“That's what the Bluebird sounds like,” he said, switching off the phonograph.

Next picture was an aerial view.

The yellow-haired man walked forward and pointed out different features in the picture. “Here is the railroad and highway layout. The railroad is this line, and the Bluebird will come from this direction. Here is where the train will be flagged, and here is where the track will be blocked. Automobiles one and two will be here, number three will be here”—he was indicating the spots on the two highways, one on either side of the railway—“and four will be here.”

The next picture was a bush.

“Car one will park here behind this bush.”

Next a picture of a farm.

“The farm is abandoned. Car two will drive into the barn and wait there. Better back into the barn. Drivers will stay with all cars.”

To a photograph of another bush, he said, “This is where three will be,” and to a stretch of open highway, “Car four will cruise here. The spot commands the scene where the train will stop, and you can cover it with machine guns. The crew of car four will not leave the machine. They will not shoot unless they get a signal from me, or from one of the others. The signal will be a bright yellow cloth which somebody will wave. All of you will have yellow cloths to wave in case you get in a jam.”

There was a lot more of the detail that went with a job as thoroughly planned as this one was, following which the lecturer asked for any questions.

A practical soul immediately asked, “How much are we going to make out of this?”

“They've been moving about four million in gold at a shipment,” the yellow-haired man told him. “There is no reason to think it will be less, and it probably will be more, because they're going to increase the shipments.”

“Suppose a shipment isn't on the train?”

“It will be. A shipment is being made every day this week.”

“That's a heck of a lot of gold to be moving around, isn't it?”

“Not when the government is doing it. This gold is being shipped to New York, in preparation for a deal with a foreign country whereby currency over there will be stabilized. As a matter of fact, it's only a small part of what will be eventually shipped.”

The doubter scratched his head and asked, “How do we know this is straight?”

The yellow-haired man said positively, “It's straight. My brother is a clerk at the Fort and he knows what is going on. I got this from him. He gets a cut.”

The other snorted. "He'll get a nice big cut of jail, that's what. The police have identified you, Davis. They'll snap your brother up the minute we pull this thing."

"That's his hard luck," the yellow-haired man said without much feeling.

Now there was some talk about timing. The operation, it seemed, was to take place tomorrow evening.

During this discussion, Charles Mayland stood in the background making sounds with his asthma—he had made the asthma noises throughout, but softly—and throwing ill, miserable glances at his sister.

The yellow-haired man was saying, "Now, here is how we will divide up until time for the caper," when Monk and Ham and Renny swapped their interest in what was to happen tomorrow for concern about what was going to happen to them right now.

It hit hard and heavy in the pits of their stomachs when a voice behind them said, "Listening, eh? That's not a nice thing to do."

THEY turned over—they had been on their stomachs—to stare at a hard-eyed man with a machine gun. The gun was locked on continuous fire; the man had his finger on the trigger, had his body braced for the recoil.

"One move makes you dead," he assured them.

It was true. Ham and Renny froze. Monk's chest got as big as a barrel with rage, but he didn't move either.

"Hey, come see the visitors!" called the man with the gun.

There was no stampede, but in the other room every man got out at least one gun. Three of them came in and helped escort Monk, Ham and Renny in to confront the others.

A short fat man's remarks set the tone for what everybody had to say. "Well, well, we got Doc Savage, and now we've got the rest of them," he said. "A very sweet situation."

Monk, Ham and Renny were lined up on the left side of the room, the side where the girl had been standing and still stood. Monk was nearest the girl, it happened.

Monk glanced at the girl, then blinked, looked again more closely, and his mouth became round with surprise. Lee Mayland's wrists were tied, something they hadn't noticed before.

She was—unless her tied wrists had some other significance, which wasn't likely—a prisoner like themselves.

While Monk was in the middle of his surprise, the girl said, low-voiced, "Pick me up and carry me through the door behind us and slam the door."

Monk and half the men in the room heard her. Monk lunged, scooped up the girl, came around with the same motion to the door, got it open, followed it through, and slammed the door. It had a spring lock which he tripped.

Bullets began coming through the door without much trouble, so it wouldn't keep anyone out for long. There was plenty of cursing on the other side, together with men assuring other men that Monk was a dead duck, that they'd get him, that there were no windows, so how could he get away? Which, Monk

saw upon looking around, was true.

“Get my wrists loose,” the girl told Monk.

Monk, inclined to be sour about his predicament, said, “You ever hear of frying pan into the fire?”

She said violently and with purpose, “Get me loose.”

She sounded desperate.

The room was large and rectangular, with scarred plaster walls and floor grooved by storage of heavy articles in the past years. The one electric bulb gave none too much light, which spread over a pair of tables and a number of boxes, cases, packages, and some cots covered with soiled bedclothes. On one of the tables was a neat array of four small glass phials containing a very dark red fluid and a larger bottle which was empty. Nothing else was on this table.

Monk got the cord off the girl's wrists and watched her run to the table, pick up one of the phials, race back to Monk, extend the phial, say, “Here, drink it!”

Backing away, Monk said, “Huh, drink it?”

“Yes, quick!” She shook the phial of red stuff.

“What is it? I don't—”

“Oh, you dumb ape!” the girl said wildly. “Why couldn't I have picked some of the others who had some sense—”

That fixed it. Monk didn't care about being called dumb, and he was curious, anyway, so he drank the red stuff, taking the whole phial contents at one gulp.

At first, he only thought he had swallowed a red-hot coal.

THEN the stuff, whatever it was, began to operate in his stomach, and the world started coming apart, at least as far as his personal feelings were concerned.

He had fever, then chills, faster than seemed possible. It was like being hit by a sledgehammer made out of flame, then one made of ice, successive blows. Coupled with this was a cat fight in his stomach, with plenty of indiscriminate clawing.

It was slightly funny—although there was no reason for it to be funny—to Monk at first, and he said something about swallowing a circus. Then as the effects grew worse, shooting agonies through his muscles, and a hellish banging in his heart, he grew alarmed. Downright scared.

Enough bullets were coming through the door to make him more alarmed. They had not yet gotten the bright idea of shooting out the lock, however.

The world went around Monk two or three times, and he put out his hands, knowing he was going to fall. But he did not fall, and he began to notice something strange—for he chanced to look down at his wrist watch, which had a sweep second hand, and he discovered that the second hand had slowed until it was hardly turning.

“That stuff even stopped my watch!” he said.

He turned to the girl when she answered, surprised at the sound she was making. It took him a moment to realize the sound was words, but words spoken so slowly that it was like one of those sound films, or a phonograph record, which had almost stopped.

“What's the idea of talking like that?” he demanded.

But she was still speaking, or making the noises, for the words were so slow that he could not make out just what they were.

Monk became tired of listening to her, and went to the door.

The shooting had changed. It had almost stopped, and the shots themselves sounded different. And the men on the other side were now speaking in the unutterably slow fashion that the girl was using.

Monk stood there.

The world continued to slow down around him.

THERE was no feeling of limitless strength inside Monk. Just an impression that the world had slowed down fantastically about him.

Curious about what was happening in the other room—what had changed the sound of voices and shots—he opened the door.

A man was standing inside aiming a submachine gun at the door lock. He lifted his eyes very slowly to look at Monk. The slowness with which his eyeballs moved was weird. And after a while, the muscles in his hands began to tighten and the gun to lift.

Monk thought, “Something sure threw them into slow gear!”

All the other men in the room were just staring at him, not yet moving their guns toward him, although all of them still had guns in their hands.

Monk lunged forward, was astonished at how his feet slipped on the floor before they got traction, and seized the submachine gun which was moving so slowly towards him. He twisted the gun out of the other's hands.

As he took the gun, he noticed that at least three fingers of the man who'd held the gun seemed to break, and the right arm was unjointed or broken. This accident to the fellow rather pleased Monk.

He took the machine gun by the stock and went around knocking guns out of men's hands. He noticed that some arms broke. He noted also that that short barrel of the submachine gun became slightly bent, and that the drum magazine was damaged badly.

A darned poor gun, Monk thought, and took hold of the barrel. He found that he could bend the barrel in his hands without difficulty. He discarded the weapon as unsuitable.

The behavior of the men in the room was peculiar, but satisfactory. They had hardly moved. Some of them were trying to face Monk, but they moved only with the greatest slowness, although the convulsive position of their muscles showed that they were trying very hard.

Monk thought, “Brother, I've always dreamed of a fight like this!”

And he went to work collecting guns. He had more trouble with his feet skidding; the floor didn't seem to offer much traction.

Another fantastic difficulty which Monk had was in gauging his leaps so as not to jump farther than he intended as he went from one man to another. He realized this was a problem when he sprang to kick a gun out of a man's hand, and leaped completely over the fellow's head, and had to come back. He was more careful after that.

When he got his hands too full of guns, he tossed them away, went on collecting more. He discovered, to his disagreeable astonishment, a finger sticking in the trigger guard of one of the guns he had taken. It occurred to him that it must be an artificial finger to have come off so easily, but it looked quite natural. He had jerked it off a man, apparently.

About that time, he observed that the guns which he had tossed were still in the air, falling slowly toward the floor.

Everybody was now disarmed. Three of the men, acting as if they were rather badly injured, were falling toward the floor. But it was in very slow motion.

"Miss Mayland!" Monk called. "Something has thrown all these guys in slow motion. The way they're moving, I can get you out past them before they do anything about it."

He went back to get the girl.

THE girl was still making the rundown-phonograph sounds. Monk beckoned several times, saying, "Come on! Step on it!"

She was, he saw, in slow motion herself, like the men in the other room. So he picked her up. She was very light. He dashed through the whole mob in the next room, out the door, and put her down.

"Run for the roof!" he said.

Monk then went back for Ham and Renny, both of whom were still in the room with the slow-motion men.

"Get the lead out of your shirts!" Monk shouted. "Come on! These guys are liable to snap out of it and massacre us!"

To his horror, he saw that Ham and Renny were likewise incapable of anything but the slowest of motion.

Monk went over and picked Renny up with an arm around the middle. Renny seemed to have no more weight than a cat. So Monk picked up Ham also.

Making for the door, Monk asked, "What the heck's happened to everybody, anyhow?"

Out in the hall, the girl was taking the slowest of paces going away, but looking and acting as if she was running as hard as she could.

Monk managed to pick her up in passing. He reached the window by which he had entered, and tossed everybody through. He tossed them a little too hard, and they traveled about thirty feet before they landed, nearly going over the edge of the adjoining roof into the alley below, before they stopped.

That, Monk reflected, was a funny thing to happen.

Since the flight had gone so well, he thought that he might as well go back and take another pass at the men. He liked a fight, and while he couldn't lick all sixteen of them probably, he wanted to see what the chances were. He might find a gun, preferably a submachine gun with a barrel that he couldn't bend around in his hands, and hold them all at bay until the police could be summoned.

As an incidental thought, he grabbed up Marvin Western and pitched him out on the roof where Ham, Renny and the girl had landed.

It was when he was heading back for the fight that Monk happened to observe an opening in the ceiling. Just an aperture into the attic. But there was a head withdrawing from view up there.

Monk leaped for the hole. Normally, he would have to make a terrific jump to reach the edge of the opening, since the ceiling was high. So Monk put all he had into the upward leap.

Results were more than he anticipated by a great deal. He miscalculated—he was running when he jumped—and hit the ceiling before he reached the opening. And he hit it with great force, driving his head and shoulders through plaster and lath, then through a layer of boards which formed a floor above.

He was aware, as he hit, of the smashing of lath and boards about his head and ears.

Then all faded to blackness.

Chapter XI

THERE were ropes around his legs, his body, his arms, binding his legs together and his arms to his body, and all of him in turn was tied to a stout plank about a foot wide and four inches thick. Under the ropes everywhere, so that they would not cut into him, there were folded blankets and sheets.

In his body was an awful sickness. In every muscle a furious aching.

Ham Brooks, leaning over him, was saying, "Here he comes out of it. The stuff didn't shorten the time that he was knocked out."

Renny Renwick rumbled, "You're sure his skull isn't fractured."

"I don't think so. There isn't too much scalp left on his head, or much hide on his face and shoulders, but I don't think any bones are broken."

Monk tried to form words, and couldn't. He could groan, though, and did.

Ham looked at him and said, "Don't ever tell me again that your head isn't made out of granite. You jumped from one floor of that building up to the next, making a hole for yourself with your head."

Monk felt too bad to make an insulting answer. He looked about.

The girl stood nearby. Also Marvin Western.

The room, Monk decided from the shabby appearance, was in the same building where the late—and strange—fight had occurred. The blankets and sheets were evidently off the cots in the room where the fight had taken place.

Johnny Littlejohn was standing on the other side, beside Doc Savage, who was sitting on the floor. There was a nasty gash in Doc Savage's scalp, and he was carefully bandaging the wound.

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

“Don't you remember bumping him and knocking him unconscious when you jumped through the ceiling?” Renny asked.

“No, I—” Understanding hit Monk. “He's alive. *Doc's alive!*”

“And somewhat disgusted,” Renny agreed.

“How—what—” For the moment, Monk was feeling fine.

Ham came over and told Monk, “You were going great, but you messed everything with that ending. Doc and Johnny weren't on that houseboat when it blew up. They were on the cliff, but down about a hundred yards. They were close—and that was just luck—to where the yellow-haired man and the others walked out of the water with their diving lungs. Doc saw them watching the boat, watching for him, so he made his voice sound a little distant and muffled, and called out, and they blew up the cliff and the boat.”

“But,” Monk said, “we saw them go on the houseboat—Doc and Johnny—and not come off.”

“We just didn't see them leave. They suspected something was wrong, and when they left the houseboat, they pulled a sneak in case somebody was watching.”

“Then what?”

“They trailed the gang here. They were hiding in the attic when we showed up. They were all set to pull a rescue when you threw your act. They climbed back in the attic, because Doc wanted the gang to think he and Johnny were dead—that would make it easier for Doc to work against them, he figured. Then you jumped through the ceiling and knocked Doc out, and yourself.”

“What about the sixteen guys?”

Ham spread his hands. “With the breeze.”

“They got away?”

“You bet they did. They picked up their guns and walked out. Or maybe they ran. They didn't know but what you were still running loose, and they wanted to get away. They carried off the casualties with them. We didn't catch a one. They even got the guy we kayoed in the outer room, and took him along.”

“Then,” Monk said, “they must have gotten over moving slow.”

“Slow? They never were moving slow.”

“Eh?”

“It was you.”

“Me?”

“You,” Ham told him, “took a taste of that Whisker of Hercules. Or didn't you have gumption enough to know that?”

MONK thought it over. It was becoming difficult to think. Everything in his body ached, twitched or throbbed, making a red-shot fog of pain through which he had to push his thoughts with the utmost willpower.

“They didn't slow up?”

“No.”

“It was me?”

“Yes.”

“Whisker of Hercules?”

“Yes.”

It didn't make sense, and so Monk moved his attention to the ropes, asking, “Why am I all tied up?”

“Doc's suggestion,” Ham explained. “You might injure, yourself badly when you regained consciousness, he said, if you were not tied. He said the strain on your muscles and bones was terrific, to say nothing of your possibly jumping through another ceiling, or something.”

Monk squinted doubtfully. “I really did that? I mean, I really took the guns away from those sixteen guys, and tossed people around, and jumped through the ceiling?”

“You sure did.”

Monk closed his eyes, said, “That's great. That makes it all perfectly sensible.”

“I'll admit it's a little skippy,” Ham confessed. “But there is sense to it, or Doc says there is.”

“You say all the sixteen got away?”

“Yes.”

“That makes sense anyway. What are we going to do about it?”

Doc Savage now got to his feet. He came over and looked down at Monk and asked, “How do you feel?”

“Like cat meat,” Monk said. “Doc, I'm sorry about—”

“Nothing to be sorry about,” the bronze man told him. “You were going great guns. You did a fine job. You saved Ham, Renny, Miss Mayland and Marvin Western. If you had not done what you did, there would have been about one chance in a thousand of everyone getting out alive.”

Monk grinned wryly. “Those are kind words. But I messed up your plan of keeping watch on the gang until you had them corner—cornered.” Monk frowned. “Hey, they were all here. You had them cornered. Why hadn't you called the police and closed in on them?”

“They were not all here,” Doc corrected.

“No?”

“Someone who is the mastermind, the brain behind the thing, was not here. Without whoever that is, the roundup wouldn't have been complete.”

Monk nodded. He was thinking of himself, and growing alarmed. "Doc," he said hoarsely. "Doc, how do I look?"

"What do you mean?"

"Old?"

"Somewhat older," the bronze man admitted. And then, observing the alarmed expression on Monk's face, Doc went away and came back with a broken fragment of a mirror.

Monk was more pleased with what he saw in the mirror; it was a better picture than had been in his frightened mind.

"I feel a lot worse than I look," he said. He closed his eyes and lay back and began to really realize how he hurt and stung in every bone and muscle.

He'd been scared. He realized now how he'd been scared. In his thoughts like a bony black monster had been the memory of how the man in the woods had aged and died within a couple of hours.

"The phial which Miss Mayland gave you to drink," Doc explained, "contained a light dose of the stuff. The same dosage they are going to use when they pull the robbery."

THE sound must have been downstairs for some time, without their noticing.

Ham said, "Listen!" but Doc Savage was already headed for the door and the stairs.

Halfway down the stairs, they could hear the noise, enough to know that it was man-made. A man was trying to cry out when he had no voice for crying, only breath and not much of that.

Leaving the stairs and running across the floor, they saw the crumpled figure. A man. Doc Savage turned him over.

The man looked up at them with a face upon which blows had rained to change most of its recognizable features. The bullet hole in his chest was high up, but touched the lung or the lung cavity, because it bubbled.

Ham asked, sinking to a knee. "What happened, Mayland?"

Through vocal cords which had just about quit, Mayland said, "Quarreled—I—washed—up. Got—away—shot."

"What they were going to do to your sister changed your ideas, eh?" Ham said.

Charles Mayland looked sickly. His eyes closed and his lips parted. He was passing out.

Doc Savage gripped the young man's shoulders. "Mayland! Mayland! Who is behind this? Who developed it—the Whisker of Hercules?"

Mayland pried his eyes open with desperate willpower, moved them, looked at Marvin Western.

"He—Western—caused it—found—found—this evening—robbery—time—changed," he said, and fainted.

MARVIN WESTERN looked at all of them as they stood up and faced him. Western's face lost color, and his shoulders drooped, his mouth looked ill, all his splendid muscles seemed to sag.

"I don't deny it," he said. "It was my fault—my foolish carelessness."

Renny went around warily behind Western, ran his hands over the athlete searching for weapons and finding none.

"Brother, you're my prisoner," Renny said. "If you're stronger than I am, you may get away. But otherwise I'll break every bone in your body."

There was no fight in Western's sagging marvelous muscles.

Doc Savage went up the stairs with long leaps, and came back in a moment carrying Monk. Appalled at not being able to walk, Monk was swearing in a small polite voice, swearing polite oaths that sounded remarkably prissy coming from Monk. Behind came Lee Mayland, to scream when she saw her brother.

"He only has a bullet in the chest and some lacerations," Doc told her. "Not enough to keep him from getting well."

They went outside, Ham and Johnny carrying young Mayland, Renny walking behind the ill-looking Western with big fists blocked out. They loaded into a car and drove to a hospital.

Lee Mayland was perfectly willing to remain behind at the hospital with her brother and Monk. And Monk was pleased, too, having for once had all the physical action he wished.

The girl talked to them in a corridor before they left.

"I want to explain," she said.

Doc nodded. "Make it brief. They are going to pull that weird robbery this evening. We haven't long, if we intend to stop them."

She twisted her hands together and talked. "I don't know how I first knew Charles was in something bad. I guess it wasn't one thing, but many. You know how it is—you know a brother so well you can almost read his mind. And then he came home tight—he never drank much as a rule—and talked some. It was the foolish talk of a drunk. But he said things about Hercules, which didn't make sense. And about Taft Davis, enough that I knew Taft Davis had gotten him into it."

She talked faster and told them how she had gone to see Taft Davis about it. The interview had been satisfactory in only one point, or maybe the word was unsatisfactory, because she had gone away from the talk convinced that her brother was in something pretty bad. She had thought of talking to Doc Savage, and then she had done a foolish thing—she had told Charles she was going to get Doc to straighten him out.

"Charles must have told Taft Davis, so they seized me at the airport. But just before that, Charles gave me a paper with writing on it that said he was guilty, and he would be tried, possibly for murder, if I didn't keep my mouth shut. The paper was mostly lies, but I didn't know it. So I was very scared, and I refused to talk when you rescued me from the cabin. Incidentally, they were torturing me in the cabin to see if I had told you anything more than I had admitted telling you."

Doc asked, "This paper your brother gave you—was that what you burned in the cabin? It was what

was in the brown paper parcel?"

"Yes."

"Why did you go to Marvin Western?"

"I got the idea he was mixed up in it—from Charles' drunken talk—I forgot to tell you that."

Renny said, "Don't worry about Western. We'll take care of him."

DOC SAVAGE left the hospital room. Western trailed along, looking wildly concerned.

"Mr. Savage!" Western said. "I want to tell you the truth. I insist on telling you—"

"Later," Doc said. "We have some fast moving to do."

Downstairs, Doc Savage got hold of the hospital manager.

"Call the police," Doc told the hospital head. "Get them here as quickly as possible. Have them watch that girl, Lee Mayland, and her brother. Tell the police they had better throw at least twenty officers into the building. Have them patrol the corridors, and outside of the building."

The hospital manager said, "That sounds rather alarming!"

"It is alarming," Doc assured him. "About the most alarming thing that could happen to this world—if any strangers get in to see that girl, or her brother, without being caught."

"In the meantime, have all your strong-bodied interns guard the girl and her brother. If you have any guns, arm the guards."

"I certainly will."

Marvin Western had listened to this, and he looked considerably less worried. He clutched Doc's arm in gratitude.

"Thank you, Mr. Savage, oh thank you!" he blurted. "I was horribly, most horribly, frightened for a while. I thought things had happened so that you no longer realized how clever she is."

Doc said, "Come on. You can tell your story while we drive."

"We must stop that robbery!" Western said excitedly. "With the capital they get from the crime, they can do anything they want. They can rescue the girl. She will lead them on to—who can imagine what terrible things!"

WHEN they were in the car headed for the robbery spot, there was a little discussion about whether or not to call in the police.

There was not much time. In fact there wasn't any spare time at all. The spot was thirty miles away, the Bluebird was due in fifty minutes, which didn't leave any time for explaining anything to anyone.

"Also," Doc pointed out, "it's over in the next state, across the state line about ten miles. The police are efficient, but there would be some delay, and they might not make it in time."

Doc was also of the opinion that the police, not knowing with what they had to cope—they doubtless wouldn't believe it, either, if they were told—might not accomplish too much. They wouldn't be helpless, but some officers would probably get killed.

The decision was that Doc, Renny, Ham and Johnny should drive like the devil to the spot and see what they could do.

Renny, in the back seat, reached out suddenly and slapped Marvin Western. "Tell it! Tell it all!" he said.

Western took the slap with no offer to fight back, then began talking, trying to make his voice oratorical and convincing, saying, "You gentlemen have me in the same pen with the goats, which is where I don't belong. Although on second thought, I have been made a terrible goat of."

"Stick to the truth minus the platform delivery," ordered Renny.

Talking the same way, or more oratorically, Western continued, "Body-building, you know, is my business. It has been my hobby, my interest, my livelihood, my special field. I study it as a good engineer studies engineering. I have studied the lives of the great strong men of history. Their lives and deeds fascinate me. That is how I came to study Hercules, and to learn—you will not find this information in the usual books—that Hercules got his strength, his legendary strength, by making and drinking a brew in which the principal ingredient was one hair from the whiskers of a legendary deity."

Renny said impatiently, "Cut out the legends and hocus-pocus."

"But you don't understand—that is the secret," said Western.

"Yeah? Secret of what?"

"These whiskers, I found, were not whiskers at all, but the name of a plant common to the regions where Hercules lived. You know of the common fern called maidenhair? Well, this was a plant called a beard. The Arab nickname for it today is *sharah baqq*. I won't go into the scientific background of it. But I studied it closely. This studying began several years ago, when—"

He stopped and covered his eyes with his hands in fright as Doc Savage took a curve. They were on the open highway now, and the car flew. Ham muttered something about hoping they weren't war tires.

MORE confident now, hence more oratorical, Western resumed, "I began studying, as I say, several years ago, when I began to get the suspicion that magical properties might be latent in this little-known Arab plant."

He smiled at them. "If this is boring you—"

"Just the way you tell it bores me," Renny snapped. "Get on with it!"

"My beginning experiments were entirely barren of results. I obtained the root, the stem, the leaves, the seed, the flowers of the plant. I made stews, teas, brews of all kinds. Nothing happened. I gave up for a year. But the thing fascinated me, and I went back to the Mediterranean, and I gathered many specimens of the plant from many spots. I brought the stuff back, and experimented for another year before—well, that day, I fed it to one of the guinea pigs which I was using for tests."

He rolled up a sleeve. "You see this?"

The marks of a past injury on his arm were impressive.

“The guinea pig did this,” he said. “You know how helpless guinea pigs are? You have heard of the rabbit that turned and chased the dog? Well, that is what the guinea pig did to me. It became an incredible little monster of fury and strength. It actually disabled me, indeed it did. And then, within an hour, it died of old age.”

Doc Savage entered the conversation to ask, “You are sure that the aging effect does not persist beyond the interval in which the drug affects the strength and agility of the taker? I have Monk's future welfare in mind.”

“No danger.”

Doc said, “You developed this stuff. We haven't time to listen to the exact details about bow. How did it get in this mess?”

Western stopped being bombastic, or couldn't be. He was getting onto ground which scared him.

It was all the fault of Davis, Taft Davis. Western confessed that he always had known Taft Davis was no account, but he had underestimated the depth of the man's rascality. Davis had proven to be an unutterable villain. He had, in short, stolen the secret of Hercules' whisker-soup, and perverted it to ways of crime.

“And then I was a fool,” Western admitted. They could tell that he was getting frightened as he went into this part of his story. “I was afraid I would be blamed. I pretended to know nothing about it. I pretended to you. I was afraid. That is the truth. I am ashamed.”

“What else?” Renny asked.

“That is the end. I am very ashamed.”

“Taft Davis stole this mysterious mixture from you?”

“Yes indeed. I am ashamed of that, too. I should have been more careful.”

Ten minutes later, Doc Savage turned the car off the road. It bumped over a grader ditch, pushed through some bushes, and went down a hill dodging trees. It was completely hidden from the road, and in tree growth thick enough to hide it from just about everything else when it stopped.

“This it?” Ham asked.

Chapter XII

AGREEING, “This is it,” Doc Savage swung out of the car and dragged out an equipment case. He began stuffing things in his pockets.

“Get what you'll need,” he told Ham and Renny and Johnny.

Johnny was looking at his watch. “I'll be superamalgamated! Doc, we're not going to make it. It's train time already.”

“The Bluebird may be running late,” Doc said. “We might make it.”

Then he knew they were going to be too late. He could hear the train coming out of the distance.

“Renny, stay with Western,” Doc said. “Do what you can. No plan. Just do what you can—but use your heads.”

Doc left them then, running through the woods. He ran with straining haste, listening to the train coming. It was coming fast, the way streamliners come at you, like airplanes.

He heard the train begin whistling. That meant the engineer had seen the attempt to flag him down. The excited continuing of the whistling told that.

Doc came to a car, a parked sedan. It was parked by the bush which had been shown in the colored slide in the old warehouse, when the robbery was being briefed.

There was no one in the car, and Doc swung to it, paused long enough to lift the back seat and chuck a small black-cased box under it. He put the seat back, then went on.

They were too late, all right.

The train had stopped by the time he came out on a bare ridge from which he could see what happened.

Not a shot was fired. No shots were needed.

Two men—thieves moving with speed which no men were supposed to have—leaped into the streamliner engine cab and threw engineer and oiler out bodily.

Others tore open the doors of express coaches. Evidently they didn't know which coach contained the bullion shipment, because they ripped open four.

When they found the right car, they signaled, and the others quickly converged on that one. There was evidently a fight with guards inside, but Doc was too far away to hear any of it but the screaming of one man.

The man who did the screaming, probably badly hurt, began yelling at the top of his voice, screeches of awful agony which seemed certain to at least take the lining out of his throat, and kept it up. Each shriek—and he kept it up until the whole thing was over and they were out of earshot—seemed fully as loud as the cry which it succeeded.

Doc Savage looked on, astonished in spite of himself at the unbelievable speed of it. The whole affair was something like a motion picture with some of the characters in normal motion, and some of the others in the comic ultra-high speed sometimes used for a gag shot.

The men all gathered around the express car door, bouncing up and down in their excitement. Possibly they were bouncing because they were elated with their new strength. They were bouncing about a yard.

The gold began to fly out of the express car. Doc knew what gold bars that size weighed, and they were being handled as if they were confetti.

One man would catch the bars and pile them in the arms of another until the fellow had all he could carry. The burdened man would then dash off. Another would take his place.

Before they got all the gold, two or three were loading at once.

When they had three million dollars or four million dollars—whatever it was—in their arms, they all left the scene. Some of them staggered under their burdens in spite of the unearthly strength they had gotten

from the Whisker of Hercules brew.

They went out of sight.

The porters and conductors were just beginning to step off the rear coaches to see what had stopped the train.

DOC SAVAGE wheeled and went back to intercept Ham and Johnny and Renny.

As he ran, he yelled loudly, "Get back to the car. Do not try to mix with them." He shouted it in Mayan.

Swinging to the south, Doc avoided passing the empty car which he had found earlier. The machine, he could tell, wasn't empty now. The men burdened with their bullion had already reached it. He heard the motor start.

Renny came charging through the trees with Marvin Western. Then Ham and Johnny were there.

"See any of it?" Doc asked.

"Some. Holy cow!" Renny was discouraged. "We certainly got nowhere fast, didn't we?"

Doc said, "Come on. We will try to follow their car. They must plan to rendezvous somewhere."

Legging it back toward their car, Ham asked, "What about your yelling in Mayan for us to come back here? Won't they have heard that, and be suspicious?"

Doc got the motor started, trusting that the noise the other car was making would keep their own from being heard.

He suggested, "That stuff they drink causes some kind of mad speed-up. If you noticed Monk when he was under the influence, he did not seem to understand anything that was said to him. Presumably the voices sound so slow that it is hard to understand them."

Ham shook his head, baffled. "What a crazy thing!"

Doc said, guiding their car back to the road, "Such things are bound to fall on us now and then, with the amount of scientific knowledge we are accumulating. Usually they come slowly, as a result of years of scientific development about which everyone knows. But it just happens this one arrived suddenly."

Marvin Western groaned miserably where he sat in the back seat. "This doesn't seem sudden—not to me. I spent years on it, as I have told you. But my mistake was in not letting the world know what I was doing."

"Why didn't you?" Renny rumbled.

"Let the world know? Why, the world would have laughed at me."

Renny said he guessed Western was right, and hung to the car as Doc got up speed.

THE chase led only about five miles. It was not in a true sense a chase, for at no time did they see the car ahead, but they were in its dust some of the time. And then Doc took a precaution.

The bronze man got out and rode on the running-board, letting Ham drive. The running-board position put Doc's head higher than the car, and he had Ham drive very slowly as they topped each hill.

They came up a long ridge, and Doc said, "Stop!" and added, "They are down there. All together. A truck, too."

They scrambled out and put their heads over the ridge and watched the swag being changed from cars to the truck.

None of the thieves were moving very fast now, and some of them seemed to be getting sick.

Western said, "Small doses, such as they took, wear off very quickly. The stuff isn't nearly perfected, you know."

"It's perfect enough to get this mess stirred up," Renny told him sourly.

"Well, it is far from practical. I hadn't nearly finished my experiments with it."

Ham said, "Well, well, there goes the truck up a side road."

One car also went up the side road.

"I think that was Taft Davis and one man in the car that followed the truck. Am I right?" Ham asked.

"You are right," said Doc.

The other cars—three—remained at the crossroads. The men stumbled around, taking their seats. But the machines remained at a standstill. One man, still under the effects of the brew, stood looking at a car for a while, then jumped from a flat-footed stand, completely over the car.

"Showing off," Renny said.

Ham nodded. "Think what those guys, doped up that way, could have done to us back there at the train—if we had been suckers enough to close with them."

Doc was thoughtful. "We might as well go down now. They have slowed up enough for us to have a chance. And probably they are feeling pretty tough."

Western, blanching, wailed, "They'll kill us! The police—"

"Shut up," Renny told him. "And let's see you put that set of muscles you've got to some useful purpose when we get down there."

They climbed in their machine and drove over the hill. Western began shaking and got down on the floorboards.

Seven other automobiles—Renny pointed at them excitedly—had come into view, approaching from the north.

Doc's machine reached the three cars filled with crooks standing at the road intersection. The crooks, disturbed by the seven machines approaching from the other direction, did nothing at all about it. Probably because the other seven cars were filled with police—state police, sheriff's men, city police.

The police alighted with plenty of guns.

They included Doc Savage and his party under the general waving of gun muzzles.

Calvin Stout, the sheriff of Cedar County, pushed out his lips and whistled as he examined Doc Savage.

“So you finally turned into a crook,” he said. “All right, you're under arrest. You started out in a big way, I must say.”

Renny roared, “We're not one of that gang!”

“Now, now, let's save the fairy stories,” Stout said.

Chapter XIII

THE police force, with enough guns to take a Jap stronghold, got around Doc Savage and his three men in a way that meant business. Because at least a dozen of the guns pointing at them were cocked, Doc and the others did not resist when they were ordered to submit to being searched. Their pockets were relieved of a remarkable quantity of gadgets.

“Hey, they've got more mysterious-looking things in their pockets,” a policeman called.

“Get them out of those bulletproof vests,” said Cedar County Sheriff Calvin Stout.

Doc, letting them relieve him of his alloy mesh shirt, which would stop almost anything under a .50-caliber pellet, said, “We are innocent.”

“Oh sure.” Stout grinned skeptically.

Doc Savage blanketed his indignation with patience. “Do you want to hear our story?”

“Sure, sure, I'll bet it's a wonderful story,” said Cedar County Sheriff Stout. “I'll bet it's a wonderful story, yes indeed!”

Ham said, “He believes us like we believe Hitler's solemn oaths.”

The three carloads of crooks, getting the general idea of what was happening, became helpful.

Pointing at Doc Savage, they shouted accusations.

“It was all Savage's idea! He made us do it! He fooled us with drugs. He's got some mysterious kind of drug!” This was a fair sample of what they were all saying.

The police, pleased with themselves, went through the cars searching for the bullion from the train. When they didn't find it, their pleasure evaporated.

“Where's the yellow stuff?” Sheriff Stout asked Doc in a nasty tone.

“How did you police happen to show up here?” Doc countered.

“We got a telephone call to be here. A tip,” said Stout.

“A call from who?”

“A friend.”

“Somebody who didn't give his name?”

“Did you get the call personally?” Doc asked.

“Sure.”

Doc Savage, imitating Taft Davis' voice with a fidelity to tone and speech mannerism that was hair-raising, said, “This is level stuff, Sheriff, and you had better get to this place at just the time I say.” Then Doc asked, “That sound like the voice?”

Sheriff Stout gave Doc a pop-eyed look. “So that's going to be your alibi—that you made the tip-off call yourself?”

“Not being guilty, we do not need an alibi.”

“Oh, sure. Apples have fleas.”

The police were organizing the prisoners for a trip to jail.

A cop, looking into Doc's car said, “Here's some metal cases, but they're just full of some kind of gadgets.”

“Don't waste time looking at the stuff now,” Stout told him. “Time for that later. Load them aboard and let's go.”

“Get in the car,” Stout told Doc, Johnny, Ham and Renny.

Doc got in the front seat. Ham and Renny and Johnny climbed in the back, planting their feet on the equipment boxes.

They were—since a moment ago—as pleased as cats with paws in the goldfish bowl.

“They handed it to us,” Renny said. But he said it in Mayan.

“On a silver platter,” Ham agreed in English.

Sheriff Stout was getting in the front seat. “What's that you say?”

“In a silver frame,” Ham said. “I was just saying we were framed.”

“You said platter.”

“Platter of what?” Ham sighed. “I hope we feed well in your jail. And the beds—brother, we haven't slept a wink in umpteen hours.”

“Oh, go to blazes!” said Stout.

Ham found the catch on a metal case for which he had been fishing. He kicked it. The case began to hiss like a big snake.

Ham said, “Okay, watch us go.”

THE lid jumped off the chest from the *whump!* of an explosion within, and from the pressure of an astonishing amount of smoke that was the color of the blackest of blacks.

When the smoke had filled the car and blinded the driver, Doc Savage reached across the driver and seized the wheel. There was a cliff on one side going down and one on the other side going up. Doc turned the car into the up-cliff.

The police automobile jarred its front wheels into a grader ditch and rooted against the cliff with a mild crash. The shock tangled everybody up inside, and they got busy undoing themselves.

Doc felt to make sure the doors had burst open. That was so the smoke would get out.

“Stay in here until the stuff spreads over the road and covers the other cars,” he said.

“What equipment case do we take?” Renny asked.

“Better take seven. We may have to run for it, and more than one case would be too much to carry.”

“I’ve got number seven,” Renny said.

Using a voice almost inarticulate with anger, Sheriff Stout advised, “And I got a gun, and I got the intention of blowing holes if you fellows move.”

They laughed at him, and got out of the car in the smoke. Stout swore, fired his gun and hit nothing.

Other guns now went off. There was some threatening yelling.

Sheriff Stout got excited and bellowed demands if the prisoners—the other prisoners, not Doc Savage and his aids—were escaping. It seemed they were not. The yelling and shooting was just for effect. Just to scare them back, one man put it.

Stout said profanely that they were not scaring anybody, and they were making fools of themselves.

Covered by all this, Doc Savage and his three men reached the end of the line of cars. They towed Western along.

Doc Savage used Sheriff Stout's voice and said, “Get out of the cars. Hold everybody against the cliff, out of the way if anybody tries to escape in a car. We don't want anyone run over.”

The police and their prisoners in the car obediently unloaded. They couldn't see a thing in the smoke.

Doc and his men got in as they got out.

“Set?” Doc asked.

“Set,” said his men.

They got going slowly backward, not leaving, but turning the car.

“What're you doing?” a policeman demanded.

“Turning the car across the road to block it,” Doc said in Sheriff Stout's voice.

He turned the car clear around, and they took out, very slowly for the time they were in the smoke, then making all the speed the car would make.

A FEW bullets chased them after they were more than half a mile on their way. When these had missed

them, Doc said, "Get a grenade out of the case, and we will try to block the road."

The case—number seven—was a sort of specialized setup which had been worked out by Monk Mayfair for what he termed occasions when they would need a lot of luck. The case contained among other things a radio direction-finder which could be converted into a weak but efficient radio transmitter-receiver—a tiny set that was, in fact, one of the most versatile pieces of apparatus Doc Savage, Monk Mayfair and Long Tom Roberts, the three mechanical scientists of the organization, had developed. Besides this, the case contained explosive grenades, smoke grenades, gas grenades. Not many of them, but enough. There were chemicals for specific purposes, such as quick destruction of metal such as a handcuff link or a prison cell bar. And odds and ends of useful nature.

While they were following the road around the face of a cliff, they came to a small bridge over a stream which foamed down the mountainside.

"Allah is good," Ham said, and put the grenade on the bridge after they had crossed.

The explosion threw parts of the bridge in the air, the noise jumping down the valley in a succession of boisterous echoes.

Renny rumbled, "Now we can have something like peace."

Marvin Western spoke for the first time. From the time the police had taken them prisoner, until now, he had behaved in a human fashion. He had looked as scared as the rest of them.

But now the athlete got organized with his chest-puffing again.

"It was a sad day when I got involved with you fellows," he said, sounding like an orator denouncing the demon rum from the platform.

"Goes for us, too," Renny told him.

Western said, "Now you have the police mad at us. What you did was idiotic, unnecessary, foolish, impulsive, dangerous and chaotic."

"Ultraindubitably," said Johnny.

"Eh?"

Renny told Western, "Holy cow! I didn't see you holding back none when we were escaping from the police."

"That," said Western, "is because I was accepting your judgment."

"Well, what you squawking about now?"

"I think your judgment was bad."

Renny and Ham and Johnny all looked at Western grimly, and Ham spoke for all of them, asking, "Have any of us embarrassed you with an opinion of what we think of *your* judgment—and behavior—in this business of Hercules' Whisker?"

When they reached the road intersection where the police had captured them, Doc Savage took the side road taken by the truck and the automobile containing Taft Davis.

"Get the radio finder going, Renny," Doc said.

Renny gaped at him. "What—what do I find with it?"

"One of our little radio transmitters which we developed to mark cars and planes and any other vehicles we wish to trail or locate with a direction-finder," Doc said.

"Holy cow!" said Renny. "I don't—"

Doc Savage told them about finding the car parked empty in the woods while they were trying to get a look at the train robbery, and told them of the pause he had made at the machine, and what he had put under the rear seat.

"I chucked one of our radio transmitters under the seat," he said. "We have a break. The car turned out to be the one which Davis took."

Marvin Western did too much wailing about their troubles as they traveled the winding mountain road.

"Running away made us look guilty. If the police catch us, we will be hung," he howled.

"No, no." Renny gave a realistic imitation of an electric spark popping. "They use an electric chair. Sounds like that."

Chapter XIV

THE night settled in the mountain valleys as black as darkness from a bat pit.

When the radio direction finder signal got louder in a way that indicated they were getting near the transmitter, Doc said, "Wait here," and walked a quarter of a mile through the forest and took a cross bearing, after which he came back to report, "They have stopped not far ahead. About a mile."

The night was silent with a stillness that would carry sound, so they decided to walk. Doc carried the equipment case.

Marvin Western kept mumbling about hanging and lifetimes in the penitentiary.

They tried to ignore him.

When they were still half a mile from their destination—whatever it was—Doc Savage called a halt with, "You fellows wait here while I go ahead and see what we are up against."

Renny followed Doc a few yards from the others. "Doc."

"Yes?"

"I've been thinking this over and we *are* in a tight corner," said Renny. "This Whisker of Hercules stuff is just wild enough to sound like something we would develop ourselves. And every now and then, over a period of time, there are rumors that we have turned crooks. Probably an enemy starts the talk, and other enemies do all they can to keep the ball rolling. Anyway, if they stand us up in court, we might have some trouble."

When Doc did not say anything, Renny went on, "With that three or four dollars—I mean, million dollars—that they got off the train, with that missing, nobody is going to be of a mind to listen to reason. Three or four million! Whew! That alone is about the size crime people would expect us to tackle if we went wrong. That won't be good, either."

“Any ideas?” Doc asked.

“No,” Renny confessed. “I guess I just wanted to talk.”

“Keep together.”

“Sure.”

Doc Savage moved off into the darkness. He wished they had brought along other equipment cases. In one of them was a scanner using so-called “black” light, or light invisible to the unaided eye because it was outside the visible spectrum, with which it was possible to “see” with fair efficiency in pitch darkness.

As it was, the night was utterly dark, and Doc could not come much nearer seeing in the darkness than any other man. He felt his way along.

It was common sense to expect a lookout, if there was one, to be keeping a particular eye on the road, and possibly have a string stretched across it. So Doc left the road.

He found himself moving through underbrush that was thick and composed mostly of thorn blackberry bushes.

After he had collected all the bramble thorns his skin apparently would hold, a large dog jumped on him unexpectedly and sank its teeth into his leg.

The dog made quite a racket taking hold, and kept growling after he had hold.

Nearby a man shouted.

“Rover's got somebody!” the man yelled. “Get your guns and a light!”

MORE than one man, and lights, began running toward the spot, apparently from a house.

Doc began to squall and snarl and spit. His squalling, snarling and spitting was louder than the growling of the dog.

He felt for the dog's throat, got it, did some throttling until the dog's main idea became getting away. The animal became easier to hold.

With the tongue of his belt buckle, Doc made enough gouges and scratches on the man-eating dog to give the appearance that the animal had been in a fight with something pretty tough.

When he released the dog, it went away. It was not a courageous dog.

Doc took the opposite direction, found a tree, and climbed it.

The men found their dog. A voice—the yellow-haired man's voice—fell to cursing the dog for a so-and-so coward.

Another voice burst out laughing.

“What's so blamed funny?” demanded Taft Davis.

“Old Rover and his wildcat.”

“Wildcat?”

“Didn't you hear the cat yowling and spitting. Sounded like an old tom. Boy, I bet Rover thought he had hold of something. Look at these scratches.”

“You figure it was a wildcat?” said Taft Davis suspiciously.

Doc Savage, deciding they were fooled, and that the dog had all it wanted for the time being, got carefully down out of his tree. The ground was less thickly matted with underbrush—no blackberries now—and he was able to get to the house.

He was almost at the point of entering the front door when the odor of tobacco from the clothes of a heavy smoker warned him that a man was standing inside. He drew back.

Taft Davis and two other men returned.

“Old Rover tied into a wildcat,” said the man who seemed to own the dog.

“Where's the dog now?”

“Left him with Nick, on lookout,” Taft Davis said. “I guess the pooch will be all right after he gets over his scare.”

“Damn a dog that scares that easy,” said the man who had been waiting inside the door.

The dog owner asked indignantly, “Did you ever have hold of an old tom wildcat? Rover's a good dog.”

“Oh, shut up about the dog.” Taft Davis' temper was short.

After they were inside, Davis said, “Let's have a light,” and another man shortly complained, “Where's the matches? Who's got a match?” Then there was a yellow glow from a kerosene lamp.

Doc Savage found himself standing outside a screened window. Inside there was a table, on the table two hats, a coat, a pack of cigarettes, and more than half a dozen of the phials containing the drug—if it was a drug—which everyone was calling the Whisker of Hercules.

Doc looked at the phials.

IN the house, they were fooling around with the gold. But the fooling had a purpose.

They had a table, three carpenter's planes and a canvas spread on the floor. They were industriously planing the edges of the gold bars, and catching the shavings on the canvas.

One man got busy sharpening a plane which had been dulled.

“This is a hell of a slow chiseling job,” a man complained.

“Slow!” Taft Davis said. “We're planing about five hundred dollars a minute off these bars.”

“Yeah, but as long as we're chiseling, why not just hide out a few of the bars.”

“Sure, and have the boss catch us,” Davis said contemptuously. “There will be a check on how many bars were taken. My brother will know the exact number, and when the cops get him, he is going to sing, and the boss will find out how many there were. If he don't find out that way, he'll find out another.”

A man examined one of the bars which had been planed.

“Well,” he said, “they look all right. You can't tell but what the planed edges are part of the way the bars were cast.”

Davis chuckled. “Sure, there you are. We chisel fifty or a hundred thousand extra for ourselves, and nobody knows it.”

“It's a dirty trick.”

Davis straightened indignantly. “What's dirty about it? Didn't the boss think up that idea of double-crossing the others—of having the police pick them up so they couldn't get their split?”

“Why couldn't we do the same, turn him in?”

Taft Davis considered the suggestion seriously. “The way I see it, that wouldn't be profitable. This is only the first job. Just the beginning. And we haven't got the formula, so we don't know how to mix that stuff that speeds you up.” He chuckled heartily. “But you've got an idea there. Later we might do something about it.”

They fell silent, working the planes industriously, the gold chips curling off the soft, pure golden bars and rattling noisily as they fell on the canvas.

By that time Doc had the corner of the screen wire pried up.

He reached in and got the phials full of stuff that looked like read ink.

There was something at the corner of the house that could be a rain barrel. He investigated, finding it was a rain barrel.

After he emptied the little bottles and refilled them with water, there was enough red ink in his fountain pen—he had the habit of carrying two, one red, one black—to color the water satisfactorily.

Getting the phials back on the table was not much trouble.

RENNY RENWICK jumped a foot when Doc appeared beside him, and got his big hands around Doc's throat. “Oops, sorry,” he muttered.

“There is one lookout and a scared dog,” Doc said.

“Three of them in the house. Apparently that is all.”

“Four. That's one apiece.” Renny sounded happy.

“You aren't counting me,” Marvin Western whispered. “I want to help.”

“All right,” Doc agreed. “But there are half a dozen phials of that stuff on a table by the window. Do not let them get to it, or we may have more than we can take care of on our hands.”

“I'll watch the phials.” Western's voice was hoarse. “This horrible thing is all my fault. I'll see they don't get the stuff.”

“Good,” said Doc. “I will go ahead, because the dog is probably afraid of me now.”

Renny said, "The dog will bark."

"Probably. We will have to do the best we can about that. You two follow about fifty feet behind me."

But the dog didn't bark.

The lookout was holding to the animal's collar saying, "Nice Rover, nice dog," and, "I ought to beat you to death, you cowardly whelp."

Doc landed on the lookout. He landed with a fist, which put the man on the ground.

The dog yowled and ran away before he could be caught.

Falling on the lookout, who was dazed, Doc hit him again, making him thoroughly unconscious. And Renny, Ham and Johnny arrived, excitement in their breathing.

"Doc !" Ham blurted. "That fool Western—"

From the house, a voice, Taft Davis' voice, bellowed, "What goes on out there now?"

Doc stood up. He imitated the lookout's voice as best he could, calling, "That blasted dog. I gave him a boot in the ribs."

"Why'd you do that?"

"Whelp bit me when I tried to find out how bad the wildcat clawed him."

The owner of the dog cursed and complained, "You got no right treating Rover that way."

But Taft Davis and the others were silent enough to indicate they had accepted the explanation of why the dog had howled and ran.

Ham whispered excitedly, "Doc—I was trying to tell you—Western made for the house. Broke away from us."

"What is the matter with him?"

"The fool has gone nuts. Said this thing was his fault, and said he wasn't going to see us get killed, maybe, because of something that was his doing. Said he was going in there and kill or be killed."

Shots came from the house. Five shots, the whole contents of one revolver.

"That's probably the end of Western," Ham said.

They ran into the house.

Western was in a fight in a corner with the owner of the dog. The dog owner, a much smaller and weaker man, was doing a job on the athlete. He had his teeth fastened in Western's left ear, was choking Western with both hands, kicking him with both feet.

Two men—Taft Davis and the other—were dead on the floor. Davis had been shot twice in the forehead. But the last muscular convulsions of death were driving quite a bit of red fluid through three holes in the other man's chest.

Renny, Ham and Johnny got the dog-owner loose from Western and clubbed the man with their fists as long as he was conscious.

Western staggered to his feet.

“Now I can live with myself”—his voice was wild—“because I took all the risk of ending it.”

Doc was looking at the five phials standing on the table. He said to Western, “So you shot two of them, and tackled the other bare-handed?”

“Yes, yes, I—”

“Where did you get the gun?”

“The gun? I grabbed it from one of them.”

Doc Savage, in a voice so quiet that it meant he was very angry, said, “You mean you asked him for the gun, and he handed it to you, don't you?”

WESTERN, speaking rapidly, wildly, said, “Then when I got the gun, I—” He stopped, staring at Doc. The muscles started loosening on his face. “What did you say? I asked—”

“You did not come in here and grab any gun from anybody,” Doc said grimly. “You walked in and asked for it, and it was handed to you.”

“No, I—” Western's face had come completely to pieces. It was sagging everywhere. “What insane talk!”

Doc said wearily, “I made a mistake letting you tag along. I thought it would do no harm, because you were not armed. I only let you come along because I thought, at some time or another, you would do something that would show you were guilty. Proof was what we needed. You have been pretty smooth. We did not have any exact proof that you were the one.”

Western began shaking. “You're mad!”

Renny rumbled, “So he's the plan maker!” as he pointed at Western.

“Yes,” Doc said. “Watch him. He may have another gun—”

Marvin Western had the second gun up his right sleeve, and tried to get it by shaking it out of the sleeve. He hadn't practiced the trick enough. He had a little trouble catching the gun. Renny and Ham were on him with their fists, had him out on his feet, before he could accomplish anything.

Doc pointed at the phials on the table.

“There were six phials. Five there now,” Doc said. “I filled them with water and red ink.”

Johnny pried Marvin Western's mouth open with a revolver barrel.

“An ultracoquelicot embouchure,” Johnny said.

“If you're trying to say he has an ink-stained mouth,” Renny said, “you could have used smaller words.”

THE next morning at the hospital, when they told Monk Mayfair the story, Monk was somewhat indignant.

“A fine thing, leaving me out at the end,” Monk complained. “So you knew Western was behind it.”

“Doc apparently did,” Ham said. “We found out later—after Western came to his senses and we threatened him with truth serum and he talked—that Western got crooked ideas right after he developed the stuff. Taft Davis was working with Western and Davis knew about the stuff. Davis got the gang together, but it was Western's idea. Western stayed in the background. Nobody—and this is surprising, considering everything—but Taft Davis actually knew Western was the main wheel.”

“Then Western, right at the end, was trying to kill off Davis—”

“He did kill him.”

“—so that Davis wouldn't give him, Western, away? That the plan?”

Ham nodded. “That was it. Western drank some of the ink-stained water, thinking it was the stuff, to turn himself into a superman and get rid of us, if it was necessary. Only that didn't work, of course.”

“Everybody in jail?”

“Yes. Except the girl's brother, Charles Mayland. He's still in the hospital here, but will recover.”

“What do you think they'll do to him?”

“Oh, turn him loose with a good scare and a lecture from the judge, probably.”

“His sister will be glad to hear that.”

“Uh-huh.”

Monk frowned. “Where's Doc? He rushed in here early this morning, found out I was all right, and rushed right out again.”

Ham grinned. “Doc has dashed off to our New York laboratory with samples of that speed-up stuff. It isn't practical in its present form—too rough on the guy who takes it. But Doc hopes he can develop a milder form, which our soldiers can use in this war.”

“I had thought of that, too,” Monk admitted.

Ham adjusted his hat. He brushed a bit of lint off his impeccable coat sleeve.

“Well, I think I'll drop around and see Miss Lee Mayland,” Ham said.

Monk mumbled something violent. He reached under the covers and brought out a small phial filled with a reddish fluid.

Ham stared at the phial. “What's that?”

“A shot of the stuff I saved,” said Monk ominously. “You leave the Mayland gal to me, see! Or I'll take a sip of this wow-juice and do what I've been threatening to do to you for years—take an arm and a leg off you!”

THE END