



DEATH IN LITTLE HOUSES

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

This page formatted 2004 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- ? [Chapter I](#)
- ? [Chapter II](#)
- ? [Chapter III](#)
- ? [Chapter IV](#)
- ? [Chapter V](#)
- ? [Chapter VI](#)
- ? [Chapter VII](#)
- ? [Chapter VIII](#)
- ? [Chapter IX](#)
- ? [Chapter X](#)
- ? [Chapter XI](#)
- ? [Chapter XII](#)
- ? [Chapter XIII](#)

Originally published in *Doc Savage Magazine* September 1946

Chapter I

IT was mid-afternoon, a July afternoon, the hour when the bright sun hammered down and the air hung motionless and still as if the whole universe were suspended in a sort of quiet interlude.

The lake was an endless expanse of tinted greens, like plate glass painted with an artist's brush and then laid out in the warm sunshine to dry. Surface of the water was as smooth as a bowl of lime-colored gelatin. Against the horizon, far off, a triangular wedge of white sail stood motionless against the water as if it were a tiny flag marker pinned into a huge map.

The lake—Michigan—was what you always remembered about Chicago more than anything else.

Driving northward from the famous Loop, the lake accompanied you like a beautiful girl with a warm, bright smile lighting her glowing features. Where busy Michigan Avenue swings into the Outer Drive, at the Drake, she is there to greet one, curving and graceful, waiting quietly beyond a sweep of crescent-shaped beach.

On the left, the expensive apartment dwellings of Chicago's Gold Coast drop behind, to be replaced, farther inshore beyond the Outer Drive, by green-lawned parks and smaller, cheaper apartment buildings.

Again she beckons to you from a placid, motionless land-locked boat harbor. The highway rolls on, curving away from the lake, coming back again. The wide pavement of the sprawling express highway swings into Sheridan Road. Big substantial houses crowd in closer, then thin out again as the suburbs of the North Shore drop behind.

The lake coyly slips behind a screen of trees, a forested estate, then makes a breathtaking, stately entrance in even greater majesty. The city and the larger suburbs are left behind now. The highway dips up hill and down, follows a flat bluff overlooking the endless stretch of peaceful, motionless, tremendous expanse of water.

A solitary cloud drifts across the sky. Beneath it, where sunshine is momentarily screened off, there is no longer bright, shining emerald tints. That part of Lake Michigan turns gray, dull, leaden, a blotch upon the clean blue-green that shimmers and sparkles as far as the eye can see. Like a quick, momentary frown upon her otherwise serene and lovely face.

A frown, perhaps, that gives the vaguest hint of the various strange emotions lying deep beneath.

But today, this particular afternoon, Michigan was a lovely lady, her face as tranquil and serene as if she were taking a siesta in the sunshine.

AN occasional car rolled along the North Shore highway, tires making slight gummy sounds on the hot pavement as the machines whipped past, soon disappearing beyond some tree-canopied curve of road.

The cab driver said: "Nothing was wrong, was there, skipper?"

His passenger did not immediately answer.

He was a blond young man, the cab driver. But his face was not young. Prize fighting had aged it somewhat. The nose was broad and flat, the cheek bones flat and wide, the lips fairly thick and heavy. He was a stocky young man without much education, but intelligent enough that he had given up boxing before his brain had been dulled by years of being knocked around in the prize ring.

Two things he was proud of. He owned his own hack, a presentable-looking black limousine. The other was that he always gave his customers a little extra service. He was not just another dumb jitney driver. You give the customer a little attention and he remembers it. With a good tip, usually.

The blond cab driver kept his eyes on the road ahead and said further: "I've been out to this Jamison place once or twice before. We swing off just past Highland Park. That Daniel Jamison is pretty well known, that's for sure."

Still no answer from the rear seat. Sometimes it was hard to get them to talk, until the passengers saw you were really trying to help them.

He pushed his cap back on his blond head. It was even warm driving. "The reason I wonder, mister," he continued, "is you ask me to drive you over there to Northwestern University when I pick you up at the

station in Evanston. Already I take some people over there to the lecture hall this afternoon. It's in the papers about Daniel Jamison lecturing over there, that's how I know. They say engineers and scientists are here from all over the country to hear him. He's some kind of authority—”

“Electronics engineer,” said his passenger.

“Yeah. That's it. Well, like I say, I wonder. I know you're on your way there to hear him because you go to that same lecture hall. I'm sitting there waiting for a fare maybe back to the station when you come right out again. First, you have me drive you to a drugstore where there's a phone booth. Now you are going out here to where Daniel Jamison lives.”

His quick blue eyes went to the rear-view mirror and he grinned. “To be honest about it, skipper, you stay in that drugstore so long I thought maybe you are cuffing me for the fare. Some guys do. So I stroll inside and have a coke, because it's hot anyway. I hear you talking to somebody about Jamison and trying to find out where he is. You know him pretty well, mister?”

“Yes.”

“Frankly, skipper, I also hear you call his place in Highland Park and get no answer. Then you call some hotel downtown and I guess he ain't there either. As I say, I figure something must be wrong. Jamison was supposed to talk at two o'clock, wasn't he?”

“That's correct.”

“And it's after three now.”

“Quarter after.”

“Everybody's waiting there for him, huh?”

“The program committee is somewhat embarrassed,” said the passenger.

“It's funny he can't be located,” mused the driver. He wished he could get more information out of the guy in the back seat. He'd like to know who he was, too. Somebody pretty important, more than likely. At least he *looked* important.

An unusual bronze sort of man, too. Even his eyes held a goldish tint. His features also. A big fellow. Probably make a whale of a boxer. Fast, you could tell from his strange, alert eyes. That's what made a fighter—quick, fast eyes. Only trouble was the guy wouldn't talk much. Usually, by this time, they were telling you about the wife and kids, or maybe their ulcers.

They passed through the village of Highland Park, a clean, well-kept, very expensive small town nestled in low wooded hills alongside the Lake. “About three minutes now,” said the blond driver.

He remembered the private road that cut off from Sheridan. It dropped downgrade through a shaded small forest area. You could feel a change in the air from the nearby lake. It was cooler.

Estates lay half hidden beyond the heavy stand of tall trees.

“It's the next lane, I believe,” said the passenger.

The blond driver's eyes jumped to the mirror. “I guess you've been out here before. Yeah, the next one on the left.”

The narrow lane tunneled through bordering trees and finally emerged on a low flat bluff. The lake was

there before them again, tremendous, an inland ocean with only the horizon and blue sky beyond it.

On the left of the roadway there was nothing but woods now. On the lake side, a sort of grove, the trim low cottage poking its green slanted roof above a high box hedge. The thick tall hedge seemed to wall in the house completely. There seemed to be no walk or driveway.

The car stopped and the driver climbed out. He took off his cap and wiped the back of his hand across his sweaty forehead.

“I guess there's no driveway,” he commented.

The bronze-skinned man swung out of the rear seat. He motioned along the lane that passed for a road. “There's an entrance farther along, I believe. But this is all right.”

“You want I should wait?”

The big man nodded.

“That's perfectly all right with me, skipper,” said the driver. “I say Johnny Lewis is always at your service. Ill catch me a little shut-eye.”

He climbed back into the front seat, loosened his tie and opened his collar. The curly hair on his chest was the color of straw. Almost immediately he went to sleep.

THE tall thick box hedge extended for some distance along the shaded lane. It shut off view of the lake and the cottage. No other residences seemed to be nearby. Somewhere in the trees a bird, disturbed, chirped once, then dozed off again. The warm air hung motionless. Silence everywhere.

Doc Savage, the passenger, paused, his gold-flecked eyes searching down the length of the solid hedge. It was several years since he had last visited his good friend Daniel Jamison. He seemed to recall an opening somewhere along the hedge that led to a path into the cottage.

Beyond the hedge, he thought he observed some kind of movement. He tried to peer through the heavy maze, but it was like attempting to view something through several layers of fine-meshed screen.

“Hello, there?” he called out, awaiting a reply.

No answer. His words went searching off into the nearby woods and lost themselves in silence.

Doc finally located the gap in the hedge and went through to the wide sweep of green lawn beyond. He saw no one. A dog would have barked or come searching for him. He supposed he had been mistaken about seeing movement on this side of the hedge.

The house was comfortable looking, sturdy, white-painted horizontal siding with the low sloping green roof. A man's house. Jamison was a bachelor.

A few high trees screened it partially from the hot sun. The lawn swept off to the left, and some distance away there was a combination garage and garden house. The garage doors were closed. It was back there where the driveway cut in from the road. There was a long flagged walk from the garage up to the house.

Everywhere else, as far as the eye could see, was the lake.

Doc Savage walked across the lawn, circled the cottage, reached a back porch and went up to try the door. He was not surprised when he found it unlocked. It was that kind of exclusive residential community. There was not another house nearby.

Doc stepped inside. The kitchen was cool. Shades were drawn part-way. He called out Jamison's name, and his voice bounded through the quiet house, up and down the stairs, and came back to him empty handed.

Doc passed through a small pantry into a front hall. On the right he found the living room. Behind this, a small study lined with bookcases. There was a dinette that connected with the kitchen again.

Next, Doc Savage went upstairs and looked around. There was a bathroom, two bedrooms, and another room that had been converted into a workshop. Everything, the entire house, was in order. He found a handwritten note propped up against the dresser mirror in one of the bedrooms. It read:

MR. JAMISON:

AS LONG AS YOU ARE STAYING IN THE CITY AT THE HOTEL, DURING THE LECTURE SERIES, I AM TAKING A FEW DAYS OFF. I'LL LOCK UP THE HOUSE BEFORE I GO.

HILDA

Hilda, he recalled, was a Swedish woman who had been Jamison's housekeeper for quite a few years. He returned to the study, sat down at the big flat oak desk and put through a call to the University, in Evanston. He was connected, after some delay, with the committee member he had talked to less than thirty minutes ago. He identified himself.

No, he was informed, there was still no word from the well-known electronics engineer. Hundreds of people were sitting there in the lecture hall impatiently waiting to hear him.

"You tried the hotel again?" asked Doc Savage. He named a world-famous hotel that faced on Michigan Avenue.

"Several times," Doc was told. "He is checked in there for a few days, but there is no answer from his room. We can't locate him any place. It's very strange."

Just before Doc hung up, he became aware that a man was quietly watching him from the doorway of the living room. He was an odd-looking character.

Nearly all his face was covered with a shaggy dark beard. His hair was long, falling to the shoulders of his light-weight coverall jacket. The beard also grew from his upper lip and forehead, long and scraggly, so that his mouth and eyes were almost completely hidden, like those of a Scottie dog.

He was a big man, at least six feet, but not as tall as Doc Savage when the bronze-skinned man stood up and came around the desk. The bearded man's eyes sparkled like two black marbles buried in a bear rug.

"You arrived by gas vehicle, kinsman?"

Doc Savage considered the question, its quaint phraseology, and the shaggy man himself. He nodded.

"Fellow Jamison is not here."

Again Doc nodded.

“You are perhaps a friend of his, kinsman?”

“I have known Jamison for ten years,” said Doc Savage. “Can you tell me where he is?”

The bearded man's black eyes stared steadily out of the heavy beard, moved to the telephone, then back to Doc Savage's face.

Finally he said: “Fellow Jamison has not been here. The pursuits of modern mankind are difficult to comprehend, kinsman. I believe he goes to the big city where men dash around endlessly like mice in a cage. Shameful.”

“You haven't seen him, then?”

The man shook his head slowly.

Doc had observed the big straw hat which the man held in his right hand. The coverall work-jacket looked dusty and worn.

“Gardener?” he asked.

The big man sighed. “I believe that is your modern term for it.” He put on the big sun hat. Doc was interested in the man's hands. “I must return to my children.”

“Children?”

“Nature's children—the flowers.”

Doc let that one pass without comment.

The tall bearded man turned, moved as soundlessly as a kitten through the living room and disappeared toward the hallway. It struck Doc Savage that the strange character had never questioned his presence in the house.

Shrugging his shoulders slightly, Doc lifted the receiver again and called the downtown hotel in Chicago. His eyes, thoughtful and slanted downward, retraced the invisible path left by the bearded man as he had left the study.

“Mr. Daniel Jamison's room, please,” said Doc Savage when the hotel operator answered.

He waited. He was aware of a sound from the kitchen, but did not hear the back door open.

“I'm sorry—” the operator started to say.

“Keep ringing,” asked Doc.

The kitchen door closed and he heard the slight creak of a rear porch step.

One of the study windows faced north toward the garage-garden shed. He saw the huge bearded man come into view lumbering slowly along the flagged path that led to the garage. The man was carrying a rake on his shoulder.

He skirted the garage, disappeared toward woods that bordered the end of the property. He went into the woods and was lost.

The hotel operator said, "They do not answer."

"Thank you," said Doc, and hung up.

He thought the most unusual thing about the bearded heavy-set man was the hands. They were neither gnarled, cracked, rough or soiled. They were not the hands of one who tended the soil. The fingernails had been immaculate.

Doc tried the phone again, this time speaking directly to the local operator when she asked for Number, please. The community was small enough that she no doubt knew many of the residents.

He asked about Hilda, the housekeeper who worked here at the Jamison place. Yes, this was a personal friend of Mr. Jamison's and he'd like to get in touch with the woman. It was rather important.

"Oh," said the girl helpfully, "that would be Mrs. Ericson. A widow, you know . . . lives over beyond the . . ."

"Could you call her for me?" asked Doc politely. At this hour the local operator probably had little else to do but pass the time of day.

In a moment he was talking to Hilda Ericson. He identified himself as a personal friend of Jamison's. "I'd like, if you don't mind, Mrs. Ericson, to ask a question about the gardener who works for Mr. Jamison?"

"Gardener?" Her voice was puzzled. She spoke good English.

"The big fellow with the beard . . . like Rip Van Winkle, only it's a black beard. Sort of a quaint character. You know, one who is somewhat behind the times . . ."

"Never heard of him!" said the woman's voice.

"You mean—"

"He's no gardener from Mr. Jamison's place, mister. We use a landscaping service. They come around in a truck, once a week, and they're young fellows who used to be in service now running their own business . . ."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Ericson," said Doc quickly and he hung up.

It was so quiet within the house Doc could hear a fly buzzing over near the north window of the study. The buzz quickly became a bumble-bee sound and he knew it was an automobile engine, outside, growing swiftly deeper and louder in its throbbing.

He tried to look from the window, but the high box-hedge blocked his view. That lane beyond the hedge was hardly more than sidewalk width and the car, approaching from somewhere north of here, was roaring down the road as if it were a Mack truck.

Johnny Lewis, the blond taxicab driver, was asleep out there behind the wheel of his own car!

Doc ran to the kitchen, shut and latched the door behind him, and was skirting the cottage when the hidden car rocketed past. He couldn't see, but dust skirled up in clouds that drifted on the air. Fenders raked against underbrush. Pebbles rattled like buckshot against a tin roof. Sound of the roaring engine was gobbled up swiftly by the screen of woods beyond the small estate.

When Doc reached the roadway his stocky blond driver was standing out there flat-footed, putting one-syllable words together end-to-end with a grinding of his teeth.

Seeing Doc, he spat and said, "The damn fool! He almost came head on!"

"It must have been close."

"Crazy, he was!" He swore and spat again. "I heard him coming and piled out on the far side—"

Doc motioned the blond driver behind the wheel as he himself climbed into the car, in the front seat now. He started to say, "Would you know him if—"

"You bet I'd know him!" snapped Johnny Lewis. "That beard—"

"The kind of a beard a hermit might wear?" suggested the bronze man.

"Yeah! You tagged it, skipper!" The blond driver already had the limousine in motion, swerved in at the driveway to the Jamison garage, backed and cut the wheels again, then sent the heavy car trailing the dust cloud that still hung suspended like train smoke in the air.

Doc was saying thoughtfully, "He had his gas vehicle hidden up there in the woods, I suppose."

Johnny Lewis shot Doc Savage a slanted, curious glance along his eyes. "If you mean that V-12 job he was driving—"

"A quaint fellow," said Doc.

"That ain't the word *I* got for him, skipper!" Johnny Lewis swung the limousine into the uphill climb that led back to the main road. "This is the only way he can go. Other way ends at the lake. But I know a cutoff where maybe we can head him off on Sheridan Road. That guy'll kill somebody!"

"How soon," asked the bronze man, "can we reach the city?"

"You mean the Loop?"

"Yes."

Blond Johnny Lewis had the limousine in second gear and they were doing fifty up the steep incline. He said, "An hour if we don't overdo it and get picked up on the Outer Drive or Sheridan Road."

Doc named the well-known hotel on Michigan Avenue.

"Get me there as soon as you can without picking up a police escort en route," he said.

Johnny Lewis dropped the gear deftly back in high and they shot ahead at the top of the grade. "But I thought maybe you were interested in this crazy bearded guy—"

"I am," said Doc Savage. "I have a feeling we're going to meet again."

His unusual gold-flecked eyes stared out over Lake Michigan, visible for a moment through a break in the trees. The bright intensity of sunlight on water was not unlike the determined glow that flickered in his eyes.

Chapter II

THE room was big and tinted Nile-green. There was furniture covered with bright flowered chintz. It was the kind of hotel room offered to guests who need reception space for visitors. Polished mirrors and colorful prints hung from the walls. The bedroom was reached through a wide archway.

It was a cool, pleasant room. Long windows faced toward Grant Park and Michigan Avenue, fifteen floors below. There was the famous Art Institute, and farther back in the park a great fountain that sent columns of water cascading in geometric pattern high into the air. There was a boat harbor and a breakwater and out beyond, the clean smooth blue expanse of the lake.

It was a room in which to be comfortably cool on a mid-summer day.

There was a man in the room, pacing up and down, up and down. Sweat stood out on his smooth, well-formed cheekbones. His eyes, cobalt blue, held dark shadows in what was ordinarily healthy, glowing skin beneath. The shadows filled the eyes, dulling them, haunting them.

He was not a big man. He was slender, medium-built, and he gave the impression of height in the straight alert way he held his shoulders and back, and moved about.

His thin, straight lips were trembling. Fists clenched at his sides as he continued walking back and forth. He seemed to be a man striving to get a grip on himself. Men heading for a nervous breakdown act the way he was acting.

Drawing in his breath and letting it out in a great sigh, he paused by the windows, staring out toward the lake. Usually he found peace and comfort in the lake. Its greatness, its endless horizon, held a bigness that made one forget the smaller everyday irritations of life.

The lake had oftentimes soothed him on a calm still night when his mind was disturbed with problems. It had stimulated him with its vigor when, frequently, high winds brought its tremendous white-capped waves rolling and crashing against the North Shore. In a storm, its fury had oftentimes fascinated him.

But always he went back to the lake for assurance and strength.

Now it failed him. He was a man afraid.

The telephone rang again.

He had been expecting it. It had rung before. Yet a startled small sound came from his throat and he whirled toward the writing desk on which it stood, near the open window, facing the lake. He stood frozen in the center of the big room, watching it, eyes focusing on the instrument in a hypnotic stare.

An hour now it had been ringing intermittently. Again he tried to ignore it. He started around the room again, tried the double latch on the corridor door, to make certain it was locked securely, as he already knew it was. His dark-shadowed eyes jumped to the other door, the one connecting with another suite that could be connected with this one if a guest preferred. He had tried that door several times. It was locked from the other side by the hotel. Sweat continued to roll down his face.

Staring at the ringing phone again, then ripping his gaze away, pacing the room he tried to concentrate on the street sounds from far below. They carried up clearly on the afternoon air. Bus horns. Cabs. Even the voices of people, a sort of hushed murmur created by hundreds of shoppers passing by.

He closed his eyes and his head bent back, fists still clenched. Once again he tried mightily to gain control of himself.

Down Michigan Avenue an ambulance siren keened against his eardrums. It grew louder and shriller and

shattered his nerves completely. With a final small cry of despair, he lunged to the writing desk and lifted the receiver.

“Yes?” His voice shook. “Yes?”

“Mr. Daniel Jamison?”

There was nothing distinct or familiar or businesslike about the voice. It seemed to speak from behind a heavy curtain.

“Yes? Yes?” he repeated nervously.

“Just a moment, please . . .”

He waited. The pause became a frightening eternity. There was still a connection and he wondered . . . “Hello?” he demanded. Now that he was going through with it, he felt some returning strength. “Hello . . .”

And the door, the locked door to the adjoining suite, clicked behind him. He spun. Only, the door was no longer locked and it was open.

He dropped the receiver on the cradle and leaped toward the doorway. He saw a dark rectangle, no light from beyond. The shades in there must be drawn. He checked himself . . .

The two shots blasted out of the shadows and killed him.

On Michigan Avenue the traffic murmur from below remained after the two flat gun-cracks had buried themselves, absorbed by carpet, drapes, walls, furnishings.

The ambulance siren faded off in the distance.

Chapter III

IT was ten after five and office workers were still pouring out of Loop buildings, rushing along well-defined routes to their own suburban stations and bus terminals. Some rain arrived with a sudden shift of wind from the lake. Dark clouds flung themselves across the hot sky, forewarning of a typical Chicago summer storm.

Within moments the splashing big drops changed to a downpour. A gray, leaden curtain of driving rain swept across the streets, down the sidewalks and drove people into doorways. Building entrances and arcades blocked up as more and more express elevators unloaded.

The electric service company showrooms were directly across Clark Street from one of the Loop's major office buildings. Lighted windows of the showrooms featured Chicago's latest postwar attraction.

The model homes exhibit.

Crowds had been milling through the huge exhibit all afternoon. Now it was worse, for office workers decided the exhibit was a good place to kill time until the sudden storm blew over.

There were Cape Cod model houses. Contemporary Georgians. Ranch types. Moderns. The models, built exactly to scale, contained everything from miniature bookcases, filled with books, to tiny refrigerators. One, a three-level modern built to perch on a little hillside, was labeled: “Dream Home for a

G.I.'s Bride.”

Monk Mayfair couldn't make up his mind. He bent down before the model of a ranch-house type, squinted out of his round bright eyes, started measuring off footage with the first joint of his stubby thumb.

“I don't know,” he mused.

Ham said, “Careful, you clumsy oaf, or you'll knock that display to bits. You don't know what?”

“It'd be a long walk for the wife. From kitchen to living room measures almost—”

“What wife?”

Monk straightened up and glared at his well-dressed partner. “The wife I'd have to think about if I owned that house, shyster.”

“But you don't own a house like that,” said Ham, annoyed. “And you haven't got a wife. Why burden that thing you call a brain trying to figure out the impossible?”

The two of them, the tall dapper-looking man and the short, wide-built one, settled down to criticizing each other in no uncertain terms.

Which was a sort of daily occurrence.

Monk—Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair—one of a group of five experts who belonged to the Doc Savage organization, was an industrial chemist by profession. He was probably one of the best industrial chemists in the country.

He was short, as wide as an ox, and muscles grew on him like strands of heavy steel wire wrapped around a keg. He had small, humorous, dancing bright eyes and a considerable amount of jaw—slightly the worse for wear as a result of being involved in various dangerous missions in every corner of the world.

Some women called him “cute.” If they were young enough, say under five years, they usually screamed at sight of him.

Monk's manners, careless dress, language and general behavior were cause for Ham's embarrassment more than once.

For Ham Brooks, the Harvard Law School attorney, was the dapper one in the Doc Savage organization. Today he wore gray flannels, a blue flannel coat, white shoes and an expensive Panama. He was dignified, but not a dude. In a courtroom he was famous as an orator. Mention the full name Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, and eyebrows raised in the legal profession.

They were an odd pair, Monk and Ham Brooks. They squabbled continually. Yet more than once, on adventurous missions, each had subjected himself to the danger of death to save the other.

Monk was saying, “Blast it, you shyster, look here and I'll show you. Suppose my wife walked the length of this house fifty times each day. That would be more than—”

Monk discovered that he was talking to himself. He swung around, saw Ham's slim straight figure in the crowd, realized that his partner was suddenly interested in something beyond one of the other displays. But he couldn't see what held Ham's attention. He wished he had a box to stand on, so he could see over

the heads of the crowd. He started to push through the crowd, merely turning one shoulder against the moving sea of humanity and sort of side-slipping. Doing that his eyes touched upon the girl in the aisle directly next to him and he wondered why he was in such a hurry.

THREE things about her stopped Monk in his tracks.

She was pretty. She had the kind of fair, lovely skin that goes with auburn-red hair. She was not very tall, with nice curves instead of one of those starvation-diet figures. She had a good chin, delicate cheek-bones and, he thought, blue eyes.

Another thing, the way she dressed. Some kind of light jacket with a white scarf tucked around the neck. Different from the way most girls dressed on a summer afternoon. And she was hatless, with a drop or two of rain glistening on her hair.

The third thing: she was either blasted curious or intensely worried about something. She kept watching a part of the room out of the line of Monk's vision. She craned her neck. Her slim throat line was nice, too.

He could hear one of the display salesmen speaking to her.

“May I help you, miss?”

“I . . . ah . . . no, thank you,” she answered quickly.

“If you are looking for something—”

“No!”

Her reply was abrupt. The salesman looked at her, frowning.

The girl moved away from him, glanced back once, saw that the salesman was talking to someone else, then let her intent, watchful gaze go back to whatever it was she was watching.

Something sure as hell was giving her a time, Monk decided. He started working his way through the crowd again. Nothing intrigued him more than a pretty girl who needed assistance. And if he was any kind of judge of facial expressions, the girl was plenty disturbed.

Ham thought so, too.

But Ham, being tall, and also observing the room from a slightly different angle, managed to see the figure that was the object of the red-haired girl's intent interest.

First Ham had seen the girl, just as Monk had caught her unusual attractiveness. Then Ham had seen what she was regarding with so much interest. No wonder!

The quaint-looking fellow looked like a character out of the hills. He wore a kind of brown robe with a cord sash tied around the waist. His beard covered forehead, cheeks, mouth and jaw. Hair came down to his massive shoulders. He was tall.

The combination of a backwoods, last-century character inspecting a postwar model home of tomorrow was as incongruous as could be. No wonder the girl was watching him also, Ham thought.

The bearded man almost fondled the miniature of the modern postwar home, running his hands over it caressingly, peering into it, feeling it.

Then Ham heard an attendant near the bearded man exclaim, "Look out! You'll knock it over!"

But the damage had already been done.

A section of the model house—a second story bedroom unit with roof, chimney and sun porch—came loose. The attendant glared, started to say, "Now, see—"

Next his mouth hung open momentarily in astonishment.

Because the man with the beard had shoved the section of model house beneath his funny robe and bored into the heaving wave of humanity moving through the exhibit hall.

The attendant yelled: "Stop that man!"

There was some excitement, as another attendant took up the cry. The trouble was he couldn't see who he was supposed to stop, and so he merely waved his arms wildly and yelled.

And as usually happens when something out of the ordinary occurs in a crowded place, people simply turned their heads, gawked vaguely—and did absolutely nothing about stopping anyone.

The bearded man, by this time, was well through the crowded hall and nearing an exit on Dearborn Street. People over in that part of the exhibit had no way of knowing what was going on.

ONLY three persons managed to trail the hermit-looking character. Monk. Ham. The girl.

It was Ham, though, who was close behind the big fellow when he shoved out through a revolving door and reached the rain-drenched street. Water now ran ankle deep in the gutters. Everyone had taken to doorways for temporary shelter. Only cabs and cars moved through Dearborn Street, tires sending up water.

One thought was in Ham's mind. He had seen the pretty redhaired girl's face when the backwoods fellow had seized the model house unit. Something like despair had been in her eyes. She, too, had tried to stop the thief.

Ham had no idea what it was all about. But he was a gallant chap and he also felt he should do something about the house-stealing.

Long Hair thought differently.

He swung around just as Ham closed in on him near the curb. Holding his monklike robe with his left hand, the section of model house still concealed, he placed a massive hand against Ham's chest and heaved.

Ham remembered that the fellow said something like, "Scram, kinsman!"

The lawyer walked backward on his heels while trying to breathe again. He thought the blow had collapsed his lungs. Monk appeared out of the revolving door and caught his partner beneath the shoulders before Ham sat down in a large mud puddle.

The incident was furnishing a little diversion for the people who were momentarily trapped in doorways by the downpour of rain. Some grinned.

Monk stood Ham on his feet and demanded, "Where is she?"

Ham coughed, sputtered, somehow was able to breathe again. His chest had a caved-in feeling. "That way!" He pointed across the street. He was already soaked by the rain. His Panama brim was wavy and drooped over his eyes. "He went that way!"

Monk disregarded the hand-pointing and said, "The *girl*, I said! What happened to her?" Raindrops came down his slightly battered nose and he shook them off, sniffing.

"It's always a woman with you," said Ham acidly.

"I suppose you weren't following her?" cried Monk.

Ham's dark eyes flashed. "I—" he started to say testily. Next, he pulled Monk's arm. "There she goes."

The girl with the red hair and the light sharkskin jacket was already across the street, some distance from them. Apparently she had emerged from the exhibit hall through another exit. She disappeared in an alley midway in the block as Ham spotted her.

The traffic light at the corner of Adams had changed while he was making this discovery, meanwhile grabbing Monk's arm. Now a double line of cars streamed past them, blocking the two off for several seconds. Finally they found an opening and ran across the street.

The rain was still coming down. There was some thunder and gusts of wind.

Across the street, they saw that the long alley led through to busy State Street. The girl's trim, running figure was well toward the far end when they entered the cobblestone passage.

Ham's eyes were fiery enough now that he ignored puddles and rain as he splashed along beside Monk's pumping short legs. "This is the way *he* went, too. She's following him. Anything might happen to her!"

"You're a fine kind of Galahad," Monk ribbed.

"Shut up!"

They reached State Street. Diagonally across from them was the arcade lower-level entrance to the hotel where they were stopping. Both caught a swift glimpse of the girl's flashing shapely legs and jacket as she disappeared into the arcade hotel entrance. They entered the hotel a half moment later.

Shops, airline ticket offices and assorted window displays lined the arcade. Ham and Monk were not conspicuous, really, for other persons caught by the sudden shower were moving through the corridors, entering the hotel, or using the busy area as a refuge.

Ham and Monk walked now. Rapidly. "Lobby," said Ham, indicating one of the stairways that led up to the large, busy lobby of the popular hotel.

Monk jerked his head. "I'll take it from the Monroe Street side."

They separated and climbed different stairways.

Each knew, without wasting time in words, the other's plan. The girl was not in the lower arcade. Neither was the bearded quaint fellow who packed the wallop of a Joe Louis.

The lobby, therefore, must be the logical place they had gone. So Monk and Ham covered it from two directions, arriving at opposite ends of the long, huge room in order that they could close in and flush their quarry.

Ham was not quite his debonair self, though other people too had been caught in the shower and showed the results. He was aware of his sodden flannels clinging against his legs. He carried his shapeless Panama in his hand. Then he observed Monk's wide-set shoulders across the lobby, near the elevators. The chemist was moving toward the information desk. It adjoined a row of counters where room clerks served guests with formal, polite efficiency. Monk's complete casualness told Ham that an objective had been sighted.

Swerving over to a busy cigar counter on the side of the lobby, Ham bought a *Daily News* red streak. He paused near a high magazine rack and watched his partner.

The girl with red hair was now at the information counter.

Obviously she was asking questions of the clerk. Twice the clerk shook his head, as if he did not have the answers. Finally the girl turned away, appeared undecided for a moment, then walked quickly to one of the lobby armchairs. The spot she chose was a corner apart from the somewhat congested center of the big lobby. On her way she picked up a discarded newspaper from another chair. She sat down alone, opened the paper and put it up in front of her face.

Ham knew she was watching the elevators, within her line of vision again.

Momentarily, he had lost sight of Monk Mayfair. He wondered what the chemist was up to now. Ham casually riffled pages of various magazines from the rack and continued to watch the girl without appearing to be watching anyone. No sight of Monk.

The situation continued that way for perhaps ten minutes. It was the busy cocktail hour in the well-known hotel. A busy murmur of conversation came from a doorway near Ham. It was one of the lobby cafés. People kept moving in and out. Across the huge room, atop a short flight of steps, soft music floated from one of the main dining rooms. Clerks at the reservations desk were busy as people checked in. Bellhops scurried back and forth.

When Monk suddenly appeared again, over there by the redhaired girl, a quick frown touched Ham's forehead. Monk was carrying a woman's purse. Bright red, it was large enough to stampede a bull if waved anywhere within a block radius.

Ham watched his burly partner step right up to the girl and say something. In fact Monk, with no inhibitions whatsoever, carefully moved the newspaper aside in order to demand her full attention. He seemed to be showing her the glaring red pocketbook.

Ham thought: "This tears it!"

Chapter IV

MONK, his bright eyes as friendly as a great Dane's, said to the girl, "Yours, I believe?"

She looked up at him intently. He had been correct about the eyes. They were blue all right. Blue ice. They cut him down to midget size.

"That is," Monk added, "I thought it was your purse. You sure you didn't lose one?"

Silence. Some more frigid-blue-ice stare. She held the paper up in front of her but was not reading it. Monk saw her gaze flick in the direction of the elevators, then come back to the paper again.

"Was he annoying you?" prodded Monk.

More silence.

“The funny guy with the beard is the one I mean. He's here in the hotel some place. Lady, there's maybe two thousand people living in this hotel.” He looked at the tiny puddles of water beneath her trim feet. “You'll have pneumonia waiting until he appears from those elevators. You might wait hours . . . even days! Think of it!”

What she thought of it she didn't say. Her mouth was set firmly. It could be a vivacious mouth if she'd give it half a chance.

“A pretty young woman like you,” Monk pointed out, “is taking an awful chance trying to shadow a fellow like him. Now me, I'll be glad to help you.” He grinned. “I've got plenty of time on my hands and I'm glad to be of service. Suppose you just tell me exactly what happened—”

“Shove off,” the redhaired girl said quietly.

“I—” Monk looked at her.

“Start hi-balling, jockey.”

Monk gulped. “Beg pardon, miss?”

She said coolly, “Take that transport out of creeper gear and let her roll. Shove off!”

A light dawned for Monk. His eyes twinkled. Say, here was a girl you really could call different. No dainty-pointed-little-finger-and-china-teacup stuff. First time he'd ever heard one talk like a truck driver.

“Now, about this long-haired fellow—” Monk started in again. He paused when he saw her eyes center on a part of the room which was not where the elevators were located. He followed her gaze.

The man was watching them. He wore a plain dark business suit. He was not smoking a cigar. But Monk knew a hotel dick when he saw one.

The redhaired girl, too, seemed to realize the man was the house detective. The coolness in her blue eyes was suddenly replaced by an expression of wariness. She quickly folded the paper, placed it on her lap, lowered her head and became interested in a comic strip.

Monk was left isolated on an island of conspicuousness. If the hotel dick took it into his head to stroll over this way, the girl could easily say she was being annoyed.

Monk wandered back toward the information desk. There was a kind of aisle separated from the main part of the lobby by the huge marble columns. Palms were placed between the columns. He could catch glimpses of the girl without being obvious about it. He guessed Ham had been watching the whole thing, because Ham had been over there at the newsstand when Monk last saw him.

Then he realized Ham had disappeared.

HE wondered about it. Perhaps his partner had seen Long Hair again and was on his tail. Monk decided he would have to await developments, stalemated the way he was.

One of the sections for the room clerks adjoined the information counter. It was the section for names from A to J. Two clerks were busy behind the counter. This was the peak hour of the day.

Then Ham came up beside the chemist and said quietly, "You have the finesse of a ring-tailed baboon. Where did you get that hideous pocketbook?"

"Bought it in one of the shops here," said Monk. "I had to have some excuse for talking to her."

"That hotel dick will think you stole it," Ham pointed out. "He's been watching the two of you. Maybe we'd better forget the entire thing."

"But that nice girl is in danger, if you ask me," said Monk worriedly.

Ham chewed his lower lip in thought. "I'd like to know why that long-haired rascal stole that section of house, and why she's so disturbed about that or Long Hair himself."

"Is that what he picked up at the exhibit?"

Ham nodded. He continued to talk quietly. "The incident is so cockeyed that it intrigues me. Long Hair also intrigues me. I'd like to push in his face."

"Of course," said Monk, "a pretty girl being involved has nothing to do with it."

"No."

"No," repeated the chemist seriously.

"I merely want to know why a character of the red plush mode-of-living era steals a model home of tomorrow."

"And the girl is farthest from your thoughts?"

"Exactly."

"The hell she is," grumbled Monk. "Right at this moment you're probably considering asking her to dinner."

Ham said: "These wet rags will attract attention. I'm going to slip up to Doc's suite and change. Take me five minutes. Keep watching for the bearded man."

Monk grimaced. "I suppose I shouldn't watch her at all. I suppose you're not running upstairs to get prettied up. By the way, is there any message from Doc? He said he'd be back from Evanston before six and meet us here."

"I'm going to call when I get to the room and find out if there's any word from him." Ham had glanced at the girl several times as they talked. Her back was to them. She sat as unmoving as a statue. Her head was still bent down as though she were reading.

"No, she hasn't a thing to do with your interest in this," said Monk beneath his breath. "Yah!"

Ham moved off in the direction of the elevators. He had no sooner taken his departure—Monk saw an elevator door close behind him—when the ancient looking long-haired fellow appeared.

He headed directly toward the A-J section of room key clerks. He carried no kind of package with him.

Monk had quickly picked up a card from a small stack at the corner of the information desk. It was a complimentary picture postal card of the hotel. Immediately he had his head bent down as he started writing a "Having wonderful time" greeting to an imaginary friend. There was a glass partition between the

two counters.

Long Hair was not wearing his funny robe now. He wore a suit and hat of the style popular twenty-five years ago. He threw a room key on the counter and started toward a U-shaped area of telephone booths nearby.

Monk's sharp eyes came up and watched one of the two clerks pick up the key and place it in the rack with the mechanical precision followed hundreds of times daily.

The bearded man was now speaking to the operator at a desk over by the block of telephone booths. She was writing something on a small yellow slip of paper. Then she nodded toward one of the booths, where a numbered light had appeared above it, and Long Hair went in there.

Monk was busy looking up something in the out-of-town directory rack when Long Hair came out of the booth again within ten or fifteen seconds. He heard the operator say, "Didn't they answer?"

The big, quaint-looking man shook his head. The operator returned his coin and he moved off toward a lobby exit.

Closing the out-of-town directory, Monk stepped over to the woman and said, "What is the station-to-station charge to Rutland, Vermont, please?"

The operator picked up a rate book and started looking up the information. She had not yet filed the yellow slip showing the last call that had been placed—Long Hair's call. Monk looked at the slip quickly as he leaned on the desk, waiting.

There was the name of a famous Michigan Avenue hotel, not far away. Underneath this, the name: Mr. Daniel Jamison. The operator had also written down the telephone number of the other hotel.

The chemist's face was as expressionless as an egg when the woman closed the rate book and spoke to him again.

She stated the station-to-station charge to Rutland, Vermont. "Would you like to place a call?" she added.

Monk murmured, "Thank you, I'm going to call later."

He went back to the A-J key section, timing himself so that he spoke to the clerk who had not racked Long Hair's key a moment or so ago.

"Nine nineteen, please," requested Monk. The clerk handed him the key and he dropped it in his pocket, moving away. In his other pocket was an extra key to their own suite on the tenth floor of the hotel.

The redhaired girl was still sitting there with her back to him. A man, a hotel guest, glanced at the large red pocketbook beneath Monk's arm, smiled a little, and passed on. The lobby was more crowded than ever. There was a long line now at one of the reservations desks, travelers trying to get rooms.

She must have missed the long-haired man completely. Monk himself had not seen the guy come down on the elevators. The fellow was not so dumb. He'd probably gotten off the car at the mezzanine and walked down to the lobby by way of one of several staircases.

She was still covertly watching the elevators. Monk guessed she'd be there for awhile. He hurried to the elevators and went up to their suite.

HAM, smartly attired in a neatly pressed tropical blue suit, powder blue shirt and knitted blue tie, was just closing the door. He paused, re-entered the suite again with Monk and demanded, "Why didn't you wait until I came downstairs? I thought I told you—"

"She's still there, sweetheart," said Monk. "Relax." He put his big fists on his hips and looked Ham over. "Pretty sharp, huh?"

Ham snorted.

"The man with all the beard, you dunce! Now we'll lose track of him—"

"I've got his room key," said Monk Mayfair. He took the key out and dropped it, along with the red purse, on the table in the small foyer that was the entrance to the suite. He removed his wet baggy coat, tie and shirt as he walked through the living room and into one of the two adjoining bedrooms. He dropped the articles of clothing on various chairs as Ham followed him.

"He went out?" Ham asked.

Monk removed his wet shoes and trousers and stepped to the clothes closet to select a suit. His shorts were a brilliant green. His hairy legs were powerful enough to be those of an ape.

"The girl won't leave, don't worry," advised Monk calmly. "She thinks old Long Hair is still upstairs some place. . . . Yep, he went out. He's gone to see a guy and I think I know who he's gone to see. He tried to call Daniel Jamison."

Ham's dark eyes sharpened. "That's Doc's friend, the engineer!"

"Correct," agreed the chemist. "The friend who was lecturing at Northwestern today. By the way, has Doc called yet?" Monk selected a suit with loud checks the size of tile squares found in ornate lobby flooring.

"No . . ." Ham was so absorbed in Monk's statement that he overlooked making his usual caustic remark about the style and loudness of Monk's suits. "Jamison? That's odd."

"I thought so too."

"You say he tried to call Jamison?"

Monk jerked his head. He was now adjusting a necktie of bright pastel colors that matched the suit, the way a tomcat pairs with a hound dog. Ham winced.

"He tried to call Jamison at his hotel," explained the chemist. He named the famous hotel on Michigan. "Apparently there was no answer. I think, therefore, Long Hair was on his way over there . . . maybe to wait around for Jamison. Don't ask me why, shyster."

"And the girl is still waiting in the lobby?"

Again Monk nodded.

Ham's eyes were frowning thoughtfully. "We didn't have much time to talk to Doc when he flew in from New York this noon. He had to hurry right out there to the university and meet Jamison. I think Doc was planning on spending a day or so in Chicago. He hasn't visited here in some time."

"Yeah," Monk said. "He told us that in the wire that caught up with us on the way back from the Coast. I thought Jamison lived out in Highland Park, north of here. What would he be doing staying at the Michigan Avenue hotel?"

Ham had started back to the living room that was the center of the large suite.

He said, "I understand Jamison is staying in Chicago for a few days, some business appointments he has during this lecture series. That probably explains the hotel room. Doc mentioned it." He sat down at a writing desk and reached for the phone.

"If you're thinking of trying to reach Jamison over there, here's the number," offered Monk. He took out the slip of paper on which he jotted the number taken from the lobby telephone operator's record slip.

Ham put through the call. He waited. There was no answer from Jamison's room. He clicked the receiver and asked their own hotel operator to connect him with the information desk. He identified himself.

Then he asked, "Can you tell me if Mr. Savage has called in or left any message for anyone in this suite? Clark Savage, Jr., that is."

The information clerk told him there had been no calls from Mr. Savage.

Ham hung up and said to his partner, "When Doc says he is going to call at a certain time, he calls."

"You don't have to tell me."

Ham was looking at him thoughtfully. He came to his feet suddenly as he remembered something he'd wanted to ask.

"What about the little model house?"

"You mean the part old Long Hair ran off with?" asked Monk.

"Naturally! Did he have it with—"

Monk said: "Slow down, pappy, slow down. Of course he didn't have it with him. That's why I let him go."

"Then it's in his room!"

Monk grinned.

"You don't think I went to the trouble of getting his room key for nothing, do you?"

Chapter V

A WINDOW was open in Room 919 and some breeze came in. The rain had stopped as swiftly as it had started, but it had left the air washed clean and fresh and cool. The storm had moved inland from the Lake and left Chicago scrubbed and freshened for a pleasant summer evening. It was not yet dark.

Monk closed the door behind him and dropped the room key into his pocket. Ham preceded him impatiently into the suite.

He was saying, "He might come right back. We'd better not waste any time."

Monk looked into the bathroom. His sweeping glance showed no sign of the section of model house anywhere in the large single bedroom. He poked his head out of the doorway—the bath was at the far end of the bedroom from the hall door, and around a slight L formed by a wall. "Nothing in here," he informed Ham.

The dapper lawyer had looked under the bed, in the closet, opened all the dresser drawers. He stood on a chair and searched the clothes closet shelf. The only evidence at all that the room contained a resident was a small, cheap, zipper handbag that stood on the luggage rack near the bed. Opening the small bag, Ham saw a few articles of clothing and the monklike robe the bearded man had been wearing. They found no papers, letters, or anything that would lead them to the long-haired man or reveal his identity.

Ham remarked, "We can check on his name later, with the information clerk. Not from this room, though. He certainly is traveling light."

Monk stood in the middle of the room scratching his head. "Which means," he offered, "he hasn't traveled far coming here. Maybe he's right from Chicago."

"The hell with that," said Ham. "Where's the house model?"

Monk was looking at the bed. It had not been made up. Pillows, spread and sheet were thrown back in a heap at the footrail. He yanked them back.

"Imagine that," he commented, "the guy broke it all to pieces!"

Ham quickly picked up tiny sections of the scale model house. "You mean," he explained, "he took it apart. Piece by piece!"

"Why?" Monk watched the lawyer study, one by one, miniature chimney, roof sections, bedroom walls, perfectly fitted units of flooring. Ham placed them aside. He shook his head.

"It beats me," was his remark.

Between them, they examined every part of the dismantled section of model house. The stuff was now spread all over the bed.

"Crackpot," decided Monk.

"Sure, crazy like a fox."

"You don't think he is?"

Ham rubbed his ear. "Far from it."

"Why not?"

"Because of the girl waiting in the lobby." He explained further. "She's either after Long Hair himself or this house thing he stole. *Both* of them can't be crazy."

"She isn't, I'll tell you," Monk said with emphasis. "But she sure talks funny."

“By the way”—Ham remembered his aggressive partner's manner of approaching the girl in the lobby—“just what was she telling you?”

“Nothing,” said Monk. He sighed and became starry eyed for a moment. “Nothing—except to tell me to breeze along. Only thing is, she said it like a truck driver would say it. Which makes me wonder—”

“—where a nice attractive girl like her picked up that sort of talk.”

Ham took one final look at the scattered model house parts, shook his head, motioned toward the hall door. Monk, too, decided it was time they got out of there.

They both froze as a key slipped quietly into the room door.

THE small L-shaped part of the room leading to the bathroom was the only place of concealment. They stood half inside the tile-walled room, and Monk whispered, “I'm gonna enjoy watching you push in his face.”

Ham made frantic motions for silence.

They heard a bellhop's voice say, “There you are, ma'am. . . . If you like, I'll run down to the desk and get your key.”

“That's all right,” the woman's voice said. “I'm going right out again and I'll pick it up if I need it. Thank you.”

A slight pause, then the bellhop's voice, “Thank *you*, ma'am.”

The door closed. There was no sound for several seconds. Then the door opened again, quietly, made a slight metallic sound as the latch touched metal but did not click. Apparently the door was being placed slightly ajar.

Next the figure came into their line of vision.

Monk had recognized the redhaired girl's voice, of course. The ruse of meeting a bellhop in the corridor and telling him you'd forgotten your key usually worked—if the tip was substantial.

Monk gently nudged Ham. The redhaired girl had instantly noted the scattered units of tiny house spread out on the bed. She started picking them up. A sound like a little dismayed gasp came from her throat, as though she were shocked that the model had been broken or torn apart.

She stood there, staring at the bed, like a jigsaw puzzle player looks hopelessly at countless disordered sections that refuse to fit together.

Ham gave his burly partner a quick nod. They moved silently out into the bedroom. As the girl whirled to face them, Ham stepped sideways around her so that she could not dodge toward the hall door.

She recognized Monk's homely features.

Her nicely formed chin came up sharply. The delicate line of her eyebrows went down straight above her clear blue eyes. Her gaze, calmly speculative instead of frightened, shifted to Ham. Apparently she remembered him too. She had no doubt seen him in the exhibit hall.

Monk said: “You do all right, honey. I thought old Long Hair slipped right past you in the lobby. You

saw him go out, too, and you noticed he was empty handed. So you waited your chance to slip up to this room." He grinned. "Say, you're real pretty with your hair fixed up better. Only, you shouldn't frown like that. It'll give you lines."

The girl's attractive figure stood rigid as a motionless young sapling. Her lips were pressed together in a thin flat line.

She said nothing.

Ham cleared his throat. "Why did old Rip steal the house, miss?"

She didn't answer. Her eyes, the blueness of them, stared through Ham and then went back to Monk. There was tension all through her.

"Blast it, lady," exclaimed Monk, "you're in some kind of trouble and helping people in trouble is our business." He guessed she had stopped off at a ladies' room on the way up, because her glowing auburn hair had been fixed. Tiny curls showed now where they had been wet by the rain. The light sharkskin jacket had shed the rain, as had the gabardine skirt which was smooth across her shapely hips. Monk prodded, "Why don't you tell us about it?"

Ham put in: "We could, of course, call the desk and tell them there's a prowler in Room 919. Then the hotel dick would call the law and you'd be in for a nasty lot of questioning."

She answered that one immediately. "Why don't you?"

Monk sighed. "You'll have to do better than that, shyster. She knows blasted well we don't belong in this room any more than she does."

Ham considered identifying himself and Monk, but decided this might lead to their connection with Doc Savage, and Doc tried to avoid publicity of any sort. A great many people in the world knew nothing about his far-flung activities.

So he said: "Do you know Daniel Jamison?"

"No," the redhaired girl said.

"Do you have any idea why the man with the beard is trying to reach Daniel Jamison?"

"I do not." She met Ham's eyes levelly.

"Well, then, do you know the strange man who occupies this room?" Ham indicated the sections of model house on the bed. "The odd character who stole that?"

She shook her head.

Puzzled, Monk said, "Then what's so terribly urgent about following him?"

The tightness left the girl's mouth momentarily. It was a mouth with a pleasant curve, when she allowed it to be. Everything about her smooth, fine features could be nice if she didn't look so grimly determined about not revealing what it was she was after.

Now she seemed on the verge of relaxing that tension which was bottled up within her. Her eyes searched Monk's face questioningly, veered to Ham's again.

Ham said, "Well?" just a little bit too harshly and kicked opportunity out the door.

The girl stood rigidly again and stared at them. "Why don't you," she finally snapped, "pull over into your own lane? You're blocking traffic."

Monk chuckled. "You see, shyster? She has a way about her."

Evening shadows were starting to wander into the room. Ham turned around to reach for the wall switch controlling the overhead room lights.

The girl moved like a swift, graceful greyhound, flashed past him, pulled open the already unlatched door, slammed it firmly shut behind her and was gone.

"WAIT upstairs for word from Doc!" rapped Ham as he flung out of the room after the girl.

He was in time to see her figure disappearing in a corridor that ran at right angles to the one passing Room 919. The side hallway did not lead to the elevators. It dead-ended in a far corner of the hotel.

A guest was coming down the connecting hall when Ham swerved around the corner. The man paused and looked curiously at the dapper lawyer. Ham ignored him and continued down the long side hall.

He saw her again, ducking into a doorway far down the carpeted length of the hall.

The heavy door, controlled by air checks, was still slowly closing when he reached it. He found himself in a service stairway used only by hotel employees. Red lamps glowed at each landing. He heard the girl's quick footsteps down below him.

Running down the cement steps, he watched the heavy doors at each landing. That would tell at which floor she left the stairway. The air checks kept the heavy doors from closing quickly, or from being pulled shut.

It was the fourth floor. There was the steamy smell of food, the sound of dishes clattering, voices. Ham found himself in a narrow hall leading to a service pantry for one of the large private dining rooms.

On either side, doorways led to a salad room on one side and a storeroom for chinaware and silver on the other. Food came up from the main hotel kitchens in the basement via electric dumb-waiters.

A man in a white coat, apron and high white cap was trimming sandwiches with a heavy knife the shape of an elongated triangle. Two women arranged salads, working near him.

The redhaired girl's trim figure had slipped into the storeroom. Ham barely glimpsed the quick movement. The kitchen workers were unaware of anything happening.

The girl in the sharkskin jacket found herself trapped in the storeroom. She tried to run out past Ham. He grabbed her.

She made no sound, no outcry, said nothing. But she struggled grimly as he pinned her arms down and held her. Her form was supple and wiry.

"Don't be a fool," Ham said softly and tensely. "You're in grave danger of something or someone, and I know it. Now let's be sensible about this."

He was aware of her face, close to his, the fine smooth texture of the skin, the delicate coloring, her glowing auburn hair. And her chin, set with determination. She was trembling, but she fought against him in silent fury. A soft gasp came from her lips.

Ham was saying, "I'm going to find out who you are if I have to frisk you like a cop!"

He had noticed she was carrying no purse. Struggling to hold her arms with one hand, he felt the outline of a wallet-size object in the pocket of her jacket. The wallet would contain something that would identify her. She twisted her agile body with the quickness of a well-trained dancer.

Ham's shoulder bumped against the shelves. Several silver cream pitchers, stored there, fell to the floor and clattered. His foot scuffed one and sent it crashing against another.

The man with the long-bladed, heavy sandwich knife came across the service pantry and called out, "Say!" The towering white cap made his face look longer and more surprised than it probably was. Ham had heard that cooks were usually hot-tempered.

He released the girl and murmured a quick, "Wives get unruly at times, don't they?"

"I never had a wife," said the tall cook. Ham wished he wouldn't handle the huge knife so carelessly.

The man came forward to investigate further, just as the redhaired girl slipped past him. She was gone in the time it took the chef to exclaim, "Say!" again. He blocked the lawyer's path. Also, he saw the silver creamers on the storeroom floor and started to look mad about that.

Ham watched man, knife, connecting hallway, and then the man's eyes again. The chef looked down at the floor. "If any of them's broken—"

Ham went out of there rapidly.

The service stairway led to the ground floor and sub-basements below. Ham peered into hallways on the way down. Finally he slipped out into an alleyway that led from behind the hotel to Wabash.

She had vanished.

DUSK was settling down. Old wooden elevated cars clattered around the Loop on the structure overhead. Street car bells clanged. Taxicabs kept moving in to disgorge or pick up passengers at another of the hotel entrances here on the Wabash Avenue side of the tall structure. The evening was going to be cool and pleasant. People were stimulated by the agreeable drop in temperature. There was assorted activity as night time approached.

Ham returned to their tenth-floor suite.

Monk was not there. The lights had not been turned on. He wondered why the chemist had not followed his directions about waiting here for any message from Doc Savage. He was a little bit upset about Doc not calling or appearing. He was especially disturbed because of Monk's information about the mysterious man with the beard trying to contact Daniel Jamison.

Ham went directly to the phone and spoke to the information clerk.

"Can you tell me if a Mr. Paul Scott is registered in Room 919?" he asked.

"Just a moment, please. . . ." Then: "No, sir, he is not."

"Perhaps," said Ham suavely, "I have the wrong name. I thought it was Scott."

The clerk said: "Mr. Columbus is in 919 . . . Mr. F. Columbus?"

"Oh," said Ham. "From Kansas City?"

"I couldn't say, sir. No address was given."

Ham thanked the clerk and hung up. The name, an odd one too, meant nothing to him.

The telephone rang. He lifted the receiver again.

It was Doc Savage.

Instantly Ham realized there was something wrong with the bronze man's voice. Doc seemed to speak with a studied slowness, a deliberativeness that did not match his personality.

He was saying, "Ham, I think you'd better come over here as soon as possible." He mentioned a room number in a famous hotel that faced the lake. Ham remembered Monk's report about the bearded man attempting to call Daniel Jamison at the Michigan Avenue hotel. This was the same hotel.

"Doc," Ham said quickly, "isn't that the hotel where Jamison is staying? Monk said—"

"Come right over," said Doc Savage. "Come directly to this room. Avoid letting . . . anyone see you. Knock . . . once on the door."

There was something wrong with him!

"What happened, Doc?" asked Ham. "I've been wondering—"

"Let's not waste any further time," said Doc with finality.

"I'm on my way!" finished Ham, and he slapped up the receiver.

Chapter VI

MICHIGAN AVENUE was crowded with evening traffic. The park across from the hotel was filled with people enjoying the clear cool breeze coming in from the lake, a quarter mile beyond, but cut off from view by the rising slope of green lawns. There was bright laughter and conversation from the hundreds of gay strollers along the wide sidewalks. Display windows were lighted. Double-deck buses rumbled along, also crowded with sightseers enjoying Chicago at night. One of the world's greatest thoroughfares—Michigan Avenue—ribboned with bright lights against the velvet of night, as far as the eye could see!

Any other time it would have thrilled Ham Brooks. But as he left the cab and hurried into the great busy hotel, there was a tenseness in him. He knew Chicago. Once or twice in his life he had brushed with that part of it that is not gay, boisterous and hearty. Deep below the surface, as in any great city, there are shifting undercurrents—strange events that happened with swiftness and mystery. How little the average person knew of the greed, hatred, fear, the danger that oftentimes lurked within arm's reach. Perhaps just beyond a hotel-room doorway.

An elevator whisked Ham to the fifteenth floor. The hotel was even larger than the one where they were stopping. They said it contained three thousand rooms. Multiply that by the people living in these rooms, a day, a night, a few hours at the most. People from every walk of life, arriving, leaving, seldom knowing not even one of their thousands of neighbors. Hundreds and hundreds of people, each in his own

secluded little world, each unaware of the tremendous number of life's incidents constantly taking place beyond soundproof walls.

Ham went down the wide, long corridor, his footsteps soundless in the deep-piled carpeting. He slowed to allow a party of guests to pass him, going toward the elevators. He found the room, made certain of the number, knocked once, quietly. Close to the panel he spoke his name.

No one was in the hall now.

The door opened against darkness in the background. Light from the hall gave him a glimpse of the bronze man's face. He went inside. Doc Savage closed and bolted the door, then flicked the lights.

Ham stared.

Doc Savage was shirtless. You never quite realized, thought Ham, the tremendous breadth of the shoulders, the marvelous development of the bronze man, until you saw him this way. From childhood, Doc Savage had been raised by a group of famous, talented men interested in an experiment that was perhaps unique in history.

For the bronze man's entire life had been scientifically planned. His mind, his body had been trained to develop into a perfect specimen of mankind.

He was trained in medicine, law, the sciences. He was a profound thinker in each of those fields, as well as in many others. Standing well over six feet, he was also somewhat of a physical giant—usually unnoticed when he was not directly next to another person, because of the symmetry of his perfect physical development.

But he was a man, like other men in many ways. He could be hurt even as other men can be hurt. Which explained Ham's shock as he stared at his friend.

“God,” breathed Ham softly, “you've taken a terrific beating!”

Doc Savage nodded. “Sit down, Ham,” he said quietly, and you could tell it was somewhat of an effort for him to speak.

Still staring, Ham backed up against a chair in the large suite and sat down. Doc Savage remained standing. Every part of his body, stripped above the waist, was bruised. Arms, massive shoulders, back, chest. Ham detected two dark blotches on his face, but the unusual bronze coloring of Doc's healthy skin made them almost unnoticeable.

“Maybe *you'd* better sit down,” suggested Ham, more disturbed than he'd ever been.

Doc shook his head. He talked as he moved up and down the room, in front of Ham Brooks. He kept working his arms and shoulders. He spoke as if his jaws ached.

“Ham,” he said quietly, “we've known action and adventure in just about every corner of the world.” He named the five aides who had been associated with him now for a number of years. Ham and Monk were two. The three others—Renny, Long Tom and Johnny Littlejohn, each specialists in a particular branch of science—were out of the country at the moment. “We've taken a lot of crooks and desperate characters out of circulation.”

“Mainly,” added Ham, “and because you have devoted your life to aiding people, we've helped out decent persons who ran up against trouble too big to handle themselves.”

Doc nodded. "Sometimes," he went on, "there was some fighting. Usually, however, we've fought overpowering odds with brains and science. We never resorted to gunplay unless absolutely necessary."

"Even then," said Ham, "we never shot to kill. I guess maybe Monk and I have winged a few crooks in our time—" He paused, studied his friend's face. "You seldom carry a weapon yourself." He frowned, puzzled. "What are we up against, Doc? What is it?"

The bronze man paused, standing still, his gaze intent on the open window across the room and the night beyond.

"First," he continued, "my friend Daniel Jamison was murdered in this room this afternoon. He was shot." He shook his head as Ham started to his feet. "Let me tell the rest of it. A week ago Daniel Jamison called me long distance in New York. My trip out here was not merely to hear some of his lectures. It was more than that."

Ham waited, silent. He had never seen Doc this way.

"As you know, Ham, Jamison was an expert on electronics. He developed numerous new devices for radio and modern lighting aids."

"I know."

"A week ago, a number of Jamison's completed blueprints were stolen from his laboratory at the university. Also, an attempt at murder was made on his life. Those plans were important new developments for postwar housing aids. New devices invented by Jamison. He had no enemies. A bachelor, he lived alone and mostly to himself. He liked privacy."

"Did he report it to the police?"

Doc shook his head. "He didn't want the publicity, either for himself or the university. True, I came out here to hear his lectures. But I also came for another reason. Ham, Jamison was a man desperately afraid of some menace. I believe he took this hotel suite in order to escape it. He was awaiting my arrival. And then—"

Ham watched the bronze man, his body, where it was bruised. He moved his own shoulders uneasily.

"Then," Doc went on, "death struck from the very room next to him. Death was that close. This afternoon I trailed a strange bearded man into Chicago from Jamison's place out in Highland Park. The fellow eluded us, but the trail led here. I had learned Jamison was here; I'd been trying to call him. There was no answer."

"All the time he was here?"

"Yes." Doc paced up and down. "But I was too late. I came up here and found him. Naturally I didn't know any more about the trap than he did."

"Jamison didn't answer."

"No." Doc Savage made a motion with his hands. "There are ways of getting into a hotel room." He indicated a part of the room over by the writing table near the windows. "Jamison lay over there, dead—shot."

Ham exclaimed, "But what's happened to—"

“The police have been here,” Doc said, anticipating the question. “I can tell you this. They found nothing, so far, to give them a lead. I've made arrangements to have my name kept out of it for the time being. The district attorney knows something about us. He used his influence. The police took the other dead man down to headquarters, printed him, and got no clue there either. He had no record and there was no identification on him.”

“The other dead man?”

Doc Savage moved across the room. “Come here.”

HAM followed him through the door which he opened to the adjoining suite. The place was a duplicate of the suite behind them. Doc motioned with his hand.

“Jamison, fearing whatever it was he feared, was hiding out in that other room. And death was living right next door to him. Here!”

Ham's quick eyes saw powdery dust marks on furniture, mirrors, table and various objects. He glanced at Doc Savage.

“Yes,” said the bronze man, “the police dusted for fingerprints. I doubt if they'll come up with anything.” He noticed Ham's gaze touch the hallway door. “The hotel manager and a few of his assistants know what's happened. They have orders not to disturb these rooms tonight. They know I'm up here, but they don't know who I am. I want it that way. Jamison and the other one were taken out via a service elevator in the rear.”

“But you said the other dead man—”

“Ham,” Doc said stiffly, “the men who murdered Daniel Jamison were in this room. I didn't suspect it, at first, any more than Jamison did. The only reason I wasn't murdered was because they didn't know who I was, or what I knew, or what information I might have passed on to someone else. So they tried to find out.”

“You said 'they'?”

“Five of them. Strange characters. All with long hair and beards. Big strapping men.” Gold tints stirred restlessly in the bronze man's eyes. “Perhaps, if I had not been tied down securely, gagged, completely helpless—”

“Good Lord!” Ham said.

“The attack was as sudden on me as it must have been against Jamison.”

“And this dead man in here—”

Doc's eyes shadowed a little. “I don't think he was one of them. Yet he was exactly like them in appearance—the long-haired, bearded fanatic type you might find in some mountain cult. From things that were said, I gathered, however, that he was not one of them. He was already dead when I first saw him.”

“The hotel people know anything?”

Doc shook his head. “One man registered for this suite. It was paid for in advance. They must have come

up here, later, one at a time. It would be difficult to tell them apart.”

Ham was still astonished that the bronze man was alive. He said so.

Doc told him, “They thought I was dead, before they left here. It explains their haste to depart. That, no doubt, saved my life.”

Ham remembered one of the bronze man's capabilities, only possible in a person with amazing will power and muscular control, such as had been developed in Doc Savage.

He said, “Held your breath . . . slowed the heart action until it fooled them?”

“Yes.”

Ham shuddered as he once again observed the bronze man's back. “Look,” he said with feeling, “is there anything I can get you—”

“It's all right,” said Doc. His tone was almost normal again. He spoke more like his alert self. Ham marveled at the control of his bronze friend.

They had moved back into the other suite. Doc brought a shirt, suit coat, necktie from the bathroom. The shirt was torn up the back. The coat would conceal it for the time being.

Putting them on, he looked sharply at Ham Brooks. “Now tell me what happened to you. You're fairly exploding with something.”

Ham went into a brief, accurate, vivid account of the incidents that had occurred since the theft of the model-house section at the exhibit. He finished with:

“And the guy, Doc, was another bearded man. Monk says he tried to contact Jamison. He's registered over there under the name Columbus . . . F. Columbus.”

Doc's eyes sharpened. “Only one name was mentioned among the five men here,” he told Ham. “Then, it was a slip and they were very careful after that. But it was 'Fellow Joliet.' You say this other one was registered as F. Columbus?”

“That's right.”

“Fellow Columbus,” said Doc slowly, thoughtfully. “Fellow Joliet.”

“Does it mean anything?”

“Some kind of society or organization, perhaps,” admitted Doc Savage. “But I wasn't thinking of that. There's another connotation—”

“What?”

Doc didn't answer. He was ready to leave the room. “This girl,” he said, picking up that part of Ham's story, “what would be your opinion?”

“You mean—is she in with them?”

Doc nodded.

Ham said slowly, “I don't . . . think so. I know character when I see it. Yet she wouldn't tell us anything.”

“Either she's afraid—or doesn't know anything,” offered Doc.

“That's my decision.”

“If she's what you say, then we've got to move mighty fast to locate her. She's in grave danger. You say Monk disappeared some-where?”

“You know Monk,” said Ham. “Gosh knows where he went.”

“He might have followed the girl.”

“I've thought of that, Doc. He might have seen her slipping out of the hotel. Either that—or he located this character Columbus—Fellow Columbus—again.”

They decided that, either way, it was urgent for them to get back to their hotel. The girl with the auburn-red hair was their only link with the mystery of the little houses, and with swift, sudden murder.

The telephone was ringing intermittently when they reached the other hotel suite.

Chapter VII

IT was Monk, and when Ham hurried to pick up the receiver the chemist told him explosively:

“A lot of help you are!”

“Where are you?”

“In a phone booth. Been steaming myself in here for half an hour trying to reach you.”

“Where?” repeated Ham.

“You know the Michigan Avenue bridge by the Wrigley Building, where the Chicago River starts out to the lake?”

“Yes?”

“Well, there. I'm calling from right nearby. There's a lower level parking area under Michigan. Lake steamers tie up down there on the river . . .”

“I know,” interrupted Ham. “But—”

“I've got the girl. The redhead.”

Ham cried, “Then why don't you bring her—”

“I mean, you dimwit, I've got her tagged. Know where she is. You know what happened?”

“That's what I'm waiting to hear!” said Ham acidly. He held the receiver away from his ear, so that Doc Savage could listen to both sides of the conversation.

“She went back there to that exhibit after she shook you loose.” Monk chuckled. “I figured that cute filly would shake you off. So I waited outside the hotel. Guess what happened, shyster?”

“Don't be so damn subtle!” snapped Ham.

“Well, it was just before the exhibit closed for the night. She went in there, grabbed some more of that little model house, and damned if she didn't make off with it!”

Ham looked at the bronze man.

Monk went on: “Only, now they got her.”

“Who?”

“Some brothers of that long-haired codger. By God, they must be triplets. Three of 'em all alike—”

“Monk, you fool!” cried Ham. “She's in danger. You shouldn't have let them out of your sight!”

“Listen, sweetheart,” said Monk harshly, “they just went aboard with her and there's no indication the boat's shoving off any place. Doc there yet?”

“Yes—”

“Like I said,” Monk raced on, “it's right down there under the Michigan Avenue bridge. A couple of big lake steamers are tied up on either side of the river. They're tied up for the night and nobody's around. This is another, smaller job. Looks fast. You'll spot it. A fast-looking white cruiser with a lot of brass work. I'm going aboard right now—”

Doc touched Ham's arm, and the lawyer understood. He shouted into the phone, “Monk, wait! We'll be right up there—”

“Can't wait,” finished Monk, and the connection was broken.

Ham swore. “There he goes!”

Doc said, “Nothing would have stopped him anyway.” He was already holding the door, waiting. “Ready?”

Ham joined him, and they hurried out.

THE clock high up on the white Wrigley Building said 11:05 p.m. Far below, down beneath the Michigan Avenue bridge that crossed the Chicago River, it was shadowy and quiet. Cars passing overhead on the bridge created a low hum of sound, and that was all.

On the far side of the river a Milwaukee steamer was tied up for the night. Beyond it, high up on towering steel frameworks, spectacular signs flashed their advertising messages through the night.

Another steamer that made daylight cruises across the lake was tied up in darkness against the south bank of the river.

Farther along were dark warehouses. The sleek lined, large cruiser was tied up there, some distance apart from the bridge. Water lapped lazily at pilings. Off in the background, weirdly fascinating against the backdrop of velvet sky, orange-red marker beacons glowed from atop little towers lining a narrow,

long series of locks. The locks held back the higher waters of the lake, and were the entrance way for traffic to and from the river.

Down here, just beyond the edge of the great Chicago Loop, it was a world apart. Quiet. Slight dampness coming off the water. Long night shadows cast by towering buildings beyond.

Monk slipped quietly out of the shadows beneath the prow of the boat. He had seen the figure standing in the darkness aft, near the gangway onto the deserted dock. The man remained there, unmoving, obviously watching.

Monk's cautious approach had been soundless. The high curving prow of the raft concealed him. He leaned out, his gaze carefully on the man standing near the stern, touched the rounded metal trim at the deck level. He grasped the rounded molding securely and swung out, legs dangling above the water.

With an easy, smooth movement, he pulled himself upward and onto the foredeck. He quickly cleared the low railing that enclosed a narrow side deck skirting each side of the cruiser. Beside him were dark, shuttered windows that shut off any light from the cabins. He came up along the narrow deck on the far side of the boat, protected by darkness. The guard—one of the strange bearded men—was facing away from him, watching the wide cement area that formed a dock alongside the river.

The chemist was directly behind the man before the fellow sensed any kind of movement. Another instant and he would have yelled a warning to those inside the cabins. But it was too late.

Monk's powerful hands had gone to work. One clamped over the fellow's mouth like a vise. The other circled a heavy neck, from behind the head, and thumb and forefinger sank deeply into nerves below the ears. There was nothing gentle about Monk's manner of handling the big bearded man.

Bracing himself so that the big fellow could not thrash about, creating sound, Monk applied relentless pressure until the man became unconscious. Then he laid him down on the deck. He grasped a fistful of long hair and gave it a mighty yank. He tried the beard. Both were real enough.

“Just wanted to be sure,” the chemist muttered softly to himself.

He turned, paddled across the wide deck aft of the cabins, yanked open a door, went inside. He had estimated there were three of the bearded fellows on the boat. Now he had only two to handle. No trouble at all!

He was in a fairly large lounge. Beyond, through an open doorway, he saw a little passage with stateroom doors on either side. The two long-haired men were just pushing the girl into one of the cabins. She was gagged. The men's backs were toward Monk. She was not tied, but they held her arms. No doubt they were about ready to tie her up.

One called without turning his head, “What do you want now, Fellow Quentin?”

Apparently he mistook the sound of Monk's entrance for that of the third member.

Monk said, “I want to give you this, chum!” and he went into action.

THE shambles lasted probably five minutes or less. Quarters were small where the fast, weaving, swaying battle took place. Monk's arms pumped like driving pistons.

He drove one big fellow up against a bulkhead. The wall trembled.

“That's for my friend Ham!” shouted Monk.

The second man tried to kick the chemist in the stomach. Monk upended the bearded man and sent him crashing to the deck. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the girl crouched back in a stateroom doorway angle.

He yelled, “Get started, baby. Get off the ship!”

The man he had spilled to the deck lumbered up again and shook himself like a mastiff. He bored into Monk. His partner came in from the opposite direction.

They probably had guns, but they probably also feared using them, lest they attract attention. They figured that, between them, they could take over this homely smaller man without too much difficulty.

It was the redhaired girl being there that complicated things for Monk Mayfair. He realized it was impossible for her to slip past them and escape, for the passage was too narrow. Thus it was necessary for the chemist to draw the fight away from her direction, to give her that opportunity.

Watching her from the corner of his eye, watching the two men hammering at him from assorted directions, he was kept as busy as a colored boy using his head for a baseball target in a carnival midway.

The two bearded men towered over him, solid men, quick in their movements. One said:

“Bat him over this way, fellow kinsman.”

“I got him, brother,” said the other one.

“Error,” corrected Monk, and he slammed their heads together, letting two blows roll smoothly off his shoulders.

By this time he had backed to the open deck doorway.

The girl must have realized his intention. Beyond the two long-haired men, she nodded her head quickly. When Monk finally backed out to the deck, with the two men closing in on him, she made a break.

She raced down the gangway to the dock. Monk remembered hearing her heels clicking on the cement area. He had no opportunity to watch her.

He realized, with a start, that the third man had regained consciousness. It was the fellow he had left lying out on the deck. The man started to his feet directly behind the chemist as a terrific uppercut caught Monk beneath his jaw.

He went backward, tripping over the rising man, hit the railing and toppled right on over. He sucked in a lungful of air before he hit the water, headfirst.

MONK allowed himself to go straight downward through the dark water. He had visions of deadly boat hooks being jabbed into his skull when he came to the surface. That would be the handiest weapons they could use, and they could split a man's head.

He held his breath, swimming underwater. He thought perhaps the girl was fleet enough to have escaped. When there was a sudden roaring, pounding in his ears, his hopes arose. The pounding was not entirely from holding his breath until his lungs were ready to burst. It was a motor pounding.

Finally, he had to come up for air. He managed to find the straight piling of the dock, coming up along that, feeling his way in the utter blackness. Then refreshing air filled his lungs.

The high-speed craft was gone.

He saw it some distance away, already entering the locks that led out into the vast lake. It would be through the locks before he could possibly reach a phone and call the proper authorities.

He'd notify the Coast Guard, of course. They maintained a patrol on the lake. But he doubted if there was any inland Coast Guard boat that could overtake that sleek, fast cruiser.

Monk climbed a ladder to the dock, removed his coat and dumped water from the pockets. His sharp, alert eyes searched for the girl. Then she appeared out of the black shadows cast by a building wall.

She ran forward and held his arm. "Are you all right?"

Monk grinned. "I'm all right if you say I'm red-balling without any flats."

"For my money," the girl said, "you're gunning along right in high speed." Then she added, "I realize now that you're really trying to help me. I'm sorry about earlier—"

Monk asked, "Ever hear of Doc Savage?"

The girl's eyes widened. "Doc Savage!"

The chemist's quick eyes noted the two figures hurrying down a long flight of stone steps from the Michigan Avenue bridge. The girl tensed as she followed his look. "It's okay," he reassured her. "You're going to meet Doc in a moment."

He studied her face. "You've been around the highway transport trucking business, haven't you?"

"Practically raised in truck cab," she told him. "My father's business. He's dead . . . now. I run it." She took her hand off his arm, apparently realizing she had been holding on to Monk. She said, "The name's Calloway . . . Marjorie Calloway. The road drivers—my friends—call me Speed."

Then Doc Savage, accompanied by Ham, was there.

The girl, introduced by Monk, looked at the bronze man with a sort of admiration in her eyes and said, "If I had only known earlier who you men were, I might have helped more."

"You can help us now," said Doc.

His gaze went toward the lake. Far out beyond the locks and the breakwater, red and green running lights of the boat blinked out even as he watched. Naturally those aboard the boat had not wanted to arouse suspicion as the craft passed out into the lake. Now, without a doubt, they were making a run for it.

The dark outline of the cruiser became a vague blur, disappeared, was now a part of the mysterious vastness of Michigan itself.

Doc said to the girl: "You'd better start at the beginning and tell me everything you know."

Soon they were headed southward through the Loop, to the company truck garage where her office was located.

Chapter VIII

MONK rode one of the jump seats in the cab. The girl sat between Doc Savage and Ham. The chemist sat sideways and told Doc what had happened aboard the cruiser. He thought Speed Calloway had beautiful legs.

Doc queried: "And the additional section of house you stole from the exhibit?"

"Those men have it," Speed said. "On their boat. But it won't do them any good. I looked before they grabbed me. It wasn't there."

"It?" Doc prompted.

"The clue Steve Brooks said he was going to hide in the little chimney of the model house. Steve was one of my road drivers . . . one of the best jockies in the business on a 20-ton semi-trailer job." She bit her lip. "Steve called me at the office yesterday morning. He was rolling in through Gary, and he knew he was being followed."

"Why?"

"Steve had learned something about those horrible bearded men and what the mystery is. He said we—my company—might be implicated. So he wasn't coming directly to the office. I was going uptown anyway, so I suggested meeting him somewhere in the Loop. He himself named the model homes exhibit, why, I don't know. And over the phone he told me that if anything went wrong, he would leave something for me tucked into the tiny chimney of a particular model. And then . . ." The girl shuddered.

Doc and the others waited, silent.

"Then," she went on, "Steve's body was found in the Chicago River this morning. He had been stabbed to death."

The cab was in the vicinity of the bronze man's hotel. He looked at Monk as he called to the driver to swing over to Wabash. Doc named the captain of detectives with whom he was dealing on the Jamison murder.

"You drop off at the hotel, Monk. Call him and have him flash the Coast Guard. The port authority should have the registry number. Perhaps they can locate the cruiser that way."

Monk looked hopefully at Speed Calloway, his eyes full of admiration. Then he looked at Ham. "Wouldn't it be better if our astute legal mind, here, handled it?"

Ham snapped, "You heard what Doc said, little man. And change your clothes. You smell like a fish wharf."

Monk left them with reluctance.

THE big transport truck garage was a dozen blocks south of the Loop, near Dearborn, in a district that rumbled with the roar of huge highway transports moving in and out of transfer terminals throughout the night. There was the rich heavy odor of Diesel fuel in the night air.

They walked to the girl's office through a big garage, where trucks were being serviced or repaired. A stocky man in blue coveralls, wiping his hands on a piece of waste, waved his hand at the girl.

"That's Murphy, my foreman," she shouted above the noise of throbbing motors. She deftly pulled Ham to one side as a stubby tractor cab unit thundered through the doorway on its way to pick up a long trailer.

Inside the typical garage office, the door closed behind them, it was more quiet.

"It all seems to go back to this," she said, pulling a ledger toward Doc and Ham. She indicated an entry date of a month ago, named a community around the lake in Michigan, explained:

"We landed a nice contract for hauling prefabricated, small modern postwar homes that could be knocked down for shipment and sent directly to the property locations. The Chicago area is the major outlet in this part of the country."

She ran a finger down the page, indicated marginal notations in a woman's fine handwriting. Her serious blue eyes held Doc's. "I made those little memos myself. Nothing important to any of them at the time. Just little remarks Steve, my driver on that run, would make some days when he pulled in. Now they seem to have significance."

"You mean," said Doc, "the bearded men?"

She nodded. "That, and something that is frightening behind it all. Don't ask me what. When Steve called me on the phone, he warned me not to say anything to anyone until he saw me. Then—he was found murdered. The police were here." Her hand trembled a little where it rested on the open ledger. "Perhaps I should have told them. But there was nothing I knew. I was afraid, in a way. I thought if I could pick up whatever it was Steve was going to leave there at the exhibit hall for me . . ."

"In the little model house, just in case he missed you?"

She nodded, eyes troubled.

Doc asked, "This contract for hauling the prefabricated homes—just how did you land it?"

Speed Calloway held her attractive hands palms-upward in a gesture. "In the way," she offered, "a good many business deals are handled. Someone tells you of someone else who is looking for a contract carrier. . . ." She thought a moment. "Come to think of it, it was a man who is representative for a building concern here in Chicago. He is one of the officials there at the exhibit of model homes. Well, he sent me to another party . . ."

"What is his name?" asked Doc.

"George Big."

"Where does he live?"

"Right in town. At the Morrison."

"We'll go up there," announced Doc. He looked at Ham. "Call him at that hotel." Then, to the girl again,

“You say he sent you to someone else?”

“Yes. I guess George Big knew my father once. Anyway, he phoned. He, in turn, knew of it from an artist who works for one of the big advertising agencies here in Chicago. The agency was doing some advertising for a post-war homes account. The artist heard of this other thing, and knew there was a nice contract job waiting for somebody. And the artist knew my driver—Steve Brooks.”

Doc's strange eyes flickered. “It comes back to him again, your murdered driver.”

Ham was talking on the telephone.

“It seems so,” admitted the girl. “Though I can't for the life of me figure the connection. I remember, however, that we were kind of slack at the time and Steve Brooks went up there himself to see the artist at the ad agency. The artist gave Steve the name of the prospect for hauling the houses.”

She shook her head. “You know, I've never met the people. The houses are being shipped from a town—a big warehouse—across the lake, around in Michigan. The contract and all, payments, are handled by mail.”

“You know the artist?”

“I only saw him once.”

“Then,” decided Doc, “we'll start with George Big, who ought to be able to tell us something.”

Ham had finished talking. He said, “The guy didn't like it much. He'd just retired.” He shrugged. “But we're going up there. I fixed that.”

Speed Calloway said, “I have a car here. It'll be quicker—”

Doc interrupted, “Perhaps you'd rather not.” He glanced at his watch. “It's after midnight . . .”

The girl's fine chin came up. “I could never sleep, thinking of poor Steve. As long as I can do something . . .”

Doc nodded and they started out to the adjoining garage. Murphy, the garage foreman—he was a stocky, slightly pug-nosed Irishman—brought the girl's car to the street exit.

It was an open-model Cadillac, not new, but one that had plenty of motor under the hood. Speed Calloway said to the bronze man, “Would you prefer to drive?”

“I imagine you do all right,” said Doc, motioning her behind the wheel. The three of them crowded into the wide front seat. The girl took a kerchief from the glove compartment and tied it around her hair.

The way she took the big car away from there, smoothly, dropping back into high speed with satin-soft meshing of gears, brought a nod of approval from Ham.

They reached the Loop hotel in five minutes.

GEORGE BIG was a small man. He had gone to the trouble of dressing again, though he had informed Ham he had retired. He was slender, trim, efficient and talkative. He was probably fifty, but there was no gray in his shiny black hair. He had a neat pencil-thin black mustache.

Doc, on the way up to the man's permanent rooms in the hotel, had told the girl it would be all right to reveal his identity. Doc saw no other way out of it. But Speed Calloway had assured him it would be all right.

Doc questioned him, after the girl had quickly explained as much as she could about the mystery of the little houses, bearded men, and the murder of her employee.

The bronze man said: "We're backtracking now, trying to reconstruct things. Miss Calloway's driver—Steve Brooks—contacted a commercial artist some time back about a new business deal."

George Big kept nodding his head. "I remember." He smiled at the girl. "Your father, some years ago, was a close friend of mine. You wouldn't remember. I thought perhaps I could throw a little business your way."

"I appreciated it," said Speed Calloway.

"Let's see . . ."

The building concern representative reached for a Chicago telephone directory. "I think I know this artist's home address. Of course I know the agency he works for, but that won't do you any good tonight."

He thumbed through the pages, stopped at the R's, ran his finger down the columns. "Here it is," he told them, reading from the page. "Paul Rose—up here on the near North Side."

He gave them the address, which Doc mentally noted. "I seem to recall it's a small studio-brownstone he has up there. Paul Rose does some free-lance work on the side."

He closed the directory, spoke to the redhaired girl. "But how can Paul Rose help you, Miss Calloway? I, myself, recall the name of the building company he mentioned." He named a town across the lake. "Michigan Moderns, they call it, isn't that correct? They're building up quite an industry in postwar unit-type, complete houses. What further information could Paul Rose give you?"

The girl's thoughtful blue eyes pondered. Then she said, "There must be something. This artist was a good friend of Steve Brooks, my driver. Steve might have told him something that he didn't tell me. In fact, Steve mentioned seeing him just the other day. Agency people, you know, investigate prospective clients pretty closely. Maybe Paul Rose found out something important."

"Could be," commented the trim, dark-haired man.

Doc said, "Do you happen to know Daniel Jamison?" He spoke to George Big.

The representative nodded. "He's done some work in modern lighting for postwar housing." He added, "I don't know him personally."

"Excuse me a moment," murmured Doc, and he used the telephone to call their own hotel. Monk answered instantly, as though he'd been sitting there waiting for the call.

"Anything new?" inquired the bronze man.

"Doc, that cruiser vanished as slick as can be. They haven't picked it up."

"Registry?"

"Some dinky little town across the lake. That's more than seventy miles across from here. Probably a

fake license.” Monk's tone brightened. “But I've got something on that dead man you found in the room adjoining Jamison's. I've been talking to that Captain of Detectives at headquarters!”

“What did he say?”

“The dead guy wasn't a crook or anything. No record, just as they informed you previously. But a friend of his was down there at the morgue and identified him. Seems this friend is a long-haired fellow too. And he hasn't any record either. They both belonged to a perfectly legitimate religious order, and this one that came to headquarters says his organization is gonna raise hell about some guys impersonating them. And Doc?”

“Yes?”

“I've got the records' bureau at headquarters working overtime for you tonight. They're checking some parole cases at a few penitentiaries for me. You'll never guess why . . .”

“Perhaps I have,” said Doc Savage.

“You figured it that way too, Doc?”

“It's worth checking, Monk.”

“Anything else?”

“We'll be back there shortly. I think we're at a standstill tonight.”

He hung up. Not even Doc Savage realized, just then, that the night's events were not ended.

Leaving George Big's hotel apartment, the builder's representative offered, “If there's anything I can do, call on me at once.”

Doc nodded. Ham, beside him, smiled politely.

To the girl, George Big said, “I'll send some more business your way one of these days.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Going down in the elevator, Doc Savage looked at Ham. “Why so quiet? That's unusual in you.”

Ham nodded toward the elevator operator's back, remained silent, waiting until they were outside at the curb, where the Cadillac was parked, until he spoke.

“Mind if I hang around here until you get back, Doc? I think I'll try to grab a steak or something. I could eat a horse.”

Doc looked thoughtfully at his aide. The girl did not catch the swift, imperceptible flicker of Doc's eyes.

“Might as well,” the bronze man said casually. He addressed the girl. “How long will it take us to drive up there to the artist's?”

“Ten minutes each way.”

“I'll meet you here in half an hour, then,” said Ham.

He stood there watching them drive off.

Chapter IX

NIGHT clubs were starting to close on the near North Side. The girl cut through streets of Chicago's famous "Gold Coast." Drunks were coming out, just as they do from any bar. But in some of these fashionable places they had spent a week's salary and tomorrow morning they would have the same kind of hangover suffered by a bum from West Madison Street.

Some blocks beyond the glittering night club section, there were quiet, tree-lined streets with large, substantial-looking houses. It was a pleasant night. Stars were hung out in the sky.

The girl, driving slowly, watched street signs. Then she finally turned down a long cross-street that led toward the lake. They crossed an intersection. There was an all-night drug store open at the corner. Everything else was closed.

Beyond, the next block was as quiet and peaceful as a country town. Houses were in darkness. Well down the block Speed Calloway indicated a structure that was somewhat more distinctive than the others.

It was a narrow three-story affair, with big studio-type windows at the front, on each floor. "I believe that's the place." She slowed the car.

A figure was just passing them on the sidewalk—a youngish man wearing slacks and sports shirt. Doc caught a brief glimpse of him as he passed beneath the low-hanging trees. Street lighting was dim along here, most of it blocked off by foliage. But he saw the man was blond. What interested the bronze man was that the man seemed to pause for an instant, as though he might be going to speak to them. Then he moved on, disappearing down the street.

Speed pulled into the curb and killed the engine. They both walked up to the house. A light showed from behind Venetian blinds on the first floor. The girl glanced up at the house number.

"This is Paul Rose's place," she said.

They rang the bell. Waited. Doc held his hand on the button. Faintly, in the night, he could hear a buzzer sounding within the building.

No one came to the door.

"Does he have blond hair?" asked Doc. "A man about thirty, medium height?"

"Yes," the girl remembered, "he does." Her eyes, deep blue in the night, were questioning. "How did you know?"

"I think," said Doc, "he just went down the street as we rolled up here. He couldn't be going far. Maybe down there to the drug store we just passed."

I—" the girl started to say.

The shot sounded in the quiet night.

It came from up the street, the section they had just passed. The single crack of the gun was loud and clear in the midnight silence.

Doc ordered quickly, "You'd better wait in the car." He ran down the steps and swung left along the sidewalk. Darkness beneath the trees swallowed his swift-moving figure before the girl realized what was happening. She had never seen anyone act with such blinding speed.

A car engine sounded while Doc was running up the residential street. Light from the street corner ahead came brokenly through the heavy foliage.

He heard the engine roar and caught a blur of motion as the car shot away from the curb near the corner. It headed west and was swallowed up in gloom.

Doc heard a window open. Ahead, sharp footsteps sounded on the sidewalk, then stopped. He saw a man's figure bent down. The place was an alleyway behind the drug store. On the side of the alley nearest Doc there was a private home with a front lawn.

As Doc reached the spot, he saw that the man was bent down staring at a motionless figure just within the dark alleyway. The man turned at the bronze man's approach.

"Holdup!" he said. "I heard the shot!"

The man lying on the ground was blond-haired, and wore slacks and a casual sports shirt.

"The druggist is calling the police," said the pedestrian. "I think he's dead." He stared, a little frightened, at the figure on the ground.

Doc bent over the body. He was asking. "Did you see who was in a car that just pulled away from the corner?"

"No. I had just run back into the drugstore to tell them to call the police. I was coming out of the drugstore a minute ago when I heard the shot. You think the robber escaped in that car?"

Doc did not reply.

The man on the ground was dead. He had been shot close to the heart. The thing that interested the bronze man was that every pocket of the dead blond man's clothing was turned inside out.

But he didn't think robbery was the motive—not the usual kind of holdup.

SPEED CALLOWAY arrived close behind him. He saw her park the car across the street and then she was running up to him. The druggist was there now. Someone came out of the house facing on the lawn. Two more people arrived from the nearby corner.

The girl bent down briefly. She jerked to her feet and seized Doc's arm. Her eyes were wide—staring. He motioned her away from the others—all talking excitedly—before she gasped an exclamation. He thought he knew what was coming.

"It's the artist—Paul Rose!" she said softly. "Is he—"

Doc nodded.

"But how—"

Doc spoke so the others wouldn't hear. "Someone could have phoned him and asked him to come down here to the corner by the drugstore. Probably made it sound very urgent. Then, the murderer waited here in this shadowy alley. They were searching for something—along with wanting to eliminate Paul Rose. He either had information or knew information that was dangerous to them—or else they thought so."

"The bearded men?"

Doc nodded.

In the distance, thinly, a police siren could be heard. About a dozen people were standing around now, all talking, all staring helplessly the way people do when death suddenly disturbs their everyday lives.

Doc remained long enough to give a brief report to the prowl car men. He identified himself as Clark Savage, Jr., and the name did not register with the two Chicago policemen. One of the cops went back to the car and lifted the portable mike from the dashboard hook. He spoke over the two-way radio to the police headquarters dispatcher.

Identifying himself, he said, "A guy shot. Yeah, he's dead. Send the wagon." He gave the address. He might just as well have been discussing the weather.

Doc and the girl departed.

"We'll pick up Ham," he said.

She was still driving. She looked at him a brief instant, sharply. "I can't help but think—" she started to say, then let the sentence trail, as though pondering.

"Yes?"

Doc waited.

"George Big," she said. "Why, I don't know. There's no reason at all. Yet he's the only one who knew we were coming up here to see Paul Rose."

"That's right," agreed Doc.

"I didn't drive up here the shortest way, really. I wasn't quite sure of the street, where it was. He could have driven directly here after calling the artist, asking Rose to meet him at the drug store, something like that. Then—" She moved her shoulders as though a chill had touched her back—"then he could have waited there in the alley, shot Rose as he passed. But why? Why?"

"Suppose," suggested Doc, "we see Ham first."

They found Ham Brooks standing in a dark clothing store doorway near the hotel entrance, when they pulled up. Ham spotted them and came over and got into the front seat.

Speed spoke first, excited.

"Did he leave the hotel right after us?"

Ham gave Doc Savage a kind of casual, questioning look. The bronze man told him, "She's a very clever girl indeed. She didn't take that line about you waiting here to have a steak."

"You stayed here to check on George Big, didn't you, Ham?" asked the girl. Her eyes were bright.

Ham nodded.

The girl told him what had just happened on the near North Side. "George Big was the only one who knew we were going there!" she pointed out. "He could have reached there a couple of moments before us. In fact, Paul Rose had just left his house. We saw him—"

Ham was frowning. He said, "Only for one thing."

“What?”

“George Big hasn't left his room.”

Chapter X

EARLY the next evening the mystery seemed to remain unchanged.

Doc Savage had been gone most of the day. Monk and Ham were in their hotel suite, awaiting a call from red-haired Speed Calloway. Monk had just returned from the record bureau at police headquarters. Ham had newspapers spread on the floor.

“She called yet?” Monk asked.

Ham shook his head, reading another paper. It was another account of Daniel Jamison's murder. The police said it was quite a mystery. So far, they had not connected Doc Savage with the thing at all. Ham had been checking to make certain. Doc's friend, the captain of detectives, had kept his word. One slip to those newspaper fellows and Doc's name would have been in all the headlines. His reputation for seeing that evildoers in various parts of the world were caught and punished was known by every newspaperman in the country.

“I wouldn't put it past you,” said Monk suspiciously, “to date that redhead while I'm busy doing a job for Doc.”

Ham ignored him, finished reading another account of Jamison's death. Two of the papers listed a small, matter-of-fact report about last night's shooting of the artist, Paul Rose. They described it as a holdup shooting by a person or persons unknown.

The running of the feature race at Washington Park got more publicity in Chicago.

Ham put aside the last paper and looked up. “Doing what for Doc?”

“I got these.”

Monk threw several photographs on the table near Ham. “Some sharp characters who have put in time at various penitentiaries,” he explained. “The Ohio State pen . . . the one here in Illinois . . . Sing Sing . . . others.”

Ham frowned as he looked at the assorted photographs. There were hard faces, shrewd clean-shaven faces, bland, expressionless faces. There were profile shots and height and weight measurements given.

“Parolees,” said Monk. “A couple of others escaped. All of 'em mixed up in various rackets.”

“So?”

“I think Doc's getting ready for something.”

“What?”

Monk shrugged his burly shoulders. “I dunno. He's been running around all day. He shouldn't, either. Did you see those marks on his back and chest?” Monk, as battle-scarred as he was himself, gave a sort of shudder.

Ham's eyes were thoughtful. "Doc hasn't said much," he said as though reviewing something in his own mind. "But he had a close call yesterday. I tried to make him take it easy today. He took a terrific beating. The murder of his friend Daniel Jamison was another jolt. Doc's moving in on something, and if you ask me he's going to move fast."

"What do you figure it is?"

"For one thing," mused Ham, "it all centers around these little houses. Funny. George Big is in that business. The artist—Paul Rose—did advertising layouts on postwar homes. Speed Calloway's transport trucks have been hauling some kind of new prefabricated postwar house—the kind a lot of G.I. veterans are buying. Daniel Jamison had developed a number of new, low-cost lighting aids for modern postwar houses. And today Doc found out something else."

"Well—go on," Monk prodded.

"Stealing those blueprints of Jamison's at the university isn't the only thing that happened recently. Doc checked over a number of recent cases recorded on the blotter at headquarters. He saw something the police overlooked—of course, at the time, the police had no reason to see a connection—"

"Get on with it," urged Monk.

"Well, an inventor of a new type of plastic building material disappeared here in Chicago recently. Also, another expert who was working on an advanced kind of unbreakable, lightweight window glass that can be shipped as easily as newspaper."

Monk said: "It all centers around this new-type postwar house field, doesn't it?"

"Exactly!"

"And a lot of funny long-haired hermit kind of guys mixed up in it. You'd wonder what connection they'd have with it."

"Wouldn't you, though?"

"Not me," announced Monk. "I think I've got the same hunch Doc has." He picked up the police photographs and returned them to his pocket. "Let's call up Speed and take her to dinner while we're waiting for Doc." He started toward the telephone.

"She isn't at the garage," Ham said.

Ham's jaw stuck out.

"You've been trying to get her, huh?"

"That's right."

"Why, you shyster, for less than two cents I'd—"

The telephone rang.

Monk grabbed the receiver and shoved his associate aside. "Is that you, honey?" he said hopefully.

Doc Savage said, "I'm calling from the lobby. You and Ham meet us outside right away. We're waiting."

"We?" Monk asked.

“Speed Calloway—her car.”

Monk hung up, looked at Ham, announced, “Something's up!”

DOC SAVAGE was at the wheel of the girl's big car. Speed, her pretty face animated with excitement, was beside the bronze man. Doc put the car in motion while Monk was still closing the door to the rear seat.

The girl turned sideways in the front seat and looked at Ham.

“I'm sorry I had to break our dinner date. Doc came to the garage and we've been busy. Something's happened.”

Monk started to say, “I knew this fast-talking shyster was double-crossing me—” He leaned forward, looking sharply at the redhaired girl. “What'd you say happened?”

“The Coast Guard located the cabin cruiser.”

“Where?”

Doc, swinging the Cadillac southward on Michigan, said, “A small-boat harbor ten miles north of Benton Harbor, across the Lake.”

“Anyone aboard?” Ham wanted to know.

Doc shook his head. “The registry number was forged, as I suspected. The cruiser belonged to an inventor who disappeared here in Chicago some time ago. The cruiser had been missing ever since. They had it.”

“They?” Monk leaned forward, his hands on his knees in a manner that said he felt like fighting somebody.

“The bearded men, apparently—though, as I said, no one was found aboard the cruiser when it was located late this afternoon. But it tells us something.”

“That the hideout is probably across the lake in that vicinity?” suggested Ham.

“Yes,” Doc said.

Monk complained, “It's a hell of a big lake—and a hell of a lot of shoreline. You might search for weeks—”

“Not if you go about it systematically,” said Doc.

“Doc hasn't told you the rest of it,” the girl said. “They *did* find some of the bearded men—the police did, down in Michigan City this afternoon. That's right at the southern end of the Lake. The main highway around to Michigan cuts right through there.”

Doc added: “There was a traffic accident, and a car full of those long-haired characters piled up and they were shaken up a bit. I was at headquarters when it came in on the teletype, a routine traffic report of accidents. We ordered the men held at a local jail near Michigan City.”

Doc turned off Michigan again, drove through streets that led to the truck terminals south of the Loop.

Obviously he was headed toward Speed Calloway's garage, and he was in a hurry.

Then he added: "Your friend Fellow Columbus was one of them—the chap who was stopping in Room 919 at our hotel. They found the hotel cashier's receipt for the room on him."

Ham whistled. "How many of them in the car?"

"Four, they say, counting Fellow Columbus."

"That makes seven we know of," figured Monk. "I'm counting the three who got away on the cruiser."

Doc nodded. "That's right."

"Any of them talk?"

Doc said: "They won't open their mouths. They insist they belong to a religious brotherhood."

"Brotherhood, hell!" exploded Monk.

Doc had pulled into the curb at the girl's big garage, which ran the length of a short side street.

"What are we stopping here for?" Monk demanded.

The girl smiled. She smiled at Monk. His face started to beam. "How would you," she said, "like to push a semi-trailer job between here and somewhere south of Muskegon, Michigan tonight?"

Monk beamed. "With you beside me in the cab, honey?"

"We're all going," said Speed Calloway.

Monk said, "I used to drive trucks once, years ago. I'd rather ride herd on one of those babies than on a bronc."

"Well, there's truck cowboys too."

Doc and the girl led the way directly to the office of the trucking company. Ham was puzzled. He wanted to know:

"Why are we starting from here? What has driving a truck got to do with it? And what are we waiting here for?"

"George Big is going with us," said Doc Savage. "He's meeting us here. He's offered to be of any assistance he can."

Ham was more interested in the transport truck part of it. "But why not drive over there in the Cadillac?"

"Because," said Doc, "driving the truck might solve this thing. We'll take Speed's car too. Well split up."

Ham's eyes narrowed. "You've found out something, haven't you?"

DOC shook his head slowly. "No-o," he admitted. "But Speed here, did. At least, it's possibly the solution to everything. When Steve Brooks' truck was serviced—it had not been driven since it was found in a parking lot exactly a mile from here today—the mechanics discovered that the meter card was missing. We've checked the mileage from here to the parking lot very carefully. We're going to allow for

that. From the parking lot, the trail will follow, in reverse, Steve Brooks' trip back from Michigan the other night. Speed, here, knows that route like a book.”

Ham said, “I don't get it.”

Doc was on the verge of explaining, when he looked up, nodded, called out, “We're waiting for you.”

Dark-haired, efficient-looking George Big had just started into the office. He shook hands with everyone.

“Ready?” he asked in his business-like manner.

“Ready,” said Doc pleasantly.

Ham was a little surprised that Doc had no objections to the man going with them. Usually Doc liked to handle cases in his own way. Perhaps it was because George Big had been a friend of the girl's father, and had sent this new hauling business to her. A contract that had led to death of her driver. George Big no doubt felt responsible, in a way.

Also, perhaps he could help them. It was he who had heard of Michigan Moderns, the new portable building concern across the Lake.

Certainly, Ham thought, he was in the clear about last night. George Big had never left his hotel, Ham had made certain of that. Someone else had reached the artist and murdered him before Doc's arrival.

Doc announced: “Mr. Big and I will take the Cadillac. We'll follow you. Monk, you and Ham and Miss Calloway ride in the truck.”

The suggestion pleased the chemist. Monk beamed. He said, “I'll give this dude shyster a ride he'll remember!”

“Don't forget,” said Doc, smiling a little, “you have Miss Calloway with you.”

Monk's grin spread his big mouth even wider. “How could I?”

The girl said, “I can take it. I've bounced around in tractor cabs more times than I can remember.”

THEY got started. The time was approximately quarter past nine in the evening.

Doc drove them over to the parking lot that had been mentioned. The huge red-painted, semi-trailer job was parked there. The name was painted across sides of the long trailer and rear tailgate: CALLOWAY FAST FREIGHT.

The bronze man left George Big in the Cadillac, parked just outside the lot, while he accompanied the others to the girl's truck transport.

“Let's see,” he said, checking details with her. “The speedometer's set?”

“At zero.”

“The route?”

“Know it like I know my way home,” said Speed with assurance.

“The stops en route?”

“A few coffee-and-anchor stops the boys use regularly. A gas-up station. That's all—unless something happens.”

“Check distances, time of stops, everything, as accurately as possible.”

“Don't worry,” said the girl, “I know just what to do.”

Doc left them, saying, “We'll be right behind you.”

The girl swung up into the high cab. A huge wide seat gave them visibility from high above the road level. She pulled numerous switches. Red, green and yellow riding lights came on all over the trailer section, on sides and rear. There were at least twenty warning lights in all. She let Monk slide behind the huge steering wheel. She sat between the chemist and Ham.

He commented, “You certainly have a lot of faith in him.”

Monk growled, “You just watch, handsome!”

The girl explained, “This isn't a Diesel job. And watch the airbrakes. We're running empty and they're touchy. Don't let her slew around or jackknife on you.”

Monk looked as happy as could be. “Lady,” he said in admiration, “you're talking my language. It's been a long time.”

“It will be,” put in Ham, “if you don't know how to handle one of these babies.”

Monk had found the starter. The powerful engine thundered into life. He let it warm up. The girl told him, “There're eight forward speeds. You won't need creeper. She'll handle light.”

Then the homely chemist was easing the long transport out onto the highway. Ham glanced down out of the high cab window, saw Doc nod from where he was parked at the curb and start out behind them.

Even Ham had to admit to himself that Monk knew his stuff. Swiftly his partner got the feel of the sixteen heavy wheels rumbling beneath them, the natural sway of the trailer, the sensitiveness of the big steering wheel.

They rumbled southward toward Whiting, at the Chicago city limits. The night was clear. Other highway transports thundered along in the same direction, or coming northward from Indiana. Headlamps flicked in greeting, the silent language of the road drivers during the long nights.

Traffic was heavy the first hour. Through busy, smoky Gary, a fiery glow lighting the sky from hundreds of steel mill stacks. The highway curved south and east past the lower tip of Lake Michigan. The route here was slightly inland. They could not see the Lake itself.

The girl had taken a pad and pencil from her jacket. From time to time she made notations, watching the mileage figures on the speedometer.

“Just what,” prodded Ham suddenly, “did Doc mean when he mentioned the trip meter card? He was going to say something about it at your office, then George Big came in and I guess he forgot about it.”

“Doc never forgets anything,” said Monk, watching the road, deftly handling the huge steering wheel.

The girl said, “Doc thought of something that everyone else overlooked.”

“Meaning?” Ham was puzzled.

“It is the clue that my driver tried to get to me. He didn't want to place me in danger, so he planned to slip it to me there at the model homes show. But someone got to him first and murdered him. And got that clue.”

“The trip meter card?”

The girl's eyes were intent in the shadows of the big noisy cab. Glow from the dash only touched her smoothly rounded knees. The lights were so adjusted in order not to interfere with a road driver's vision.

She nodded. There was that tenseness in her mouth again.

“It is not only the clue,” she said. “The card is the solution to grim murder. That's why everyone is after it.”

“But who *has* it?”

“I don't know.”

“Does Doc?” asked Ham.

“I . . . don't know that either,” said the girl slowly.

For several moments they were all silent, thinking about it.

Chapter XI

THE highway was starting its curve northward again now, toward the Michigan state line. That part of Indiana through which they rumbled was only a tiny segment right at the Lake edge.

A highway sign told them Michigan City was not far ahead. There was still quite a bit of heavy traffic, and Monk complained.

“Wish I could let this baby out,” he said.

They were doing fifty. It was loud and bumpy within the steel cab. The rumble of the heavy wheels beneath them made the speed seem even faster.

“Don't get ideas,” said Ham to his impatient partner.

The girl made note of the time at fifteen-minute intervals.

A big straight job rolling down the highway toward them flicked lights and spotlight.

“That's a new one,” commented Monk.

“Slow down,” warned the girl. “That means something is wrong up ahead. The driver is letting us know.”

Monk touched the air brakes gently as they rolled into a long sweeping curve. A red glow swept into view as they came into the straightaway again.

There was a truck parked on the shoulder of the highway, red flares placed behind and in front of it. They saw the driver's figure revealed in their powerful headlamp beams. He waved them on, making a sign language signal with his hands.

Speed explained, "Engine trouble. He's already got a service truck on the way. We won't have to stop."

Ham remarked, "It's fascinating, isn't it? These fellows spend a lonely night, rolling along, talking to no one. Yet they have a way of conversing with one another as they thunder past in the dark."

"Yes," the girl said. "In this business, you only stop for emergency or at a regular terminal. Time is precious. We compete with the railroads for speed in delivery—even faster, sometimes. It's no job for milk-toast boys."

Monk was picking up speed again when the girl's open Cadillac pulled beside them, on the left. Monk stuck his head out the high cab window. The girl leaned over and handled the wheel a moment.

Doc was shouting something up at the chemist. Then the Cadillac fell back again. Monk told them:

"The next little crossroads ahead. Doc says there's a warning traffic light. Right past that's a country hoosegow. We stop there."

In a few moments they slowed for the light. Then Monk eased the big transport into the curb. Ham noted that, when they stopped, the girl again jotted down the time. He was aware that the time notations seemed mighty important.

They parked and swung down to the street. There was a pool room, a general store—closed—a feed store across the street. Doc and George Big came walking up alongside the truck. He indicated a small red brick building set off by itself.

"This must be it," said Doc. "The local jail."

INSIDE, they found a gangling tall man sitting with his long legs hooked on the sill of an open window. His chair was tilted back and he was reading a true story magazine. He was at least fifty, and could have been years older. He shifted a wad of tobacco into his cheek and said, "Hi."

Seeing the girl, he decided to get up. There was a heavily barred doorway on the far side of the room. The night was warm. Outside, in a side yard, crickets chirped lazily.

Doc stepped forward.

"Mr. Garrity?"

"Yep," said the jailer.

"I talked to you late this afternoon from Chicago police headquarters. I'm—"

Garrity shoved out a long bony hand before the bronze man had a chance to finish. "Hell's bells!" he said. "I recognize you now. Doc Savage!"

Doc introduced the others.

Jailer Garrity said with importance, "I been waitin' for you, Mr. Savage. I got those funny birds right on ice." He removed his cut of tobacco, threw it in a waste basket, rubbed the palms of his hands on the

seat of his trousers. "Right this way." He took a large key from his pocket and moved toward the iron-barred door. There was a heavy belt around his waist that supported a holstered revolver. He also wore old blue suspenders, probably just as a matter of habit.

Garrity squinted at the girl as he slid the large key into the steel lock. "Maybe she oughta wait—"

"I want to see them too," said Speed determinedly.

Monk moved up beside her. "She'll be all right, Chief." He elbowed Ham aside.

Pleased at the way he was addressed, the jailer unlocked the heavy door and led them into a corridor. He was saying, "These guys sure got me puzzled. All look alike. I'm glad someone's gonna straighten me out. I threw them in the lockup when they busted one of our traffic signs and almost ran right through the feed store window. Talk about speeding—"

"Anyone hurt badly?" asked Doc Savage.

"Naw. One of 'em sprained his wrist, is all."

They came to a large room walled by several individual small cells. An overhead drop light hung from the ceiling of the room. Garrity said, "I locked 'em up separately so's I could handle them if they started a fuss."

Four bearded faces, four sets of eyes like those of watchful, caged foxes, stared at them from four separate small cells.

Doc Savage moved from cell to cell, looking the men over. They were big men, solidly built. The others joined him in his scrutiny.

To Monk, Doc said, "Which would you say is the one called Fellow Columbus?"

Monk pointed at one of the prisoners.

George Big stood to one side, watching.

Ham said, "No, he isn't the one. It's this fellow over here."

"You're crazy!" said Monk.

They started arguing.

"I think," the girl said quietly, pointing, "it's this man here." She drew back, seeing the way the man's eyes looked at her. His big hands gripped the bars.

Doc looked at the jailer. "Is he the one you got the hotel receipt from?"

Garrity nodded.

"Search them all?" asked Doc.

"Just routine stuff," explained the bony-looking jailer. "Took knives, belts and such away from them."

"Let's have a look at Fellow Columbus here," suggested Doc. He indicated the bearded, watchful man both the girl and Garrity had pointed out.

The jailer unlocked the cell door, jerked his head, growled, "Come on, bo. Outside!"

The big, long-haired man shuffled out into the room. Speed Calloway moved back a bit, as did George Big, his usual efficient, business-like manner somewhat ill at ease.

“See if he has anything, Monk,” said Doc.

Monk, grinning, stepped toward the man with the beard. “Try something, fuzzy,” he told the big man, “an' see what happens!”

The bearded man tried it regardless. He didn't turn on Monk. He leaped toward the hallway and slammed right into little George Big.

The slender, dark-haired man let out a yelp and flung his arms around the bearded man—more to keep himself from falling than anything else. They threshed about.

The man with the beard did not have a chance, of course. It was surprising he did not understand that. Monk was on him like a leaping bobcat. Doc was past Monk and across the room, blocking passage out to the hall. He could have stopped the fellow.

Ham said as though bored, “Thought you could handle him, stupid,” and moved to help search the man.

Monk said what he thought of people who didn't mind their own business.

Doc, meanwhile, was setting George Big on his feet. The business man had fallen to his knees. He was gasping, “Good Lord, I thought he was going to kill me.”

Garrity was holding his gun and looking like he was going to shoot someone. The girl told him, “It's all right. Don't worry.”

The search of the bearded prisoner revealed nothing. There were no papers on him. Doc Savage seemed most disappointed of all. It showed in the way he glanced at the redhaired girl and shrugged.

Then he said to the jailer, “Have you a razor?”

“Yep, sure thing,” said Garrity. His faded gray eyes looked quizzically at the bronze man, then started to twinkle. “I get you,” he said, “I'll bring some rope, too. Watch him!”

FELLOW COLUMBUS suspected what was coming. He started to struggle. Monk slid behind him, pinioned his arms as though they were held in a mighty vise. Ham and Doc Savage handled the feet. They were holding the bearded man still and motionless on the floor when the jailer returned with rope and an old-fashioned straight razor.

“I reckon,” said Garrity, “you won't need soap. Take too much time!”

They tied the man securely, then shaved him.

The transformation was somewhat amazing.

He was fairly young, under thirty. His features were heavy, cruel, and there was an ugly scar, long and deep, on the left cheek.

Speed Calloway exclaimed, “I imagined him to be almost fifty!”

“A beard like that fools you,” said Doc Savage.

Monk was looking curiously at the freshly shaved man. "Y'know, I've seen that funny-looking face before!"

"Of course you have, dimwit!" snapped Ham. "You have his picture right there in your pocket!" He referred to the photographs Monk had shown him in their hotel suite.

Monk yanked out the police photos. He said slowly, selecting one of the photographs, "Oh-h!"

Then he read: "James Bridges . . . Ohio State Penitentiary . . . June, 1941 to December, 1942 . . . September, 1944 to January, 1946!" He looked at the prisoner. "Went back for a little post-graduate work, huh?"

Doc told them, "Embezzlement, armed robbery and blackmail used to be his specialties." He nodded to jailer Garrity. "Lock him up again."

"What about searching and shaving the others?" Ham wanted to know.

"We won't bother—right now," advised Doc. There was a restlessness stirring in his strange flake-gold eyes. "I want to get started." He spoke to Garrity again. "The State police will be here to take over. They're being notified. It might take time until formalities are completed."

"Check," said Garrity. He felt impressed that he had such distinguished lodgers behind his bars.

Doc looked at trim George Big. "Do you feel up to going on? There's more ahead."

George Big looked a little pale. But he said, "I guess I can take it."

They went back to the truck.

Chapter XII

DOC SAVAGE revealed a shift in his plans when they reached the curb.

"I wonder if you'd mind," he said, speaking to George Big, "riding in the Cadillac with Monk and Ham? I'll drive the truck. I want Miss Calloway to check on the route with me."

The business man nodded. He still looked rather shaken.

They switched around, but when Doc climbed up into the high cab seat with the girl, he said, "Can you handle this job?"

"Of course," she told him. She slid over behind the wheel.

With the assurance of a veteran, she put the long semi-trailer into motion and went deftly through the speeds. Soon they left the towns behind them, rolling through Michigan City and a little suburb. Traffic thinned. It was getting late. Only occasionally did another highway truck pass them going the other way.

Doc took the disk-like sheet of paper from his pocket and placed it on his knees under the dash light. It contained sort of a graph.

Speed's eyes flicked down, saw the chart, and gave a little cry. "The meter chart! Where did you find it?"

"Fellow Columbus had it." Doc's eyes were somewhat grim. "This is what everyone has been looking for—the piece of paper for which murder was committed."

“Yes,” the girl said, and there was a hint of terror in her tight voice. “That’s what Steve Brooks tried to get to me before . . .” She stopped, finally went on: “But I didn’t see you get it away from that horrible man back there.”

Doc said: “Can you read me those notes you made, while you drove?”

“Of course . . .”

Handling the wheel with one hand, gaze shifting back and forth constantly to the open road ahead, she took the slip of paper from her pocket and started reading off the time and mileage notation she had made on the run down from Chicago.

The graph-like chart, which Doc held, showed mileages and exact length of time spent at all stops. A fresh blank chart was placed in the meter at the start of every truck run. It recorded speeds, mileage and all stops made by a driver during his run.

Doc read from Steve Brooks’ recorded chart. “He made a ten-minute stop in Gary, coming in that morning.”

“Check,” she said.

“Then he stopped again in Michigan City. Let me see . . .” Doc carefully studied the recording that was on the cardboard-like paper. “Twenty-five minutes.”

The girl read off the mileage between the two stops.

“Exactly,” said Doc.

“That,” she then told him, “would be his coffee-and-anchor stop at Pete’s diner in Michigan City. The boys stop to eat there.”

He did some more figuring on the chart. “The next stop should be forty miles north of here, according to this.”

The girl frowned. “It should be forty-five miles to the warehouse where he picked up the house units.”

Doc carefully re-checked the graph. “Yes,” he said, “he did start forty-five miles north of here. That’s where the graph begins. But five miles later, south of there, he made an hour stop. It’s here.”

“There’s nothing at that point,” the girl said, puzzled.

They rolled on through the night. Doc made no further comment. Air rushed in through the lowered side windows and there was some dampness. You could smell the lake now. Once it appeared far off to the left, as they followed a bluff that bordered it. Its dark, endless breadth was inspiring.

The highway dropped downgrade and ran close to its shore. Then the lake wasn’t visible at all.

The girl said, “We’re going to run into some fog. You can feel it. You can’t see the lake anymore.”

She was right.

WISPS of gray mist, like tumbleweed rolling across the desert, shifted across the curving highway. The girl switched on twin pairs of fog lamps. She was able to hold the fifty-mile-an-hour speed. Her straight,

trim figure shifted slightly with the motion of the cushioned seat, as they roared along. Tires made a continuous high whistling sound racing over the pavement.

“Ten more miles,” said Doc. He looked at her carefully. “Want me to take over?”

She shook her head, blue eyes straight ahead on the road. The tractor-trailer unit shot through little fluffs of misty fog. She said tightly, “This is for Steve Brooks.”

Doc was suddenly interested in the rows of switch buttons on the dash. He asked, “Which one of these is the tail-light?”

The girl grinned. “You can almost take your pick.” She indicated one of the switches. “But this is the main one.”

The bronze man started flicking the switch off and on. Speed glanced at him curiously. “What are you doing?”

“Something I forgot to tell Ham,” he said.

“I see,” she said. “Blinker code—just like on a ship. Well, that saves time stopping to tell him.”

“Yes,” said Doc.

As Doc Savage manipulated the switch, he also checked mileages on the chart. “Four miles,” he announced. Then, only a little more than a minute later, “Three miles.” He added, “I’m giving you the distance to that unscheduled stop Steve made five miles below his regular terminal.”

“I understand,” she said. Her own quick gaze watched the trip section of the speedometer. Shortly she announced, “Two miles. I’m checking it here.”

They had less than a mile to go when Doc finished whatever he was doing with the tail-light switch. He pushed it in, shutting off that particular light.

The girl had her foot on the air brakes, touching them gently. She had reduced speed, dropping the cab into neutral, and they rolled along without the thunderous roar of the engine, coasting. They dropped down a long straight hill, followed a wooded long stretch of highway that, soon, would be fog bound. The fog kept rolling in from the lake.

Puzzled, Speed said, “This is it . . . right along here . . . where Steve made an hour's stop.” She lifted one hand from the big steering wheel and motioned. “Look. Nothing at all. Just woods on either side. No road . . .”

“Easy,” instructed Doc. He watched beneath the layer of fog, which hung perhaps a dozen feet above the highway through this long hollow. He checked off the speedometer mileage with exactness. When there was one-tenth of a mile left to go, he pointed ahead, on the lake side, and said, “That old gate in the sagging wire fence, see it?”

The girl was alert, shaking her head.

“Don't stop,” said the bronze man. “Drop back into gear and keep rolling.”

They both watched, however, as the truck went past. Beyond the sagging gate there was an old road, like the road leading into a farm, only this one disappeared in the woods that bordered the lake, some distance away, a mile perhaps.

As they passed it, Doc said, "It checks exactly. Five miles from where Steve Brooks started his return trip that night."

"What do you think?" she asked tensely.

Doc's features were immobile for a moment. Then, "Keep right on to the terminal where he picked up the shipments. That's five more miles."

They reached the place seven minutes later.

It was a landing stage alongside the lake. The highway, skirting an inlet, swung past two huge gray wooden buildings the size of small warehouses. There was a dock, with a small lake freighter tied up alongside.

Doc drove the truck in and parked. Monk pulled the touring car up beside them. The three men—Monk, Ham, and George Big—came over to join Doc and the girl as they swung down from the truck cab.

Lights shone from the many windows of the two long structures. There was a large sign: MICHIGAN MODERNS. Two transport trucks were drawn up at a loading platform beside an office doorway. Men were loading the big trailers with bulky, heavy packing cases.

The girl said, "That one truck goes to Detroit." She was reading the truck company names painted on the sides of the trailers. "The other is a Cincinnati outfit."

Doc commented, "The business is branching out fast."

George Big said in his efficient, quick manner, "Something was wrong with one of your tail-lights. It finally burned out."

"Thank you," murmured Doc. He was already leading the way toward the office of the long building. They found no one inside, so continued on through to the main part of the building.

What they saw was quite impressive. A production line at Willow Run would be similar to it. Only, cars were not being assembled. They were unit-built houses.

Men worked at various sections, crating units of siding, floors, walls, a kind of collapsible window, kitchen units.

There was a section where lighting fixtures were being carefully packed. Doc Savage recognized a new kind of fluorescent lighting that was not yet on the market. Nearby, molding and trim made of some new light-weight plastic—it looked almost like steel—was being placed in cartons labeled with a key number.

Men went on working, merely giving the Doc Savage party a glance now and then. A man came down an aisle of the long assembly room. He wore a watchman's time-clock at his belt. He was an elderly man with a friendly smile.

He said: "Visitors, Mr. Big?" and nodded to the dark-haired, mustached man.

George Big nodded. He looked at the Doc Savage group and said in a matter-of-fact way, "Well, I suppose I might as well tell you. Michigan Moderns is my business. I own it. You'll find it a perfectly legitimate business." His sharp dark eyes went to the bronze man. "Do you see any bearded fellows around here?"

Doc shook his head. There was not a long-haired worker in the building.

Monk looked suspicious, staring around. Ham said nothing. The girl's deep blue eyes went to Doc's and were questioning.

George Big said, "Excuse me a moment. I want to get something from the office to show you." He walked away quickly.

Monk started, "Doc, I don't get it—"

The bronze man apparently did not hear him. He stepped quickly down the long assembly room as George Big disappeared along an aisle of the office.

The business man was just picking up the telephone when Doc came into the small room behind him.

"Just a moment!"

George Big's dark eyes flashed as he looked up.

"I think," said Doc Savage, "I'll make a call first."

The operator was on the line. "State Police," said Doc without waste of words.

Monk had come into the office, quietly, behind the short, slender business man. At that moment George Big was saying harshly, "Put down that phone!" And his right hand was reaching behind his waist, at the belt line.

Monk yelled: "Look out, Doc!"

The bronze man reached into his coat pocket, removed a small, short-barreled weapon. He tossed it to Monk, saying, "He had a gun—in the small holster he wears at the back of his belt. I took it away from him when I picked him up off the floor at the jail."

Monk had caught the weapon. He dropped it in his coat pocket, on the side away from the fiery-eyed little business man. Monk's hand held George Big by the arm, and the man winced with pain. He began to stare in fear at the homely-faced, powerful chemist.

Doc said: "And this!" placing the truck meter chart on the desk beside the telephone.

The girl, Ham and the watchman had come into the office. The elderly man was wide-eyed at the way George Big was held a prisoner.

Monk said, "It's all right, Pop," to the gray-haired watchman. "Your employer happens to be a crook!" He put some more pressure on the arm and George Big sucked in his breath.

Ham was looking at the meter card-graph on the desk. He said to the bronze man, "We figured out your blinker message from the truck tail-light. So you got this away from Fellow Columbus back there at the jail?"

Doc nodded. "He tried to slip it to George Big during that faked escape attempt from the jail room. He grabbed him purposely."

"That's what you said when you flicked us the blinker message," Ham acknowledged.

“FELLOW COLUMBUS,” continued the bronze man, “was the man George Big called the moment we left Big’s hotel-apartment last night. Columbus got to the artist, Paul Rose, ahead of us—killing him and finding the truck meter chart. Steve Brooks had gone to the artist because they were personal friends, and he could trust him—and, he did not want to implicate Miss Calloway in something that he was trying to solve. Steve Brooks realized their own company might be suspected.”

To the operator, as he still held the phone, Doc said, “Yes, I’m waiting.”

Doc said to the others, “Fellow Columbus and some of his gang had to leave town fast. They’d missed the cabin cruiser, so they drove. Columbus still had the meter card—the one thing that would show us where their hideout is—with him. George Big, here, knew that. So he suggested coming with us to the jail.” He looked at the prisoner and his unusual eyes flickered a little. “You were puzzled because you didn’t find the meter record in your pocket after we left the jail, weren’t you?”

George Big cursed profanely. Monk hit him in the mouth. After that he was silent.

“Police barracks?” Doc was saying on the phone. The connection had gone through. The trunk line to the town, five miles away, had been busy—as the operator had informed Doc.

Briefly, yet in clear detail, Doc made his report. He finished with, “We’ll get started. They might have spotted us already and are liable to try and pull out.” He gave instructions concerning the old sagging gateway exactly five miles south. “In there,” he said. “You’ll find the gate open when you arrive.”

He hung up. The girl looked worried. “Shouldn’t you wait—” she started.

Doc shook his head.

“There isn’t time.” He spoke to the elderly watchman, “Pop, I don’t think you’re implicated. I’m positive everyone working here is innocent of how many of your new home appliances, devices and features were obtained—the plans, patents, and so on. But I’ll have to ask you to wait right here until the State Police take over.”

He spoke to Speed Calloway again, “Know any of those truck drivers outside?”

“I think I recognized one,” she said. “They all work for well-known, legitimate outfits.”

“Bring them in,” said Doc.

Five drivers shortly appeared. Doc guessed the girl had told them something of the crooked setup, and of murder—especially of one of their fraternity.

Doc explained further. “Two of your drivers will have to stay here. I can use you three others.”

They were husky men, and they already looked like they were ready for a fight after hearing the rest of the details from Doc Savage.

They started in by tying up George Big.

“Do they hang or electrocute these kind of guys in Illinois?” one driver asked.

Doc insisted that the girl remain there at the office.

A few moments later, using the Cadillac, Doc, Ham, Monk and the three truck drivers returned to the half-hidden dirt road in the fog-shrouded hollow, five miles south.

Doc had passed out weapons that he took from the luggage compartment of the girl's car. He had stored them there earlier that day. They also had assorted tire irons, monkey wrenches and heavy tools with them. "No shooting unless absolutely necessary," Doc had warned them.

The road in through the woods, which they were following a few moments later, wound back and forth. They drove a mile. The fog formed heavy beaded curtains among the trees. The lake was close by, for now it grew damper and the fog was almost impenetrable.

They were on the lookout for buildings back there in the deep woods. Doc had an idea they would be constructed far enough in from the lake for concealment, yet close enough that an escape route would always be available.

They ran into the bearded men in a different way than they expected. Trouble came down upon them without any kind of warning.

Chapter XIII

PERHAPS a guard was kept posted near the old sagging gateway at the main road. Maybe the lookout had seen the truck slow down to a crawl as it went by, on the way north.

Regardless, the bearded men appeared without warning. They dropped down out of the trees, three of them landing in the open car. Others moved from behind concealing tree trunks.

Monk let out a whoop, slammed on the emergency, seized a heavy wrench and leaped out.

There was some confusion. The heavy fog, like a gray veil, caused it. Once Monk almost clipped Ham by mistake.

The lawyer yelled, "Grab them by their beards, you dunce, and then you'll be sure."

The fight spread out, scattered through the woods. There was some shooting. The shots went wild or thunked into trees.

Monk estimated there had been a dozen men. He knew that he himself had knocked out five. He found Ham and learned that the lawyer had accounted for three more.

They heard one of the truck drivers yell in the fog, "That makes four!"

Monk was puzzled as he saw three figures moving vaguely and tore after them. Ham was at his side. Monk yelled, "Can't understand it! They're growing in numbers!"

It was Doc Savage who made the discovery that at least four bearded men had been fighting side by side with him.

He drew up short. He realized a truck had pulled in through the winding road, had parked, and more bearded men were piling out with clubs in their hands.

"I think," said the man closest to Doc, "we've accounted for all of them. May I introduce myself. I'm Brother Jones." He named a famous brotherhood of religious followers who operated a resort area ten miles south of here. "We decided," he told the bronze man, "it was time we took things into our hands when these rascals killed one of our members!"

Doc's voice, loud and deep-toned, carried up and down the misted lanes of the woods. He called a halt

to the fighting. He explained the presence of the growing numbers of bearded men.

Somewhere in the woods, Monk said with relief, “Golly, I thought I was seeing triple. I was getting no place fast!”

The fight was over. The State Police arrived.

LATER, the following morning, they examined the small, hidden workshops in the woods, not far from the lake shore. Stolen patents were found. Blueprints. Plans for the low-cost production of new, light-weight materials for prefabricated homes.

Everything had been stolen.

Doc examined books found in a safe at the warehouse office. There were orders on the books for hundreds and hundreds of the new portable houses. Mostly from veterans desperately seeking places to live with their new brides. Substantial down payments had been collected. The balance, in each case, was due upon delivery of the houses.

Ham remarked, “This racket would build up into millions.”

Doc agreed. “And,” he added, “it was being built on the brains of men who spent years of research. Some of them—murdered.”

He referred to his personal friend Daniel Jamison. There were others. Doc's eyes were grim.

It was pretty red-haired Speed who wanted to know about the names of the bearded men. “It was some kind of way of identification, wasn't it? Such funny names—Fellow Columbus—Fellow Joliet!”

Doc told her: “Their names identified the state penitentiaries where they all had spent time. Most of them were parolees. A few had escaped.”

Suddenly she understood. “Joliet is the Illinois state prison . . . Columbus, the Ohio state penitentiary.”

“That's right,” said Doc.

Monk had wandered off some place. He arrived with a Michigan state trooper. “I've got a suggestion,” he said. He looked happy about something.

Ham asked suspiciously, “What's up now?”

Monk indicated the state cop. “They have that cabin cruiser tied up several miles up the lake. It has to be returned to Chicago. I thought—”

He glanced at red-haired Speed, grinned. “I can handle a boat as good as a truck. It'll be a nice sail.”

Doc was listening.

The girl said, “Well . . .” It was a clear morning, warm and pleasant.

Doc told them, “Go ahead. I have some things to finish up here. I'll get one of the truck drivers to take back your trailer job, Speed. I'll drive the Cadillac back myself.”

Then he added, “I think Ham would like to go too.”

Monk's face fell. Ham's lifted. Doc smiled.

As the girl and the two Doc Savage aides departed in a state police car, for the boat harbor, the last thing they observed was little George Big being placed in another police car.

The man said nothing. He looked neither right nor left. His face was ashen. He was a murderer going to his doom.

The lake was silver bright and calm that morning. Somewhere beyond the rim of the distant horizon was Chicago, for which they were headed. The curved prow of the craft cut a smooth wedge through the water. Ripples trailed behind them, slowly smoothed out, and the water became motionless again. Miles and miles of placid, blue, impressive water.

Strangely, as he handled the wheel, Monk was not in one of his talkative moods. He stared across the lake. Ham, leaning on the rail beside the lovely red-haired girl, was looking thoughtfully off into the distance also. The girl's blue eyes were somber.

Each was thinking. The lake's greatness held them in thoughtful silence. Today its mood made one reflective. Somehow it impressed upon you that life, to every man, is pretty important.

Daniel Jamison had thought those thoughts when he stood beside its shores on many a calm, tranquil night.

THE END

NEXT MONTH . . .

An exciting new DOC SAVAGE novel called THE DEVIL IS JONES. About a man with all kinds of eccentricities . . . who liked everyone—he *said*. He also had a penchant for keeping corpses in a closet—which struck Doc Savage as being rather odd. It turned into a fast, suspenseful chase . . . which you won't want to miss.

In the November issue of DOC SAVAGE, on sale September 27. Don't fail to get your copy from your newsstand.