



# THE DISAPPEARING LADY

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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## Chapter I

LATER, Doc Savage was to connect the several little incidents together and discover that they formed a distinct pattern. Each had a bearing on the mystery. Each, really, had involved himself. But, at the time, how was he to know that he was the focal point of a whirlpool of events leading to a sinister climax?

The sidewalk vender selling gardenias—it later developed—had absolutely nothing to do with the crime. Nevertheless, gardenias, at least the sweet cloying smell of them, was always there in the background . . . throughout the case, a vague, challenging, threatening thing as elusive as drifting fog. Touching one swiftly and unexpectedly at times, as fog sweeps in from the sea with a sudden vagrant change of the wind. Then, moving quickly away as if scattered by an offshore breeze, dissolving, vanishing into intangible nothingness.

Because Doc Savage was somewhat early for his appointment, he had noted several unrelated events, and later they were to fall together in the pattern.

It still lacked fifteen minutes till five o'clock when he parked his car on Park Place and walked down the narrow steep street that bordered rambling Boston Common. Near the corner of busy Tremont Street he entered the park and found a deserted bench.

A clock in a tower atop the building at the corner of Park Place and Tremont showed the time. The bank, where he had the appointment at five, was a few doors up the narrow street that climbed toward Beacon Hill. It did not look like a bank. It was a typical conservative Boston institution.

Red brick, with white trim at narrow windows that looked like ordinary private dwelling windows, the bank appeared more like a three-story residence squeezed in between the other business houses of the hilly street.

The new automobile was the first in the chain of little small details that Doc was later to remember. When he left his own coupé, and started toward Boston Common, he had noticed several people looking at the new car. Each was trying to guess its make.

Doc surmised it was a standard 8-cylinder chassis with several thousand dollars' worth of custom-built body placed on top of it—the first of the fancy postwar jobs for which someone had squandered some real money.

In place of the standard all-metal roof, the section above the driver's seat was of plexiglas—offering the driver the kind of visibility a pilot enjoys in a modern glass-enclosed airplane cockpit. Or perhaps the owner was seeking a lot of sunlight.

Then, instead of the usual windows, the rear part of the car body contained small round portholes. Interior of the machine was of expensive cream-colored leather and fancy chrome fittings. The entire car—fenders, hood, roof—was blended into a smooth, sleek unit that gave the impression of ultra-modern design.

A moment after Doc had passed the car and seated himself on the park bench, the man came out of the store on the corner beneath the clock and went up Park Place. He wore a chauffeur's cap and dark suit, a tall, long man who appeared to be annoyed when he saw passersby staring at the car.

Unlocking the car door, the chauffeur climbed inside and started the engine. The sleek car moved a little way up the street, then swung into an alleyway that was pinched between two buildings. Soon the chauffeur appeared again and walked back down the hill. He disappeared into the corner store beneath the high steeple clock.

Doc guessed the fellow had merely parked the car in the alleyway because it was attracting attention.

It was ten minutes till five.

AT the corner of Boston Common and Park Place—a wide sort of plaza—sailors from the Charleston

Navy Yard were meeting their dates. The spot was Boston's favorite rendezvous for the men who followed the sea and the gals who followed the men. "See you at Boston Common, honey, about five o'clock." The date could have been made last night, or six months ago. But she'd be there. The ships came in and out, and on one of them was always her man.

A smile flickered across Doc Savage's bronze features as he watched the flower peddler doing a rushing business. Gardenias—fifty cents each. There was hardly a sailor who passed them up.

The chauffeur came out of the corner store and went up Beacon Hill again. A taxicab pulled up. Two well-dressed men climbed out and approached the bank. One pressed a buzzer beside the double entrance doors. Shortly they were admitted by a gray-haired bank guard.

It was past the usual banking hours but they, probably the same as Doc Savage, no doubt had an appointment with someone. Perhaps a couple of board members.

Doc kept thinking about his own appointment. The request, urgent, had come from Ernest Green himself. Green was president of the staid, reliable institution—yet one of the youngest bank presidents in the country, they said. A sort of business wizard.

Being a stockholder himself in the bank, Doc had felt obligated to keep the appointment when Ernest Green somehow learned he was in Boston and staying at the Copley-Plaza.

"There's not another person I can turn to," Green had said urgently over the phone.

Five minutes, now, till five.

Doc Savage stood up, strolled toward the corner of Park Place. Though it was late October, the afternoon was warm enough to be pleasant.

Now people were pouring out of office buildings and department stores. The business day was over. They headed for buses and the subway-like entrances that led to the carlines beneath the Common.

The chauffeur came down Beacon Hill again and entered the store. Doc noted that it was a cigar shop. Doc crossed the street, entered the place and asked for a package of gum. The man in the chauffeur's cap was inside a telephone booth. By the time Doc came into the shop the fellow was already talking to someone. While Doc was getting his change the fellow hurried out of the booth and went outside again, once more going up the hilly side street. He had no eyebrows. It gave his face a peculiar, gaunt appearance.

As he disappeared, a man detached himself from a group of people waiting for a bus at the corner just outside the store. Doc Savage thought he noticed the merest indication of a nod as the chauffeur passed the small, dapper little man. A moment before the birdlike small man had been watching for the bus; now, he seemed to have completely forgotten this and was heading up Beacon Hill.

Little casual incidents like this Doc Savage always noted. His mind, trained for alertness, tagged such details. He was hardly aware that he was making the observations even now; yet later, sharply distinct, the happenings were going to be remembered and they were going to be significant.

Five o'clock was striking when Doc Savage pressed the buzzer beside the bank entrance.

A HEAVY gate of steel grillwork had been locked for the night. The gate was just outside the regular doors. Almost immediately a big man with ruddy Irish features and wearing the uniform of a bank guard appeared.

He looked out at the bronze man and made no attempt to unlock the gate. A slight frown touched his brow as he looked up at Doc Savage.

“Yes?” he asked, and he kept sizing up Doc's build.

A tall, heavy man himself, the guard nevertheless had to look up at the bronze man. For Doc Savage, standing close to someone as he was now, always gave strangers a somewhat startling impression.

He was taller than most big men. His eyes were an unusual flake-gold color. There was a breadth to his shoulders, an attitude about his figure that denoted amazing physical perfection. One sensed this underlying deep strength whenever Doc Savage moved close beside another individual, and now the two men were separated only by the steel bars.

Doc said quietly, “I have an appointment with Ernest Green. The name is Savage—Clark Savage, Jr.”

“We're closed,” the Irishman said.

“That's obvious,” said Doc patiently. “Nevertheless, I have an appointment—”

“Nobody said anything to me,” the bank guard said. He continued to frown. Also, he appeared to be somewhat uneasy. He made no attempt to unlock the gate, but continued to be disturbed by the size of this stranger standing there.

He started to say grumblingly, “I ain't forgetting the trouble we had at the South Boston branch—”

A voice behind the guard, a woman's voice, said pleasantly, “It's quite all right, Reilly. Mr. Savage *does* have an appointment.”

The interior of the bank was a dark cavern behind the woman, and Doc Savage only caught a glimpse of her while the guard unlocked the heavy gate. Then, as he stepped inside into the cool vaulted room, he was able to observe her fully.

She was brunette, tall, slender, and probably in her late thirties, though he had found that he was never positive about women's ages. She wore an expensively tailored black gabardine suit and a white pleated waist beneath. He wondered if you would call her pretty. Attractive, yes—in a neat, quiet, subdued businesslike manner.

She smiled briefly in the way a perfect private secretary smiles. “This way, Mr. Savage,” she directed. “I'm sorry I forgot to tell Reilly. I planned to be at the door myself to let you in. Mr. Green asked me.”

They were moving down the length of the big banking room. Darkened tellers' cages were on either side. Their footsteps on the marble flooring echoed against the high walls.

“I'm Miss Lang,” she was saying. “I—”

“Velma Lang,” said Doc Savage. “Mr. Green's secretary.”

She glanced at him quickly. Her eyes were gray-green, quiet analytical eyes that gave evidence of intelligence. Her hair, parted straight through the middle, was done a little too severely. She had smooth fine skin and a delicate bone structure to her face. A beauty expert no doubt could accomplish startling changes in her appearance.

“Yes,” Doc explained, “five years ago, as I recall. I stopped off here for a board meeting. You were in the office when we all left. Green spoke to you a moment about something. He happened to mention your name.”

They had reached a wide, carpeted stairway at the rear of the banking room. Velma Lang paused momentarily before starting up the steps. “You have an unusual memory, Mr. Savage. All those years!”

Doc shrugged.

Though outwardly impersonal, businesslike, you could tell the remark had pleased her. There was a new expression in her eyes for the barest instant. They seemed just a trifle more green than gray.

Nothing further was said as they climbed the stairs.

VELMA LANG led the way along a balcony that bordered the stair wall. Up here the walls were paneled from floor to ceiling, dark wood, somber, in keeping with respectable Boston tradition. She entered an office that was also carpeted and there were fine prints in expensive black frames on the walls. There was a single large desk, and atop it a zippered briefcase lay open. Beside it rested a black hat, black gloves and a purse.

She moved toward an adjoining doorway that was closed. “I'll tell him—”

Doc waited. He noticed that it was the kind of desk that did not contain a typewriter section. Velma Lang was the executive type of secretary who had her own stenographer.

Doc heard her say something, announcing him. Her quiet-spoken words were quietly absorbed by the rich, quiet surroundings.

The man came out of the adjoining room and quickly approached Doc Savage with outstretched hand and an expression on his round, clean, bright face as if Doc were a wealthy relative arriving with a trunkful of gold.

“Lord, man!” exclaimed Ernest Green. “I'm glad you're here!”

Doc felt his hand worked up and down like a pump handle.

Velma Lang followed the banker out of the inner office. She stepped past them to her desk, closed the briefcase, picked up hat, purse and gloves. She waited quietly.

Ernest Green was a short, solid man with a round young-looking face and blond hair. There was an alert boyish expression about his pink face. It was his round brown eyes, sharp and bright as polished marbles, that gave a true indication of the man's capabilities.

Gripping Doc's arm, he urged him toward the private office. “We'll get right down to this,” he was saying.

His voice held a slight shrillness. The man was tense, you could tell. “God, man, I’m glad you came—”

He stopped saying that and swung back, his quick mind remembering the woman standing there. “Sorry, Velma,” he said with some apology. “You’re going up to the house, of course?”

“Yes.”

“You have those statements?”

She nodded. Doc saw her face above the short blond man’s head. He imagined her eyes, large and round, could be very expressive. But she had trained herself to be quiet, placid, efficient. Her entire manner was one of reserve.

“We’ll go over them tonight,” Ernest Green finished. “I’ll see you then, Velma—”

The woman said, “You won’t forget the two gentlemen who are waiting?”

Green jerked his blond head quickly. “I know, I know. In the board room?”

“I told them you would be tied up for a little. They said they didn’t mind waiting.”

“They shouldn’t!” The banker’s words popped out with rapidity. He was certainly keyed up about something. He glanced at Doc and flashed a tight smile. “Not when they want to borrow a hundred thousand, they shouldn’t mind. They can damn well wait.” Then, again to the woman, “Good-night, Velma.”

“Good-night.”

She glanced briefly at both men, that quiet impersonal look, and went out.

Green hurried into his own office and motioned to a heavy leather chair on the near side of a heavy, huge carved desk.

“Sit down, sit down,” he said to the bronze man.

He bounced around behind the desk and perched on the edge of a swivel chair, hands flat on the desk top, looking at Doc Savage. He stared for several seconds without saying a word, his round, bright brown eyes boring into Doc’s face.

The manner in which the banker sat, hands held palms down flat against the desk top, was a gesture to help steady jumpy nerves, Doc surmised.

“Now!” said Green, letting out his breath. “We can talk!”

## Chapter II

“YOU act,” commented Doc Savage, “as if someone were going to rob the bank.”

“That,” said the banker, “I could take.” He gave a half-sickly smile. “Insurance would cover a robbery. Insurance won’t cover me, however, or my reputation.”

“You?”

“I’m the one who is going to be robbed. A million, Mr. Savage—not counting my reputation.” He turned his hands over, palms up, then slapped them back on the desk top again. “Besides, I don’t have that kind of money. I’d be ruined . . . completely ruined!”

His eyes, shrewd, intense, thinking eyes, bored into Doc’s and waited for the bronze man’s reaction. Doc remained relaxed in his chair, knees crossed, studying the banker’s round pink face.

“And who plans to do all this wrecking?”

“My wife!”

“I thought—”

“You thought we were divorced?”

Doc nodded.

“Five years ago, it was,” Green explained tightly. “That was shortly after the last time you visited the bank.” He shook his blond head. “No, Mr. Savage, we were not divorced. Merely separated. It was a sort of a mutual understanding. The marriage was a complete mistake. We both agreed to that, Sybil and I. We just decided to call it quits, all very friendly, no ill feelings.”

“No settlement?”

“Nothing. Sybil had done some singing before we were married. Call her a show girl, if you like. Not really, though. A lovely, beautiful girl—nothing flashy, understand. You never met her, did you?”

Doc shook his head.

“Well, she was like that.” Ernest Green sighed. Talking seemed to loosen some of his tension. He reached behind him to a small carved wood cabinet, opened it, removed a flat teakwood cigarette case and offered one to Doc Savage. When the bronze man shook his head, the banker lit one for himself. He leaned forward and continued talking.

“No, Sybil asked for nothing. But the lure of radio fame or Hollywood was too great. She realized she couldn’t be both—an entertainer and the wife of a banker.”

“A Boston banker,” corrected Doc.

“Exactly. The Green name, you know—”

“Dates right back to Plymouth Rock, doesn’t it?”

Ernest Green smiled briefly. “My sister would have me wear the family coat-of-arms right on my coat sleeve. She has been an invalid for years, you know.” He turned his perfectly manicured hands over and back again. “But it was more than that. The bank here—the depositors—some of the city’s oldest families. Sybil was decent enough to understand all that. Banking and show business don’t go together in Boston.”

Doc unfolded his legs, the only indication that he was impatient for the man to finish his story. He saw Green’s face tighten up again, the expression of uneasiness in the back of his agate-brown eyes.

“So a few weeks ago it starts to happen. Letters from her, Sybil.” He opened a drawer of the huge desk

and started placing things in front of Doc Savage—several letters, a photograph, and what appeared to be a phonograph record in a large brown envelope. “More recently, phone calls right here to the bank. She's using an intermediary.”

“Who?”

Ernest Green crushed out the cigarette in an ash tray, straightened up in the big chair and gripped the edge of the desk.

“I haven't the slightest idea—yet. So far, the blackmail negotiations have been in the preliminary stage. Two days ago, however, she displayed one of her hole cards. She has something I can't ignore.” He was perspiring a little now. “One of those affairs while I was in my last year at Harvard, here. Every college student has one sooner or later. Somehow, she's managed to unearth it. *That* is the axe she's wielding over me, Mr. Savage.”

Doc said: “You thought I could do something?” He ignored the exhibits that had been pushed in front of him on the desk.

“Yes. Your work . . . your unusual organization with its facilities for unearthing things in a hurry. And I've got to move fast. She wants a million, cash, which I haven't got, and now she's becoming impatient. I've got to find some way to stop her—or stop the people who are putting her up to it.”

He came around the desk, like a man jerked along on strings, picked up letters, photograph and large envelope, shoving them into Doc's hands.

Doc Savage continued to ignore the things. “You say you think someone might be helping her?”

“You wonder,” said Ernest Green. “Five years ago she walked out of my life. Everything ended clean, finished. Then—this, all of a sudden. You figure it out.”

“No word from her in all that time?”

“Nothing.” The banker took another cigarette from the polished wooden case, put it between his lips, removed it without lighting it. “Oh, of course I kept track of her for awhile. She was singing at a club near Boston. Changed her name—her maiden name, which was damned decent of her. She spent a summer, part of it, in Vermont. Then—” He spread his hands. “Never heard from her again.”

“Until recently?”

His blond head jerked.

DOC SAVAGE stood up, his bronze features immobile. He still held the exhibits that Green had forced on him.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

The banker looked confused. “You mean—”

“You'll have to sell it to some one else,” Doc explained. “A good, reputable detective agency could handle it. The police, naturally, are out. There would be too many political angles.”

The banker's brilliant brown eyes still were puzzled. "I don't understand. You—your organization—have handled some of the toughest problems in the world. You accomplish things without publicity. In fact, you always *avoid* that sort of thing. Somewhere along the line you can stop her, or you can find out just who else is mixed up in it, and block their vicious purpose—"

Doc said quietly, "Don't misunderstand me, Green. I'm convinced you're telling it straight. I appreciate the spot you're in. But blackmail built around this sort of thing . . ." He broke off, moved his chair aside, indicating that he was quite finished with the interview. "I'm not having any. Sorry."

The executive seemed at a loss for words. Obviously he was accustomed to having people cater to him, because of his position. This was different. Doc Savage was different, somehow, than anyone he had ever met.

There was a soft discreet knock on the heavy door to the outer office. Ernest Green's marble eyes jerked that way, were annoyed, then apparently remembering Velma Lang's reminder about the other appointment, he hurried to the door and opened it a few inches.

A man's voice spoke quietly and briefly. The bank president nodded. "All right. Tell them right away."

He returned to speak to Doc. "That was my head cashier." He moved his immaculate hands impatiently. "This loan . . . two business men from out of town are waiting for me. All the details have been completed. I've never even met them. There just remains the formality of my signing the papers. A cash loan. It will only take me a moment."

He touched Doc Savage's arm briefly. "Wait, won't you? I'll drop you off at your hotel as soon as I'm finished. Better yet, we'll have dinner together." He swung toward the door and was already half across the threshold. "I'll be right back."

He was gone before Doc Savage could mention that he had his own coupé with him.

Doc found himself still holding the assorted items in his hands. Golden lights in his eyes flickered restlessly. Ordinarily, he disliked being rude to people. There was no doubt in his mind that Green's request was quite sincere. But it was the type of case any private "op" could handle.

So this delay irritated him slightly. Naturally the banker was hoping he could use high-pressure talk when he returned.

Doc wasn't buying. Not one part of it.

He dropped the letters on the desk without reading them. He opened the large heavy brown envelope. It was a personal recording, prepared by a small firm here in Boston. The title of the song and the singer's name had been typed on the circular paper disk glued to the record.

"The Last Time I Saw Paris." That was the title of the song. The singer: Lois Lee.

That would be the name Sybil, Green's wife, had used after they had separated. He had already mentioned it.

Doc placed the record on the desk also.

The photograph remained. He glanced at it once, started to put it on the desk, then drew his arm back and looked at the photo again.

A thoughtful somberness was in Doc's eyes as he studied the photograph. This woman was Sybil, and

she was beautiful. His mind, trained for exactness in all things, noted the perfect contour of the woman's features. He imagined the eyes were dark, as was the hair. Against this the skin would be very fair, ivory white, a soft, delicate, almost Latin type of beauty.

In the picture, Sybil stood beside a radio-phonograph cabinet, one arm resting on the machine. She had been looking directly toward whoever had taken the picture, and now, holding the photograph, it was as if she were looking directly at him. She was not tall. Her figure was small and perfectly formed.

But it was the face that held him. He took it apart mentally, put it back together again, and could find no flaw anywhere. Calmly beautiful, just the trace of a smile on the delicate small mouth, he imagined her a person of deep sensitivity. It was in the eyes.

A man could be mistaken, of course. Perhaps you couldn't completely judge character from a photograph, a picture that must have been taken at least five years ago—for the banker had said he had never seen his wife again since their separation.

And yet—yet Doc Savage could not quite conceive that a woman with that kind character mirrored in her eyes would be the instigator of a vicious blackmail plot such as Green had outlined.

Doc's gaze wandered from the photograph in his hand and stared across the room, as he turned the thought over in his mind. A faint mechanical hum abruptly disturbed the complete silence of the richly furnished office. He glanced up, saw the grill-covered outlet of an automatic air-conditioning system in the paneled wall. The whisper of sound came from there.

Gaze dropping again, his eyes came in line with the handsome Capehart radio-phonograph cabinet located against a far wall. Familiar details of the cabinet's construction touched a spark in his mind. Somewhere he had seen—

The photograph in his hand, of course. She—Sybil—had stood beside this very identical Capehart. It was the same room, the same background of dark paneled wall and beautiful polished phonograph combination.

Doc stood up. It wasn't so much curiosity that caused him to pick up the record as it was a desire to be doing something while he awaited the bank president's return. Anyway, he told himself, this was the only reason why he carried the recording over to the machine.

Women, as a rule, did not interest Doc Savage. They did not interest him for the simple reason that he would not allow himself to be fascinated by them. It was his work, the kind of career he followed. Adventure had taken him to every out-of-the-way corner of the world. Adventure in which there was always real danger. There was no place for a woman in that sort of life.

Placing the record on the turntable, he flicked a switch and turned the volume control down low. He moved back across the room and closed the door, which Green had left ajar.

Soft hum of the machine mingled with the faint whir of the air-conditioning system, which had not yet gone off again. Then the song started.

DOC SAVAGE stood there, head turned slightly, and it was almost as if someone were there in the room with him. Her! The rich, full-toned words of the song exactly matched the photograph, somehow. His thoughts visualized the fair, pale skin of her face, the large deep dark eyes.

A few years ago you heard the song everywhere. But never exactly the way it was being sung now. The song brought Sybil Green there into the quiet room, her serene pale beauty—beauty, he thought, that could deeply affect many men.

No need to glance at the photograph again. He saw her vividly. She was there, almost, her ivory white face framed against the dark background of the room, a room that was almost in darkness now, for night had settled down outside.

A face as white as a delicate flower set against a background of soft black velvet. A gardenia, for instance. Doc shook his head slightly. Odd that he should think that. A gardenia. Almost as though he smelled the deep, rich fragrance of the flower itself . . .

Then, in the next instant, he rocked back on his heels as a sudden, flat, harsh sound cut through the soft, hauntingly sad words that floated in the room.

He was startled, momentarily, by the foreign sound. Certainly it had not come from the machine . . .

Moving agilely across the deep-carpeted room, he glanced down at the revolving disk. That vague, elusive smell of gardenia, as if she were there!

“Acting like a moon-struck bobby soxer!” Doc reprimanded himself. He lifted the needle from the record and shut off the instrument. A car backfire from outside, that sound, no doubt. Good thing for him. He had spent enough time here . . .

Silence enveloped the large austere room as the song ended. Even the faint whirr of the air-conditioning system had stopped.

It came again!

A flat, somewhat muffled crack. Not from outside. Right here somewhere inside the bank building. From somewhere beyond the closed door to the outer office!

Doc listened intently. Seconds whispered past. Nothing further, only silence.

Then he was whipping toward the door, every sense alert.

The two foreign sounds, he realized now, had been the noise a gun makes when it is held close to an object and fired!

### Chapter III

DOC hurried through the outer room that was Velma Lang's office. The door to the bank balcony was open. He went out there, the heavy carpeting muffling his steps, his quick eyes watchful in the semi-darkness of the bank. In front of the building, light from a high street arc lamp sent pale lemon-colored glow through frosted windows at the front of the long balcony. Heavy bars outside the narrow windows, breaking into the lamp glow, sent the faint light beams fanning across the ceiling like spears.

Three seconds had probably passed since Doc Savage spun away from the phonograph-radio in Green's

office. Now his hand touched the balcony railing. He found himself half on tiptoe, listening.

No sound.

Velma Lang had mentioned the board room, and the two business men who were waiting there. That would be down along this side of the balcony. He slipped that way, his quick, quiet movements blending with the shadows.

From his memory, long trained to file details away in orderly fashion, Doc called upon that day, five years ago, when he had last stopped here and sat in at a board-room meeting. Third door down from the office he'd just left!

He discovered the door open. He saw the bulky, elliptical shaped outline of the large board room table. No light was turned on in the room. It seemed to be deserted.

Nevertheless, he used caution. There still had been not a breath of sound throughout the entire, morgue-like bank building.

Doc's entrance into the large room was so quick and softly smooth that his frame, momentarily sketched against the faint light coming into the balcony, was visible only a scant instant. Then he paused again, motionless, listening.

The odor of cigar smoke was distinct—an odor that was already turning stale. Doc held his breath. He held it long enough to outlast that of anyone else who might also be trying the same ruse.

He would have heard a man breathing. His senses, long ago developed to be more acute in every way than other men's, heard nothing. No one was in the room. His fingers reached out, found the wall light switch, his other hand closing the balcony door silently before he flicked the button.

Clusters of lights came on in wall brackets. The broad, highly polished board room table was as clean as a windswept frozen mill-pond in winter—except for the single ash tray. Doc spent a precious moment swerving across the room to examine it.

The tray contained a single cigarette butt of the type Ernest Green himself smoked. He had noted the brand when the banker had offered him one. There were some gray cigar ashes in the tray, but no cigar. Whoever had been smoking the cigar still carried it.

Doc snapped off the lights, opened the door again and reached the wide staircase. He went down the steps swiftly and silently, ready to hurl himself down flat against the padded steps should there be a sudden attack.

The complete silence, following so closely upon the two gunshots spaced only seconds apart, warned him of stalking, nearby danger. *Surely someone was still here!*

He reached the base of the stairs. Light came through the front doors, reached halfway into the long main room of the bank, ended in shadows that crawled off in various directions.

One of the shadows moved slightly.

Doc's alert eyes barely caught the movement as his gaze swept the long room. His attention riveted on the spot.

It was a man, lying there, and the figure had moved. A sigh, a sort of weary kind of sound, followed. The figure continued to remain prone.

Doc whipped through the big room, bent down. Reilly, the guard!

The big Irishman was on his back. A dark smear covered one side of his forehead. He stared up dazedly and tried to paw for his gun holster as he saw the big frame of the man bending down above him.

“Easy,” murmured Doc softly. “Let me see.”

Recognition came into the guard's eyes. Doc felt the man's head, gently but expertly. Then he moved legs and arms. No bones were broken. “You weren't shot?” His voice, the words, would not have been audible more than five feet away.

“Slugged,” said the big guard. “Someone came up behind me.” Sensing Doc's caution and tenseness, he kept his voice low. “One of those two!”

The bronze man did not ask for an explanation until he was positive the guard was not seriously injured. When Reilly climbed to his feet, though unsteady, Doc knew he was all right. He pulled the big man back into the shadows, talked quickly and softly. “Who?”

“Those two!” repeated Reilly. “The ones who came in about the loan. They came downstairs after awhile with Mr. Green. I was going to let them out the front way. They were with—”

He broke off, gave a start, held fiercely to Doc's arm. “Mason, the cashier! Where is he? Mason was with them too!”

Doc remembered the bank president's comment after someone had knocked discreetly on his office door, reminding him of the appointment in the board room. That would have been Mason, the head cashier.

Reilly was saying, “They were going toward the back exit. It leads to the alleyway where Mr. Green sometimes parks his car. I was just coming to meet them. I thought everything was all right. Then—one of them used a blackjack.”

“Who?”

Reilly shook his head.

Doc said quietly, “Give me your gun,” and started back through the long room. The .38 was cool against his hand. Then, as the darkness ahead thickened, he ordered, “Light—and watch yourself.”

Reilly already had the flashlight in his hand. He moved to the left, allowing Doc Savage space in which to act fast if need be, snapped on the beam.

Beyond the wide stairs, an aisle continued through the length of the bank. On either side a waist-high railing enclosed a bookkeeping department. There was another stairway at the rear, leading below.

“Vaults down there,” said Reilly. He motioned. “Over there's the rear exit.”

They turned right, in the aisle still enclosed by the railing, approached a door that was closed.

“Here, offered Reilly, moving up beside Doc Savage, opening the door and revealing a heavy, barred

gate beyond. He added, puzzled, "Locked too!" Then, "Of course Mr. Green has keys. They could have forced him to—"

He stopped talking, turned his head in the direction Doc was looking. The aisle continued past the rear exit for half a dozen feet, ended at the side wall of the room.

Within this space, between railing and wall, lay the doubled-up figure.

"Mason!" gasped Reilly, and looking, gray eyes sick with horror, he crossed himself.

The head cashier was dead. He had died clutching his stomach, where one of the shots had entered. The other had made a small neat puncture in his forehead.

The two spaced shots Doc had heard, not loud, because they had been fired at very close range. The sound of neither would have carried outside to the street.

BESIDE them, where the rear exit door stood open and only the heavy, barred gate cut them off from the night, there came the faint assorted sounds of evening traffic on nearby Tremont Street. The familiar sounds, drifting into the taut stillness of the bank, seemed to bring the gray-haired guard back to reality.

"The police!" he cried. He added an odd remark, "I knew it! I knew it! Ever since that South Boston thing—"

Doc touched the big man's arm gently but with some command. "Just a minute." He peered out through the barred door into the dark, cool night. He couldn't see a thing. "It will take the police time to get here. Every minute is important." He turned, his eyes questioning. "You said Mr. Green oftentimes parks his car in the alley—"

Immediately the guard was jerking his head. "His new one. It attracts too much attention. He just bought it . . . that is, he just got delivery on it a month ago. So, most of the time—"

"Wait." Doc's tone was clipped and tense. He remembered the chauffeur driving the car into the alleyway just up the street from the bank. "Is it a custom-built job with porthole-type rear windows?"

"That's it," said Reilly.

"The chauffeur? Tall bony fellow without eyebrows?"

Again the bank guard's head jerked. "Jenkins. Mr. Green just hired him after he got the car. Some sort of scalp trouble, Jenkins told me last week, made him lose his hair a long time ago. He—"

He saw the tightness of the bronze man's jaw, the muscles ridged beneath the cheekbones. "What are you thinking?" he asked quickly.

The incidents, insignificant at the time, were revealing themselves quickly in Doc Savage's mind like changing, brightly illuminated pictures in a penny arcade machine.

He said: "There was one other one . . . a fussy little nervous man. He seemed to know this Jenkins, the chauffeur?"

But Reilly was shaking his head, pale-gray eyes curious.

“I don't know what you mean—”

“Never mind,” finished Doc. He indicated the barred gate. “Can you unlock this? Then call the police. After that telephone the Copley-Plaza hotel and ask for a Mr. Ham Brooks. He's an associate of mine. Ask him to come here.”

“But—”

“I might,” said Doc impatiently, “pick up their trail while you're waiting for the police. We can't lose time, not one minute.”

Reilly's big rawboned hand was trembling as he fitted a large key into the lock and opened the heavy iron gate. It swung outward. There were steps leading down. Doc passed him the .38. “Give me the light instead. You might need the gun.”

“How about you?”

Doc took the light, shot the beam downward. Four steps led down to a passage between high walls. The area-way cut uphill. A narrow rectangular slash in the building wall a hundred feet up the hill showed where the alleyway cut into the walk behind the building. The light beam, bathing walls and narrow walk in a naked glare, revealed only emptiness.

Doc went down the steps, fixed the direction in his mind, snapped off the light and padded lightly through the blackness. His steps were unerring. Behind him, he heard the heavy gate close with a thud of finality.

He was estimating the time that had passed since he had heard the gunshots. Perhaps five minutes. At least four men were involved. The two who had kept the business appointment, whom he had not seen. The chauffeur, the one the guard had called Jenkins, a gaunt man without eyebrows. Then there was the dapper, fussy little man who had been waiting outside the cigar shop, and who obviously knew Jenkins.

And Ernest Green was their captive.

Or was he?

Doc had not overlooked that part of it. That story in the banker's office, the buildup . . . could it be a cleverly arranged scheme of some sort? Stranger things had happened. There was only one way to find out the answer.

Find Green himself.

It would have taken them time to get a captive to the car, quietly, this back way. Only moments had passed . . .

Doc reached the mouth of the alleyway, swung left toward Park Place. There was some light coming in from the other end. His movements were soundless, and his figure, the smoothly flowing motion, blended with the shadows close to the building walls.

But he was too late. Caution, now, was unnecessary.

The car was gone.

HE thought he must have missed the car by only a moment or so, for the smell of gasoline fumes still hung in the alleyway. Whoever had driven the custom-built sedan, in his haste at a fast getaway, had used the “choke” in order to prime the engine quickly. Thus the lingering gasoline odor.

Doc stood there a moment, a plan of pursuit forming in his mind. The machine's ultra-modern design should help him. He imagined that it was one of the first post-war models of its kind. The moment he reached his own, parked right out front, he'd contact . . .

Strangely, he found his feet still rooted to the spot. Ordinarily he would have swung into action, now that the plan was formulated. Something held him there.

It wasn't the odor of gasoline. This other was more elusive, vagrant . . . touching him with the softness of a drifting feather.

Gardenia!

Upstairs, alone in the banker's private office, listening to the haunting words of Sybil's song, he had thought he had imagined noticing the odor. He'd decided it was a trick of the imagination, song and picture of her combining to delude him.

But no! It *had* been there, just as he caught it now, already fading, quickly drifting away into nothingness.

And he understood how it could have happened the first time. The air-conditioning system, of course! He recalled the soft hum as it had switched on while he was there in the quiet room. Somehow the gardenia smell had been picked up by the air-circulating system, to be gently wafted through the bank to that room where he had stood alone.

Doc was moving swiftly toward his car, parked facing up the hill, a one-way narrow street leading over Beacon Hill. His mind kept turning the thought over. Gardenia. Strange! What was the explanation? What significance did it carry?

He temporarily filed the incident away in his thoughts as he swung into his car. Right now there was urgency. Later, he could think about this other thing . . .

The coupé was Doc's own specially constructed job. It contained various equipment built right into the interior. Exteriously, the car looked like a well-known, fairly heavy pre-war model. Nothing too modern or rakish about it. Inside, though, the most up-to-date gadgets—including two-way short-wave radio.

Doc was already tuning into the Boston short-wave police band as he sent the car up the hill. He was positive the custom-built sedan had not gone in the other direction. That would have led to busy Tremont Street, well lighted, with too many people nearby. Also, the sedan would have been going against the one-way traffic. That, too, would have attracted attention.

Radio tubes warmed up. He picked up the police dispatcher at headquarters. The man was busy giving out routine orders. A fight in a bar in South Boston. A description of a missing child . . .

Doc lifted the portable hand mike and spoke to the dispatcher. He identified himself. For an instant the dispatcher was confused.

“Who? Doc Savage! But where—”

Doc explained briefly. He was well known at police departments in major cities. In fact, he carried honorary police commissions from several of them.

Then, still driving up the long Beacon Hill street, Doc quickly mentioned the bank killing and kidnapping of Ernest Green. As he was talking he brought the coupé to a stop at a main thoroughfare which bordered the far side of Boston Common. He debated following the winding narrow streets of crowded Beacon Hill, beyond the through street, or turning left. Left was the logical move. It offered the speediest escape route from Park Place. He thought perhaps whoever was driving the custom-built sedan would have figured similarly.

The receiver crackled as the dispatcher cut in again.

“We’re already there at the bank, Mr. Savage. First prowl car just reported in. Detective squad is on the way.”

Doc said, “Good . . .” Then: “I’ll describe the kidnap sedan. Then I want you to broadcast it city-wide to every prowl car. Surely one of your cars will pick it up. Otherwise, trail it and report route and direction.”

“Get you!” said the police dispatcher. He waited while Doc Savage described exact details of the unusual-appearing sedan. He cut back in:

“Keep tuned to me, Mr. Savage. I’ll relay every report that comes in.”

“Roger,” said Doc. He slowed down for a stop sign. It was a cross street, a main thoroughfare.

He debated only an instant. To the right, only a short distance away, was a concourse that followed the Charles River out toward the suburbs. It was a speedy through route out of the city. He swung that way.

But he drove slowly. Perhaps his figuring was all wrong. There was nothing to do but bide his time now, waiting for the first reports of the dispatcher—if any.

## Chapter IV

DOC swung, finally, onto the concourse along the river. The lights of Charlestown flickered across the narrow Charles. Early evening traffic flowed along. The air was cool, a little damp, with some of the tang and saltiness of the ocean coming in on the slight wind.

Doc’s plan was simple. It was a method that could be used in any large city where there was two-way police radio. And it was the only device that was effective when the escape car was faster than ordinary police prowl cars.

As the sleek custom-built sedan no doubt was!

He’d wait until the dispatcher got the first reports of any police spotting the car. He’d compare one report with the other. Should enough reports come in, then he’d be able to visualize probable route and direction the sedan was taking.

Working this way, having the reports all come to him, Doc had an advantage over the individual police prowl cars. Each would try to overtake the sedan. Perhaps none would be successful.

Doc himself would not give chase—not directly. He hoped, if his plan worked, to get *ahead* of the sedan

and block it off!

In preparation, he removed several city maps from the glove compartment of the coupé. There was one which showed the city of Boston and the outlying suburbs. He spread this out on the seat beside him, removed the flashlight—which Reilly, the bank guard, had given him—and placed it beside the map.

The flashlight reminded him that he had returned big Reilly's .38. Doc was carrying no weapon himself. He reached down, his right hand feeling beneath the dashboard beside the steering wheel. There was a hidden compartment there, cleverly built into the car. And there were several guns in the compartment.

He selected a pistol with a long barrel, a target pistol with a good range. Doc slid the long barrel down inside his belt, beneath his suit coat.

Ten minutes passed. No word from the police dispatcher. The radio was silent. Somewhere in this great city a man was a captive. An important man. Already another man had been murdered in cold blood.

The obvious motive was robbery. Two men—strangers whom Doc had not yet seen—had supposedly kept an appointment with Ernest Green in order to receive a large cash loan. The banker himself had mentioned that everything was ready for the borrowers and the only remaining formality was his own signing of the papers.

Then—something had gone wrong. The head cashier was dead. Green was a kidnap victim, or so it appeared.

To Doc, his mind turning the facts over and over, re-sorting them, there was something unexplainable about the entire case . . . questions that he first needed answered.

One person could help him.

Velma Lang, the banker's personal secretary. He remembered Green's comment about meeting Velma Lang later this evening, apparently at his home. Doc knew the banker's address up on Beacon Hill, an old residential section where gloomy stone houses enclosed by high iron fences had stood, stolid and substantial, for many decades. Perhaps Velma Lang could tell him something that would save hours of delay. Maybe he should have seen her at once . . .

The radio speaker crackled. The dispatcher's voice came on again.

“Mr. Savage?”

DOC had reached for the portable microphone the instant the speaker gave its warning sputter.

“Ready,” said Doc.

“I think we're on it, sir,” the dispatcher continued. “Two cruisers have reported seeing it.”

Doc immediately swung the coupé into the curb, out of traffic, stopped, reached for the flashlight. He shifted the mike to his left hand.

“All right,” he directed.

“WHERE are you now, Mr. Savage?”

Doc named a street just ahead. He could read the name on the metal sign beneath a boulevard light. He was somewhat surprised that he had traveled so far into the Back Bay section while awaiting word from the police dispatcher. “I have a map in front of me,” he explained. “What have you got?”

The dispatcher's voice picked up interest. “Perfect!” he stated. “The sedan must have covered that same route.” He named a main highway route less than a mile ahead of the spot where Doc was now temporarily parked.

“They crossed the bridge there. The squad car cruising that district remembers the sedan. It was going north on that route.”

Doc studied the city map as the dispatcher spoke. “Yes?” he said into the mike.

“They didn't know anything was wrong, naturally, but they remembered the car after I put it on the air.” He gave Doc a state route number. “The sedan's still headed north, on that same route. It rolled through a business section out there less than ten minutes ago. Again, though, the boys out that way didn't know it was hot. They merely remember the car because of its fancy design. Right now they're breezing after it. I'm waiting for another report.”

Doc checked the map carefully, snapped off the light, laid it aside.

“It looks obvious,” he said.

“Yes,” agreed the dispatcher. “Haverhill.” It was a town north of Boston, not too far. “They're following the logical route into that town.”

“Perhaps too obvious,” said Doc Savage.

“You think they'll try some tricks?”

“Possibly.” Doc's mind retained a photographic impression of that section of the map he'd just studied. “There's a cross-country highway they might use . . . approximately five miles above the point they were last seen. It would keep them away from the towns. They might swing off there.”

“I was just thinking of that, Mr. Savage.” He informed Doc that he, too, had a map spread before him and was trying to figure the possible route that the sedan might follow. “The car's getting out of our territory. I'm trying to raise the county or state police.”

“Are you powerful enough for that?”

The dispatcher explained that certain areas could be contacted from the police tower. “I think I can reach some of the boys out there in the county. Hold on. . . .”

His voice went off the air momentarily.

Meanwhile, as the terse conversation had gone on, Doc was wheeling the fast coupé along the road again. He reached the right turn over the Charles River bridge, was northbound now. Traffic dropped behind him and he let the machine out.

Two minutes later the dispatcher came on again. “I think it's going to work, Mr. Savage,” he said, and his tone hinted excitement.

“You raised the county police?”

“Yes. They're moving in now from two directions. We've got the northbound route blocked. I've also got a county squad moving in from the west, along that other route.” He named route numbers. “They won't be able to go very far west, either!”

Doc was encouraged. He slowed down a little, flicked on the light and took his gaze from the road ahead an instant to glance at the map. Then his hopes went into a tailspin.

“Two miles ahead there, on the westbound highway,” he pointed out. The section of the countryside was clear in his mind as he watched the road again, sending the car thundering ahead. “They've got one loophole. There's a turnoff that leads south—right back toward the city, though a little west. They can sneak through there if they are not blocked from the west in time. You think they are headed west?”

“Damn!” said the dispatcher grimly. He added, “Yes . . . wait a minute. Here's another report coming in. . . .”

In less than a minute, he was talking again. “They turned west, all right. Report just in from the county car I had planted on the Haverhill route. Now, if we can only block them westbound . . .”

Doc said quickly, “They can still make that cut-off to the south. Can't you raise anyone down there?”

“I've been trying. Sometimes we hit dead spots on the radio out there in the country.”

“Keep trying,” advised Doc. Then he explained his next move. “There's a highway not far ahead I can use. It will bring me in south of them if they do sneak through that one loophole. Then we'll have them bottlenecked. There will be no possible escape.”

“Good!” exclaimed the dispatcher. “That's open country out there. No other through roads at all. Give me your license number, model and make, Mr. Savage, and I'll clear you so you can highball straight through.”

Doc described his low-slung coupé and gave the license number.

“Luck to you,” said the police dispatcher.

And shortly Doc Savage swung left, following a route that formed the third and lower side of a triangle in which the custom-built sedan was enclosed.

Soon, now, the noose would close.

THE night was cool, the air clear now. There was no dampness. Tires made a sound like a thin, shrill whistle against the pavement. Doc left a small suburban community behind him, rolled into open country. He checked the speedometer carefully, counting off the miles.

Soon he made the turn north. He was on the route now, the only highway along which the sedan could turn south. He had estimated there were at least seven or eight more miles to go before he would be in the vicinity of the car in which the banker was a captive.

Wind cutting past the open window beside Doc brought a foreign sound with it. Glancing sideways his attention was attracted upwards. He saw the red and green riding lights of an airplane. He caught the

throb of its twin engines. The plane was flying low.

Shortly another plane—he knew it was a plane because he saw the tail-light blinking on and off—came into his line of vision farther off. It was higher, climbing away into the night.

He used the flashlight to glance briefly at the map again. He saw the area marked on the map. Of course! There had been a routine CAA report on it recently in his mail. The field, a large one, was not far ahead on this route. It was one of the new auxiliary airfields made necessary by increased air traffic in the out of Boston. The Hub city's regular municipal airport had already proved inadequate to handle the great surge of postwar air travel.

Some of the overseas airlines, for instance, were finding runways too short for the huge 4-engine jobs like the Constellation.

Presently the field marker lights came into view. He saw the spaced red lights that outlined the area. He glanced again at the speedometer. Only two miles, now, to the east-west highway where the sedan would have been forced to turn off.

His hopes rose. No car had yet intercepted him coming south. Still there had been no further word from the police dispatcher, over the air. But he remembered the remark about dead spots in the air, out here in the country. That probably explained it.

Above the throb of the coupé's powerful engine came a greater, louder sound. In the next instant the airplane passed directly over him, engines a mighty roar in his ears. Doc glanced out the window. The big ship had just taken off from the nearby field and was climbing. He recognized one of the new air freight transports that were becoming popular in the industry. Across the country capable young flyers recently out of the air corps were going into the air freight business. It was a new, booming postwar field.

Suddenly Doc found his eyes riveted on one of the red marker lights far ahead, on the side of the airfield bordering the highway he was following. Instead of glowing steadily, the red light blinked on, off, on again. And it was moving.

Then he knew it wasn't one of the field lights at all. A county police car, its red spotlight flashing on and off! And coming right down the highway.

Doc hastily slowed the coupé, brought it to a stop, switched his own headlamps on and off to attract attention, then swung from behind the wheel.

He was no sooner in the roadway than the oncoming car bore down upon him. Rubber squealed against the pavement. He recognized the police emblem painted on the side of the machine.

A TALL, lean-waisted man in a smart uniform swung out of the car. He moved like a man with

well-conditioned muscles. His right hand rested on his gun holster.

The county patrol officer looked Doc Savage over carefully. Behind him, another officer sat in the police car. There was the sound of a voice speaking over a loudspeaker. The second man waiting in the car said something in reply. Doc could not quite hear what he said.

The cautious look left the officer's lean face.

"You're Doc Savage," he stated.

Doc nodded.

Calling back to his companion inside the police car, the officer said, "Okay, Ludwig. Tell them we've met Savage." He held out his hand. "Name's Blake . . . Sam Blake."

Doc shook hands.

Sam Blake said, "They didn't get past you?"

"Nothing," announced Doc. "I haven't passed a car." He frowned. "You didn't cut them off?"

The county officer, somewhat to Doc's surprise, nodded. "That sedan was seen, all right. We managed to get it blocked off three ways, but it managed to slip through to this south bound route. Hell, we were right on their tail a few miles back! That crate could roll." He was puzzled. "Dammit, you don't hide a job as conspicuous as that one behind a tree! Besides, there's no trees."

"You're positive you tagged the right car?"

Blake nodded.

"Boston police headquarters relayed all the information to our county radio station out here."

He motioned toward the car from which came the sound of the radio. "That's Ludwig, my partner, talking to them now. We were told to watch for you too. That's how I knew." His direct, level eyes held a certain amount of admiration. "I guess I would have recognized you regardless."

While he listened, Doc Savage's gaze was sweeping across the wide, flat, dark breadth of the airport. The field was probably two miles overall, bordering this highway, and another mile deep. Open country surrounded it. A sharp breeze swept across the open plain and set up a weird hum in thin strands of rural telephone lines strung overhead.

Doc motioned across the wide airport. "Any roads they might have used back there?"

"There's only one, a dirt road. It doesn't lead any place except around the airport. They're still working on a new runway here, and a construction company uses the road for hauling stuff." Anticipating Doc's question, he added: "We sent one of the cars back that way, just in case."

"We might," suggested Doc, "drive around there."

"It won't do any harm," said Blake.

Doc climbed back behind the wheel, swung the long coupé around in the highway, followed the county car to a point a quarter of a mile south. Then it turned left and followed a dusty roadway at the boundary of the airfield.

Materials for building a fence around the field were stacked at intervals. A new hangar was under construction.

A mile in from the main highway the county police car swung left again. This back road, recently built, was rutted and bumpy from heavy trucks passing over it. Progress was slow.

Midway along the back stretch of road they intercepted the other county car. Doc was close behind Blake's machine when it drew up. Blake spoke to two officers who were in the car that he had sent around the airport from the opposite direction.

"Not a trace of them," Doc heard an officer report. "They sure did a disappearing act!" Then the speaker asked, "You report it to the radio station, Sam?"

Blake said in the night, "We've got every car in the county out. That sedan won't get far."

"Hell!" said the other officer. "It's already gone. But *where*?"

Everyone was puzzled.

FOLLOWING an order from Blake, who appeared to be in charge, the second county car moved on. Blake came back to Doc's car and said, "We'll drive around and talk to the airport manager."

Five minutes later they pulled into the part of the airport where most of the hangers were clustered. There was some movement of air traffic. A private charter plane came in and landed. Some distance away a big, fat-bodied freight job was loading.

The airport manager was a round, efficient, particularly bald man with a worried expression in his eyes.

In response to Blake's questioning, he said, "I've got enough troubles without watching out for fancy-looking cars racing up and down the highway. We've been busy tonight."

Doc spoke up. "Would you mind if I talked to your man in the tower?"

The manager frowned. "It isn't customary—"

"This is Doc Savage," said Sam Blake. "He happens to own a couple of well-known airlines."

"Well, gosh!" said the stout little manager, staring at Doc. "I'm sorry. . . . Sure, you go right ahead up there."

Doc left them momentarily, moving along a pedestrian walk that led to the control tower of the field. He was gone perhaps five minutes.

When he returned, Sam Blake said, "That Boston police dispatcher has been calling. Wants to speak to you."

Doc went to his coupé, leaned inside, picked up the mike of the short-wave set. The set was still tuned to the Boston station. He identified himself.

The dispatcher's familiar voice came on, "Message for you, Mr. Savage. One of your associates—Mr. Brooks—called me from the bank. He and a partner of his are down there now with our men."

“Have they found out anything?” asked Doc.

“Not one lead,” answered the dispatcher. “I understand the boys out there ran up against a blank wall, too. What do you imagine happened to that custom-built sedan?”

Doc said, “It appears to be quite a mystery.”

“About this message . . .” the voice came back on the speaker. “That banker's secretary, Miss Lang, wants to see you. The boys contacted her at Green's home, but she couldn't help them any. Guess she left the bank before the trouble.”

“That's correct,” said Doc.

“Well, anyway, she wants to see you as quickly as possible. Something she wouldn't tell the boys. You aren't holding out on us, are you, Savage?”

Doc said grimly, “Believe me, I'm as completely in the dark as anyone.”

“I don't know what this secretary has,” the dispatcher said.

“We'll see. I'm leaving here immediately,” Doc told him.

A few moments later he was rolling out of the airport. He left Sam Blake in charge of the search for the sedan in which wealthy Ernest Green had been a passenger. Blake was organizing all his forces to comb the countryside thoroughly.

“It's the damnedest thing,” Blake had said. “That car has to show *some* place!”

Doc wondered what Velma Lang had to tell him. Would it help explain a fantastic idea that had come to his own mind?

## Chapter V

THE man seated on the far side of the huge board room table of the bank was massive. His long arms were stretched on either side of him, hands resting on the table, and somehow this seemed to make the big table shrink in size.

His name was Higgins. He was an immense round man—round face, round smoothly bald head, round gimlet eyes. He looked fat, but he wasn't

You could tell that when you watched his features. There was no flabbiness to the jowls. When he spoke, only his lips moved. When he stood up once, to reach for a paper lying amidst a litter of scattered papers at the far end of the table, his movements were smooth and quick. His motions were as precise as a piece of machinery operating efficiently in a well-defined pattern.

Higgins, the lieutenant of detectives, glanced briefly at the sheet of paper, placed it aside, looked across the table at the man seated there facing him. There was a remote speculation in his deep-set gimlet eyes.

“What'd you say your name was?”

“Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair.

“All right, little man,” said Higgins. “Now I’ll ask you again . . . how come Doc Savage is interested in this thing?”

“I told you I didn’t even know—”

“You said that before,” Higgins cut him off coolly. “You tell me why Doc Savage was right here on the spot when a man was murdered tonight?”

“He happens to know Ernest Green, the president here, and Doc Savage happened to be in town so he merely happened to stop by to say hello.”

“And it happens you said that before.”

“I’m saying it again.”

“Don’t give me a runaround, little man.” Higgins leaned back and stared across the table carefully. There was a hardness about him—eyes, face, body.

Monk Mayfair, one of the group of five associates who worked with Doc Savage, jumped to his feet. He stared back. “I’m telling you!” he snorted.

A short, extremely wide man, Monk Mayfair had the build and appearance of a burly ape in some respects. His mouth was large, his eyes small, his forehead deceptively inadequate. His clothes were the kind worn by a sideshow barker.

By profession, he was an industrial chemist with quite a reputation. By preference he led a life of excitement as a member of Doc’s organization. He liked adventure. He liked nothing better than a good fight. For two cents he’d punch this tough cop right in the nose. He wished Higgins wasn’t quite so damned big.

“This,” said the lieutenant of detectives, “happens to be Boston. I came up the hard way, little man. I fought my way up and this is my territory and I’m going to dam’ well run it my way. Nobody interferes.”

“Who said anybody was butting in?” demanded Monk. His small eyes, usually humorous, flashed with fire.

Higgins looked him over with some more speculation. His eyes were unreadable. He sat there, a mountain of a man, as solid as stone.

Silence hung in the room.

Finally Higgins said, “All right, you go send that partner of yours in here. I’ll talk to you again later, little man.”

Monk’s powerful fists were clenched as he stalked out of the room. He moved along the balcony, hearing the voices of cops talking downstairs in the main part of the bank. He entered the secretary’s office and continued on through to the large quiet room beyond.

HAM BROOKS, his partner, was waiting there. He was a dapper, carefully dressed man, slender but

with a capable pair of shoulders. A grin touched his wide, mobile mouth as he saw the expression on Monk's face.

"What happened?" he asked. "Did Higgins work you over?"

"I'll 'little man' him!" said Monk, snorting.

"You'll what?"

"I'll take him apart, that cop!"

Ham burst into laughter. "I think, my friend, you have met your equal at last. Higgins is no lad to shove around." He chuckled again. "I could just see the two of you in there. I knew exactly what was going to happen—"

"You did? Well, I'll bet you can't guess what's going to happen this very next minute, you blasted low-down shyster. I'm gonna—"

Swiftly, the smartly dressed man said, "Careful! There's a lady present!"

Monk turned, following his partner's warning gaze. He saw her standing there, slim and serene and with the kind of large grayish-green eyes he liked. Instantly his manner changed. A grin spread over his homely face.

"Hi," he said.

Velma Lang said, "Your friend was telling me about you. You're Monk?"

Ham, reluctantly, introduced him to Velma Lang. Monk said, "Whatever he told you about me, wasn't true. I'll bet he even told you—"

"We were talking about Doc Savage," said Velma Lang.

"Oh!" Monk's expression sobered. "Has Doc got back yet?"

Velma Lang's manner was quiet and reserved, but in her large eyes you could catch an expression of urgency. "No," she said. "I must see him. I've been trying to reach him—first."

"First?" It was Ham who asked the question.

"Before those horrible police ask stupid questions," said the secretary. "Mr. Green would be furious if I told them anything. That's why he called in Doc Savage. I don't know much about it, but I know a little, and there's something I must tell Doc Savage immediately."

Ham explained for his partner's benefit: "Miss Lang was asked to come down here. Higgins sent for her. She just hurried down from Beacon Hill while you were in there with him."

"That reminds me," Monk told him. "Higgins wants you in there right now." A grin touched his large mouth again as he accompanied Ham to the doorway and patted him on the shoulder. "Take your time, old man." He winked. "I'll keep Miss Lang company."

Ham, grimacing, went out.

Velma Lang said, "He's quite well known, isn't he?"

Monk jerked a thumb toward the closed door to the outer office. "Him?"

She nodded. He wished she'd smile. He'd bet she was damned pretty when she smiled.

"I hate to admit it," Monk said, "but I guess he is. He's one of the most distinguished lawyers Harvard Law School ever turned out. That's why we happened to be up here for a few days. We drove up from New York. He was a speaker last night before a group of law students from all over the world who are attending a special class at Harvard. He's pretty good."

A CERTAIN amount of admiration had crept into the homely chemist's voice. He and Ham Brooks, really, were an inseparable pair. Yet, together, they seldom had a friendly word for one another. Ham fancied himself the well-dressed man about town, which he no doubt was. Monk always appeared as if he had slept out in the rain in borrowed clothes. They had one important thing in common—an attractive girl tempted them like a flower draws bees. Which probably explained the angry buzzing that went on between them when a person as serenely attractive as Velma Lang came on the scene.

Monk took his eyes off Velma Lang's face long enough to try to remember what it was he was trying to remember. Then it came to him—the remark she had made a moment ago.

"You said," he prompted, "you wanted to see Doc Savage before Higgins questioned you? What happened, really? I mean, why was Ernest Green kidnapped? Who shot the head cashier?"

Velma Lang stood stiffly, looking at him, and she kept shaking her head back and forth slowly as if dazed.

"I don't know," she murmured. "I don't know. It . . . it's so horrible. I talked to Reilly a moment on the way into the bank just a few moments ago. He's the guard. They were taking him home. They were afraid he might have a slight concussion. He told me the little bit he knew."

Monk waited. The girl was shaken.

She continued: "Reilly says he was waiting to let them out of the building. They were coming downstairs—Mr. Green, the cashier and the two gentlemen who had an appointment here with Mr. Green. We were closed, of course—Reilly had the lights turned off too—and he says suddenly someone struck him down with a blackjack. The next thing he knew Doc Savage was bending over him—"

Monk tensed. "Doc was right here when it happened?"

She nodded. "I had left only a few moments before. Mr. Savage was here in this office with Mr. Green. I can imagine what happened. These two men were waiting to see my employer. Mr. Savage probably waited in here. If he had the door closed, he no doubt didn't know what was happening—until too late. Reilly says it all took place so fast he is still confused about it."

Ham returned while they were talking. He closed the door carefully behind him. He looked at tall Velma Lang and seemed pleased about something.

"It's a good thing it was I," he said.

Monk rapped, "Get to it, shyster. Stop making riddles!"

Ignoring him, Ham said to the girl, "I convinced Higgins you knew nothing about it. He said he had talked to you over the phone, before you came down here, and he was about convinced of that anyway. But I fixed it. You won't have to talk to him. He's tough, believe me!"

Velma Lang came quickly across the room, touched Ham's arm. "Oh, thank you," she said with some emotion. "Even his voice frightened me." She looked from Ham to Monk, then back at Ham again. "I must see Doc Savage before I talk to *anyone*."

"Why?" asked Ham point blank.

Velma Lang looked at Ham carefully for a moment. She remained silent, as if deciding something.

"You can trust us," reassured Monk.

"If Doc Savage were only here—" she started. Her gray-green eyes questioned Ham. "What have they heard from him?"

"Higgins reports that they had Ernest Green's car caught in a trap somewhere out in the county. Then the car got away from them. Doc's out there. That's about all we know, right at the moment. It's pretty much a mystery."

"And we don't know, for sure, *when* he will get back."

Ham told her, "Doc might be tracking down something. No, we can't tell."

Velma Lang let out her breath as if she had been holding it.

"Then—we can't wait!" she said with decision.

She went swiftly to the desk, picked up a black corde purse that was there, opened it and removed a letter. She pushed the letter into Ham's hands and said, "Read it! Sybil wrote it!"

"Sybil?" Monk came across to Ham, his eyes curious as the attorney removed the folded sheet from an envelope that was already open.

Velma turned and stared at the chemist as he mentioned the name. Her wide eyes were filled with something bordering on fear.

Monk wondered, what the hell!

## Chapter VI

HAM was reading the letter. It was brief, a few lines on the front page. His eyes became puzzled. He looked at the envelope. It carried a special delivery stamp and had been postmarked in Boston.

"This was mailed today?" he said.

"Yes." Velma Lang explained about going directly to Ernest Green's home after leaving the bank. "His sister is an invalid, you know. I go there quite frequently to keep her company. Mr. Green had some statements he wanted to go over with me tonight."

She paused, bit her lower lip, obviously controlling emotions that would have spilled over in another woman. "The letter was delivered while I was there. I didn't want Anne—that's his sister—to know about it. I . . . I recognized Sybil's handwriting, of course!"

"Who in the blazes is Sybil?" Monk asked.

He'd been trying to read the letter in Ham's hand. Finally he grabbed it in order to satisfy his curiosity.

The note read:

THIS IS THE FINAL MOVE, ERNEST. YOU WILL MEET ME TONIGHT AND DISCUSS DETAILS OF PAYMENT BETWEEN 8 AND 9 PM. AT THE HOTEL WHERE I STAYED FOR A WHILE. YOU KNOW THE PLACE.

The message was typewritten, and signed "Sybil." The signature had been neatly printed.

Ham was saying, "If the information you are holding for Doc Savage is as urgent as you say it is, Velma, and somehow concerns this letter, I'd suggest you tell us." He looked at his watch, held his arm out for the girl to see the time. "It's almost nine o'clock now."

The secretary still hesitated. "I . . . I shouldn't tell anybody about it!" she gasped. "But now, with Mr. Green in trouble—perhaps in danger of his life—we must do something." She spoke tensely and rapidly, saving words. "Briefly, Sybil is blackmailing Ernest Green. They were separated five years ago. Everything was all right. Now—this! I knew part of it, not all. He took me partly into his confidence recently. But I never imagined it was as serious as this. I see now why he made the appointment with Doc Savage. He must have asked Mr. Savage for help. Then . . . this horrible murder . . . Mr. Green kidnapped."

For the first time she gave a little sob of dismay. "That's why, when I saw the special delivery letter, I had an idea it was from her. I couldn't wait. His sister could never stand the shock if it were delivered to her. The thing to do, I figured, was turn it right over to Mr. Savage. I don't want the police to know, because of her . . . Anne . . . his poor invalid sister!"

Ham checked his watch again. He said, "Almost nine o'clock." He held Velma's frightened eyes. "This hotel—would you have any idea where it is? Which one, I mean?"

She nodded, naming a well-known local hotel.

"She stayed there awhile after she left him. That must be the hotel she means."

"That's just around the corner on Tremont," offered Monk. "We could be there in a couple of minutes."

"What about Higgins?" asked Velma Lang.

"He said he was through with us temporarily," Ham announced. But he was frowning. "If I know Higgins, though, he'll have a tail on us the moment we leave here. We're not kidding that boy any."

A twinkling gleam came into Monk's bright, lively eyes. Ham noticed it.

"What are you gloating about, you ape?"

“Idea,” said Monk.

“Such as?”

“Let’s get going. I’ll explain it. We’ll just start walking down the street. Leave everything to me.”

Ham glanced at the girl, shrugged. “Sometimes he gets an idea. More than likely, though, we’ll land in jail. If you’re willing to string along—”

“I’m ready,” said the girl.

As they passed through the outer office, Ham said quietly, “I’ll simply tell Higgins we’re going to our own hotel to wait for Doc Savage.”

A POLICEMAN let Monk and Velma Lang out of the bank. He was standing guard at the front entrance, and at a nod from another man on the balcony, permitted them to leave. Ham joined them when they had proceeded a short distance down the street.

The lawyer told them, “Higgins hasn’t heard from Doc yet, but he said it was all right for us to leave.”

“That guy!” grumbled Monk. He made a slight motion with his head toward adjacent Boston Common, across the street. Trees were numerous there. “A flatfoot’s already shadowing us. Saw him start down the far side of the street. He got a signal from the cop at the front door of the bank.”

“I never noticed that!” said Velma Lang, somewhat amazed.

Ham said, “You’ve never traveled in our kind of company.”

“I think you’re both very nice.”

Monk’s homely face grinned with pleasure.

“I suggest,” Ham reminded him sharply, “you keep your mind on this flim-flam you’re going to try on our shadow.”

They had turned into Tremont Street. It was early enough that the sidewalks were fairly crowded. A first show was letting out at a nearby theater.

Within moments they neared the corner where the hotel was located. Small groups of people waited for taxicabs at the curb.

Ham said sharply, “Look, you smart aleck, we’re almost there. I thought you were going to shake that shadow?”

Monk’s eyes were suddenly lively and sharp. “There’s a side entrance to the hotel, just around the corner. When the fun starts, slip in that way. I’ll see you in the rear of the lobby. Watch this!”

A considerable number of people were gathered at the corner, either waiting for cabs or for the traffic light to change. The light was red when Monk made his move.

Ham saw him disappear into the crowd. A woman screamed. Ham breathed, “Oh, Lord!”

Monk's head appeared again. He was frantically waving an arm, shouting.

“There he goes! Police! Help! Purse-snatcher!”

He was making a bedlam of noise.

The crowd increased amazingly. The woman screamed again. Monk's stocky figure disappeared, popped into view. He clung to another man and was struggling with him. People leaving the theater joined the ruckus.

For Monk was still shouting, “Here he is! Thief! I've got him!”

A patrolman who had been directing traffic at the corner came pounding up. He elbowed his way into the milling, curious, excited crowd.

Monk shoved the purse back into the hands of the woman from whom he had snatched it. The well-dressed man he had accused was screaming denials. Monk guessed the man looked prosperous and important enough to be the mayor himself. Perhaps he was!

He ducked his head and wormed through the mass of people as the patrolman joined the excitement. Also, he caught a quick glimpse of a large fellow in plain clothes just entering the far side of the huge crowd that had now gathered.

Monk reached the side street unseen, straightened his hat, moved toward the entrance of the hotel and stepped inside with assurance.

HE found the girl and dapper Ham back near the house telephones. Even people in the long narrow lobby had gone out front to see what all the commotion was about.

Monk was grinning.

“I told you!” he said.

“Fifteen cops will probably be here any minute,” said Ham worriedly. He looked at Velma Lang. “You think you can get away with it?”

“Watch,” the girl said, and disappeared toward the room desk.

“What's she gonna do?” demanded Monk, frowning.

“She's a smart girl,” Ham stated. “She called the information clerk and asked the number of the room in the name of Lois Lee. It seems that's the name this Sybil—Green's wife—used after she left him. Velma had an idea Sybil would still be using that name. And she is. Room 915!”

Monk ignored all except one part of Ham's information. “So now it's Velma, huh? Real chummy, huh?”

He was ready to start an argument, but the girl's return momentarily delayed him.

“All right,” she murmured, and walked toward the elevators.

Ham was nervous. He was not convinced that Monk had shaken their shadow. The lawyer's gaze swept

the lobby. "Hurry!" he whispered to the chemist.

They followed the girl into the elevator.

"Nine, please," Velma Lang said.

Some other people stepped into the car. Ham wished the operator would hurry up. He shot guarded glances toward the lobby.

He felt some relief when the car started up the shaft.

Two people got off at the fifth floor. The next stop was theirs. They followed Velma out of the car, turned the opposite way along the deserted hallway, immediately swung around and came back again when the elevator doors had closed. They rejoined the tall brunette.

Monk had noticed the room key in the girl's hand.

"Look," he asked, "shouldn't we call her first? I mean, busting right in on her like this—"

"Quiet, dunce!" snapped Ham.

Velma explained, "She isn't in the room. I phoned. The room clerk didn't know that, of course. I merely went up to the desk, gave *her* name and asked for the key to this room. He was busy talking to someone and handed it to me without paying the least attention."

"Didn't I tell you she's a clever girl," said Ham.

"Oh, I hope we can learn something!" whispered the secretary as they neared Room 915. "It's horrible . . . not knowing where Mr. Green is or what danger he's in."

"You really think he was kidnaped?"

Ham asked the question.

They were outside the door to Room 915. Velma Lang turned swiftly toward the lawyer, amazement in her eyes. "Why did you ask that?" Her words were almost a whisper.

"I was wondering."

"I don't understand—"

Ham's expression said he was turning something over in his mind. Then he said, "Perhaps he *wasn't* kidnaped."

"Good heavens!" cried the girl softly.

Monk, in his blunt way, said, "You think maybe this Ernest Green has pulled a fast one on the bank?"

Velma Lang acted as though the outspoken chemist had struck her in the face. She moved back a half step, staring.

"Hell!" said Ham, "I guess I'm just a suspicious guy. Forget I mentioned it, Velma." He nodded toward the door. "Let's get on with it."

Stepping between Monk and the girl, he raised his hand, knocked on the heavy door.

They waited.

There was no answer. Ham pressed his ear to the door and listened. He kept his head to the door for a full moment. Then he straightened.

“I don't think anyone's in there.”

“LET'S find out,” said Monk impatiently. He took the key out of Velma's hand, fitted it into the lock—it was the kind of hotel door that had to be unlocked or locked each time you went in or out—and pushed open the door.

Darkness greeted them. Monk reached inside, switched on the lights, motioned them inside. He dropped the key in his pocket and closed the door.

The chemist took one glance around and announced, “Vamoosed!”

It appeared that way.

The room, large and furnished with cheerful combinations of color, was in neat order. The bed was made up. Monk opened a clothes closet. They saw only naked wire hangers on the cross rod. Bureau drawers were as empty as a hobo's pockets. Ham examined ashtrays. They were clean and polished. The glass top of the dresser was spotless.

“It looks,” said Ham, “as if our lady friend has departed.” He glanced at his watch. “After all, she only gave him until nine o'clock. It's past that now.”

Monk went into the bathroom. An instant later his loud voice bellowed, “Hey, Velma, look at this, will you?”

Ham rapped, “Quiet, you fool!”

The girl followed Monk to see what he was shouting about.

Ham, going over the room carefully to see if there was anything at all that indicated Sybil might have been here, listened to Monk talking.

“It sure looks like lipstick to me,” the chemist was saying.

“I think it is,” Velma Lang said. Then: “Yes. It is!”

Ham stepped to the doorway. The bathroom was large. There was a section, behind the door, containing a glass-enclosed shower. The room was done in black tile and chrome.

Monk held a clean face towel in his hand. He had found it hanging across the rack.

“Of course it's lipstick,” Velma was telling him. “Here, look.” She flattened out a part of the towel, indicated the impression of curved lips. “A woman does that after she applies lipstick, to remove the excess.”

“Then she must've been here!”

Ham said from the doorway, "Isn't he terrific?" He added acidly, "Of *course* a woman must have been here, you dope!"

Monk used a device that could irritate his partner more than anything else. He ignored Ham. The chemist, his expression starry-eyed, looked at the girl and remarked, "Gosh, that's nice perfume you're using."

The secretary's gray-green eyes looked quizzically at Monk. "But I don't use perfume," she told him.

Ham said coolly, "Stop making passes, Casanova."

Suddenly very serious, his manner sincere, Monk said, "No, I really mean it. I like it. Gardenia, I'd say."

Ham watched him. Monk wouldn't be wrong on a thing like that. As a chemist, he certainly should know. Gardenia! A strange thing about that. Higgins, the lieutenant of detectives, had asked him a question there at the bank. "Do you know anyone who uses gardenia perfume?"

Ham had thought it a silly question, coming from the massive-built detective, interjected right in the middle of some other questions. Higgins had quickly gone on to something else.

Ham sniffed. Monk sniffed again. The girl was sniffing. Ham noticed it then.

He said: "I hate to agree with him, but he's right. It certainly *is* gardenia."

Velma Lang was tense. She gasped a single word.

"Her!"

Ham sensed, rather than heard, a whisper of movement behind him. He turned. A large man in a dark suit had just stepped inside the hotel room. The lawyer was the only one who saw him, for he was in line with the hall door.

There was a grim, hard line about the man's jaw. Spotting Ham, he started a swift move.

Ham exclaimed, "I was afraid you'd foul up things, Monk. We have company!" And added: "Also—trouble!"

For the big man's hand went to the light switch, found it, snapped off the room lights.

Things started to happen.

## Chapter VII

A FIST came out of the sudden darkness with amazing accuracy and speed, and clipped Ham alongside the jaw. His head snapped around. Pain jarred through the nerves of his teeth.

His brain whirled for an instant. He flung up his arms and grappled for the big man while his head cleared. The fellow closed in, big, solid, a stone wall. Ham figured if the man ever connected squarely with his jaw he was a dead duck.

He managed to catch the man's arm as it shot out again. He flung his right arm over the assailant's left

arm, brought his own arms down and grasped his own hands. That way, he pinioned the fellow's arms between their bodies.

Locked together, swaying, banging into furniture, they reeled across the room. Ham's eyes were becoming adjusted to the light. There was a vertical red neon building sign across the street which cast an eerie red glow partially into the room. Furniture took vague shape. Ham struggled to avoid falling backward over anything.

The big man's strained breathing touched his face.

He said, "Brother, you've got it coming. Fool around her, will you!"

He heaved upward mightily, striving to break Ham's armlock. The lawyer was lifted off his feet. He managed to hold on.

It occurred to Ham that the bathroom door had been closed. Now an abrupt white rectangle of light showed momentarily.

He heard Monk's voice saying, "Remember, honey, you stay right in here. Lock the door. Somebody might get hurt!"

Then Monk was in the room, in the confusing darkness. He said, "Where is he, Ham?"

Ham grunted with rage.

"Where do you think, you nitwit!" He gasped for breath as he was again heaved off his feet, still clinging to the big man. "I . . . I've got him!" Ham said as the breath was almost knocked out of him.

"Swell," remarked his partner.

Ham swore.

Once again, as they crashed against a chair, the big man—he was taller and heavier and far more solid than Ham Brooks—straightened his body rigidly in a final attempt to fling the attorney clear. He lost his balance.

The two of them, struggling, fell across the bed. Supporting slats beneath the box spring splintered and the inside section of the bed gave way at one end.

Ham found his face buried in a pillow. He choked for air, tried to twist around, found himself now seized in a powerful, chest-crushing hold.

Monk said in the darkness, "Say!"

Ham gasped, ". . . ah . . . *do* something, stupid!"

"Hell," he heard Monk comment, "I thought you had *him!*"

MONK leaned over the broken bed, found the big man's legs, dragged him clear as though he were a sack of grain, then went to work on him as though he were a punching bag.

Assorted snorts, thuds and loud breathing sounds filled the room. Monk's short, wide stature fooled most people. He was built like an ox. But he could move with the agility of a polecat.

The bathroom door flung open. Light streamed into the room but was cut off by the footboard of the bed. It only partially revealed the confused tangle of humanity that was struggling there.

Velma Lang gasped in horror. She ran across the room, found the light switch beside the hall door. The moment she had the room lights on, her hand flashed to her mouth and she gave a startled cry.

"Hank!" she gasped, staring. "Hank Watson!"

Then, rushing forward, she cried "Monk! Ham! Stop—*he's a friend!*"

Somehow, they got untangled. The big blond man lowered a fist that had been ready to clip Ham's jaw. He stood up.

Ham stood up, aware of his wrinkled clothes. He tried to smooth the creases, decided his jaw was giving him more trouble, and started massaging it.

Monk merely sat on the bed, the broken-down part of it, the fire going out of his bright eyes and a look of wonderment replacing it.

For the girl was saying, "Oh, Hank. This is terrible. I'm so sorry!"

The big blond fellow looked suddenly self-conscious.

He said quietly, "It's all right, Miss Lang. I thought . . . well, I figured maybe you were in trouble."

"Heavens, no!" said Velma Lang. She motioned to both Ham and Monk. "These men—they're associated with Doc Savage!"

The big blond man named Hank Watson opened his mouth, closed it. A flush crept up into his good-looking features.

"Gosh!" was all he said, and he looked ill at ease.

SLENDER, brunette Velma Lang was probably more composed than any of them. The calm serenity of her features had returned again. She spoke quietly.

"Hank is an old friend," she explained. "I've known him for years. When Higgins, that detective, called me at Mr. Green's home early this evening, I didn't know what to do." She looked at the tall blond man. He was perhaps thirty. "That's why I called and left word for you, Hank. I needed someone. I was desperate."

"I got your message," Hank Watson said.

He shook hands with Monk and Ham. "I'm sorry I misunderstood the situation," he said. He nodded toward the girl. "I missed Miss Lang at Green's house, so I came directly to the bank. I saw the police cars there." He nodded to Monk and Ham. "You were just leaving with her. I was across the street. I didn't know what to think so I followed you here."

Ham gave Monk a sour regard. "You thought he was a plain-clothes cop, and you ditched him. Ha!"

The girl spoke up before an argument started. "Hank is aviation editor of a flying publication here in Boston."

"Flyer?" asked Ham. He noted the ruptured duck gold pin in the blond man's coat lapel.

"Bombers, for awhile," Hank Watson said. He shrugged. "Washed out later on. High altitude flying did something to my stomach. The doctors couldn't find any cure for it."

He kept watching Velma Lang as he spoke. He appeared worried. He asked abruptly, "What happened, Miss Lang? I mean, the police, there at the bank . . ."

She told him. Ham and Monk both noted an expression that came into the big man's gray eyes as Velma talked. It was when she mentioned Sybil, from there on, Ham decided. The explanation came shortly.

Velma said: "I might as well tell them, Hank." Then she addressed Monk and Ham. "Hank, here, knew Sybil long before she married my employer, Ernest Green. He probably knew her better than anyone."

She looked back at Hank Watson. "That's why I called you, Hank. This murder of the cashier . . . Green's disappearance, I thought if anyone could help, you could!" She appeared undecided about something, studied his fairly handsome face. "Should I tell . . . them, Hank?"

The big blond man shrugged.

"Why not? If there's anything I can do to help . . ." He glanced at Ham. "Anything involving Doc Savage must be mighty important. There must be more to it than what appears. A cop there near the bank gave me a little of it."

Then he explained the girl's remark. "I was engaged to Sybil once—before she married Ernest Green." He made a motion with his big hands. "She turned me down for him." He smiled. "I got over it, in the army."

There was silence in the room.

It was Hank Watson himself who broke that silence. "Yes," he said, "I guess I knew her better than anyone." He gave them all a direct look. "But forget about that business in the past. She doesn't mean a thing to me anymore. If there's anything I can do to help you or Doc Savage . . ."

Monk said quietly, "Even if Sybil is . . . really behind this mystery?"

"Yes."

Velma Lang said, "You see, Hank, we've got to *know*. It's so horrible . . . so . . . so awful."

The blond man said frankly, "Sybil was a . . . well, you might say a difficult person to understand. There was something strange about her. Don't ask me to explain it. I can't!"

The girl herself dragged out in the open what was in everyone's thoughts. "We've got to *know*. We've got to be sure . . . about her. No one has seen her for almost five years. And now Mr. Green's disappearance, trouble at the bank . . . everything. You understand, don't you, Hank?"

“Of course.”

She motioned toward the bathroom. “Come here a minute.” Inside, she said, “Notice anything?” She waited.

Almost instantly Hank Watson was tense. He stepped back into the bedroom. There was a sort of faraway expression in his gray eyes, as if he were reliving some moment out of the past.

“Gardenia,” he said finally, softly. “Sybil used it all the time.”

The hallway door to the hotel room had opened so quietly that no one had noticed. But all heard the faint latch click as it closed. They turned.

Doc Savage stood there.

## Chapter VIII

VELMA LANG seemed least surprised of all. Instantly she moved across the room, a directness in her manner.

“You found him?” the girl asked hopefully.

Doc shook his head.

The secretary's eyes clouded. “Nothing? No trace of the car?”

“Nothing yet,” said Doc. His gaze had gone to Hank Watson, than back to the girl again. “Throughout the city and out in the country the police are working on it. Every available man will be kept on duty all night.”

Velma saw Doc's glance. She introduced Hank Watson. The big blond fellow was staring openly at the bronze man. Then he caught himself and said quickly, “Glad to know you, sir.”

He tried to keep the admiration out of his voice. Many people, meeting Doc Savage for the first time, had that kind of reaction.

Monk couldn't restrain himself any longer.

“Doc!” he exploded. “How in blazes did you know where we were?”

“You really shouldn't irritate people,” Doc answered him. He smiled a little. “Especially the Boston police department.”

“Higgins!” said Monk.

Doc nodded. “Naturally he was keeping a check on you folks. He informed me where you had gone.” He looked at the broken bed.

Monk grinned. “There was sort of a slight misunderstanding—until we found out who Hank was.”

Hank Watson's position was explained to Doc Savage. Velma said, “If anyone can, Hank can lead us to Sybil.”

The flyer said, “Well, I'll try. It will take a little digging into the past.”

Doc said, “That has already been started. Higgins has some information. Nothing much to go on, though.” He glanced at Velma Lang, who was seated in a chair now, her figure straight as she listened attentively. “How much had Mr. Green told you?”

She lifted her straight shoulders a moment, held the attitude, dropped them. “About everything, I imagine. Sybil . . . the blackmail angle . . . his fear of losing both his high position and money.”

Doc removed the photograph from his pocket, passed it to Ham and Monk. “Higgins doesn't know about this. Neither did I show him a couple of letters I have. He suspects something, though, probably the fact that there's a woman in it somewheres. He asked me about the gardenias.”

“He knows?” asked Hank Watson.

Doc shook his head. “I don't think so. He merely wonders about it. That will bother him, and Higgins is the kind of detective who sticks it out.”

“What you mean is,” said Velma, “that withholding information from Higgins is treading on dangerous ground?”

Doc's unusual eyes flickered. “That about describes it. He's smart, and he likes to run the show.”

Doc said, “Find out what we can as fast as we can. If we uncover a murderer, naturally that person will be turned over to Higgins immediately. Your employer, Ernest Green, asked my help this afternoon. I was going to refuse. Now . . . it's different. I'll protect him if I can, if he is innocent. If—”

“Doc,” Ham interrupted, “what do you really think about Green?”

Shock was again in Velma Lang's usually quiet eyes for an instant. She leaned forward slightly.

DOC SAVAGE did not answer the question. This was a trait of his when he had not reached a definite conclusion about something. He seemed to be more interested in watching Hank Watson remove a pack of cigarettes and lighting one. Doc shook his head when the flyer held out the pack.

Abruptly, Doc said, “A peculiar circumstance has developed.” He was speaking to Velma Lang. “Higgins said he had already asked you the names of the two business men who were there at the bank to meet Ernest Green this afternoon. Higgins requested that information over the phone, didn't he?”

The girl nodded.

“I made the appointment for Mr. Green myself. I telephoned those men yesterday.”

“Green had not actually met them yet, had he?”

“No. You see, the details of such a loan are all handled through our business loan department. They had excellent credit ratings. They've been in business here for years. The appointment this afternoon was merely the formality of Mr. Green signing the papers. He had to do that before the agreement was final. Also, it was a cash loan.”

“I know,” acknowledged Doc. He continued: “Green had never actually met them, had he?”

“No-o,” Velma said slowly. “I don't think he had.”

Doc's next statement astounded all of them.

“The two so-called business men who were there this afternoon were ringers. They were not the real borrowers at all.”

The secretary gasped. “I don't understand!”

“Higgins has already cleared up that part of it. He immediately checked on those two men when you gave him their names. Both were attending a banquet early this evening. You can be sure that Higgins has completely checked their alibis. They were never at the bank at all.”

Everyone was tense.

“Their appointment with Green was changed until the same time *tomorrow* afternoon. Someone called them, and said it was the bank, but it wasn't. Higgins checked their statement through the telephone operator at their place of business. It was she who got the call.”

“Then we don't know—” Velma Lang started, her eyes startled.

“We don't know *who* the two strangers are. Mason, your head cashier, might have been able to tell us. Mason is dead—murdered. Reilly, the guard, didn't know them. He merely knew that two gentlemen had an appointment and that was all. That leaves the chauffeur, Jenkins, who was only recently employed.”

“He had good references—” the girl started to say.

Doc nodded.

“I took the liberty of going through your files. Rather, Higgins and I did. Already Higgins has checked those references. Faked. Jenkins, the chauffeur, spent some time in prison. He was sent up on a bank robbery charge.”

Doc paused, waited a moment, then asked, “Does that mean anything to you, Miss Lang?”

THEY saw her eyes becoming thoughtful, the greenness dominating as some decision took shape in her mind.

“Yes,” she said suddenly, “it does!”

“The recent trouble at two of your branch banks?” prompted Doc.

She jerked her head.

“Both holdups happened within the past month,” she said quickly. “Both times the holdup car was spotted, then disappeared mysteriously.” She stared sharply at Doc. “You don't think that Jenkins, the chauffeur—”

“There's a red herring somewheres,” said Doc. “There's a motive behind this mystery that is still cleverly hidden. The gardenia perfume, for instance—”

“Sybil again!” said the secretary.

“Yes.”

“Look.” Hank Watson spoke up. “Let's get that part of it squared away. I think I can help—”

“Where do we start?” suggested Doc.

The big blond man's gray eyes took on a faraway look. He was thinking back, apparently. He said:

“Ever hear of the Club Seaview?”

Only Velma answered him. “It's out beyond Neponset, on the south shore, past the Bay.”

Hank Watson said, “That's right. Sybil sang there after she walked out on Green. After that, I don't know where she went. So we'll probably have to start backtracking there.”

“All right,” agreed Doc. “We'll begin there. Meanwhile, perhaps you'll think of additional things.”

“Take us about half an hour to get there,” said the flyer. “I have my car parked in a public garage near here. We—”

Then, for some reason, Doc changed his mind about going. He had not told them, really, that he was going to the place called Club Seaview, but everyone took it for granted.

He said, “I think Monk and Ham can handle it for me.” He spoke to Velma again. “I'd like to meet Anne, Green's sister, the one you say is an invalid.”

“Now?” Velma's eyes questioned.

“If it would be convenient.”

“I suppose so. I really should be up there staying with her anyway, poor thing.”

Hank Watson asked, “Mind if I join you? Perhaps she can help us. Monk and Ham, here, can learn as much at the club as I can.” He turned toward them, mentioned a date out of the past. “It was about that time. A woman named Fifi runs the place. Ask for her.”

“Of course we can handle it,” said Monk with confidence. “How long did Sybil work there?”

“Oh—” Hank Watson thought. “I'd say perhaps six months.”

Ham said to Doc, “We'll get in touch with you either at Green's home or our hotel. I know Green's

address on Beacon Hill.”

Doc nodded. “You better get started.” He indicated the broken bed. “I’ll square the bill here.”

The remark reminded Monk of something.

“Hey!” he exclaimed. “Maybe Sybil will come back here. We never thought of that!”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” said Doc. “Sybil won’t return here. Forget this place.”

Going out, when they were in the hallway, Monk was puzzled.

He said to Ham, “What’d Doc mean, you think?”

“He meant she won’t be back,” said Ham.

“Smart, aren’t you?” growled the chemist.

THE cab followed one of the main streets through South Boston. Traffic was thinning now. Monk and Ham sat in the rear seat and argued.

“I tell you her eyes are green,” said Monk.

“Gray,” Ham said stubbornly.

“Green,” insisted the chemist. He signed. “Like deep pools beneath a rocky waterfall in late afternoon. I wonder if she ever comes to New York?”

“Quit getting ideas,” snapped Ham. “You don’t think Velma would fall for you, you halfwit?”

“She likes me.”

“The hell she does!”

Monk turned, glared at his partner, seemed to be on the verge of bopping him on the nose. Instead, he stared out the rear window of the cab. He did this for some time.

Ham ignored him.

After awhile Monk leaned forward and called to the driver, “You any good at giving somebody the slip with this hack?”

“You guys ain’t in no trouble, are you?” the driver said.

“We’re gonna be if you don’t try some shortcuts,” announced Monk.

He removed a five-dollar bill from his pocket and tossed it through the open window behind the driver. “Here. This’ll pay for the rubber you burn off the tires. Start moving, brother—but fast!”

Ham groaned, glanced back through the window, then looked frowningly at Monk. “Cops again, I suppose? If you hadn’t been so damned smart with Higgins—”

The cab lurched forward and threw them both back against the cushion. The driver called over his shoulder, "If I pile up this crate, you pay!"

"If I'm alive!" said Monk.

They went around a corner in a sweeping, swaying arc, tires complaining. The driver shot the cab ahead for two blocks, then swung wildly into another through thoroughfare. As they thundered out of the side street he missed a loading zone at the corner by inches.

He followed a car line, approached an intersection just as the light started to turn red. Cars slowed, blocking them. Throwing the wheel over with a mighty jerk, he swung to the left of another loading zone and barely skimmed through on the light. The cab bounced as wheels on the right side went across the five-inch-high edge of the leading platform.

Ham said, "My God! Let's pull up and shoot it out with them—cops or not. It'll be safer!"

"Doc said to keep the police out of it temporarily," Monk reminded.

Ham clung to the toggle cord with his right hand, trying to brace himself. His eyes popped as they swung crazily again and whipped down another side street. The rest of it was a maze of back streets, an alleyway, then a railroad freight crossing near some warehouses. Red lights were blinking on and off at the crossing. Their driver never slowed. They bounced across the tracks.

The dark, bulky outline of freight cars came into view as the train backed across the street—an instant after they had passed.

The driver slowed. "That does it," he said, and he settled back and calmly lit a cigarette.

Soon he had angled back to their route again. They followed the main highway now along the south shore. The night air was damp and salty, and very cool.

Fifteen minutes later they pulled into a large parking area beside a low, rambling, neon-lighted building. A large decorated sign extended out toward the highway. As it flashed, the words CLUB SEAVIEW were flung out against the dark, quiet night. Few houses were nearby. The section was a strip of shore highway isolated from any community.

The driver pulled around the side of the building. You could hear the muffled beat of a dance band. About fifteen cars were parked around the building.

Ham said, "Turn off your lights and wait a minute, driver."

Ham wanted to be certain they had shaken their tail. Ten minutes passed. An occasional car swept past along the highway. Nothing happened.

Finally Ham said to the driver, "Wait here. It won't take us long."

They entered the roadhouse.

## Chapter IX

SOMEONE, Monk thought, must have spent a number of years collecting the stuff—or else they had bought out a seaman's supply house. Just about everything maritime had been crowded into the club. The various rooms were scattered here and there, dim-lighted, intimate.

There was a bar to the left of the entrance foyer. Nautical doo-dads cluttered the small room. People sat at the bar talking.

They saw Fifi.

There was no mistaking her. She moved back and forth, talking to this one and that, laughing a little too loudly, overdoing the having-wonderful-time stuff. She didn't walk; she flowed.

Put another one hundred pounds on Mae West, add a few more years, and you had Fifi. She was big. She had assorted round chins and numerous strings of imitation pearls strung around her throat. You couldn't tell where the chins ended and the numerous strings of pearls began.

She was jovial.

Fifi saw thick-set Monk and dapper Ham standing there. Her avid eyes brushed across Monk and came to rest on Ham. He looked like money. She flowed toward them.

“Ah, gentlemen,” Fifi said expansively. “A table in the dining room? I presume there are ladies—”

Ham said politely, “We'd like to talk to you.”

Instantly her eyes, bright restless eyes deep in her lumpy face, became guarded.

“You're not cops?” she asked softly. “We don't have trouble here. Just because of that one time—”

“We're not cops,” said Ham. The crisp twenty-dollar bill, neatly folded over several times, crinkled as he toyed with it. Fifi's eyes went down to the bill, back to Ham's face.

He said, “Would you care to join us at a table for a moment? We're alone. Just a few simple questions.”

“Questions about what?”

Her voice was somewhat harsh now.

“A girl named Sybil. I'd like to find her. Perhaps—” He watched the eyes go hungrily to the bill. He handed it to the fat woman with a deftness that no one would have noticed.

Immediately it disappeared down the V of her gown, cut low over an ample bosom.

“This way, gentlemen,” she said.

They followed in her wake, through various rooms, then down three wide steps into the main dining room. The dining room, after a fashion, resembled a ship's deck. The bridge was the orchestra platform. There was a small dance floor.

The band was too brassy, but the rhythm was good and several couples were dancing. The light bill was probably only \$2.98 a month. It was shadowy and the tables were not crowded one on top of the other. Ham imagined they soaked you plenty for the intimacy.

A waiter appeared miraculously out of the shadows and took their order. Fifi ordered gin with a beer chaser. Monk requested a bottle of beer. Ham shook his head.

He leaned forward toward the fat woman and asked immediately, "When did she work here last?"

Fifi thought. Then: "Mister, it must have been well onto five years ago."

"Have you ever seen her again since?"

"About a year after that. She stopped around."

"You mean she was singing here then too?"

"No, mister. Only the first time." Her eyes got quizzical. "Say, are you her husband? She talked about her husband a couple of times—"

Ham was shaking his head.

"I didn't even know Sybil," he admitted. "I'm merely trying to find her—for a friend. This is the last place anyone remembers. I thought perhaps you could help."

A shrewdness had arrived in the woman's eyes. "Is she coming into some money? Is that why you're looking for her?"

Ham appeared to consider the question. "It's likely—if we can find her."

The waiter had placed the drinks on the table. Fifi picked up the shot of straight gin, swallowed it neatly, washed it down with some beer. Her chins moved like waves rolling along a curve of beach.

"Wait a minute," she said, and got up and left the table. She went across the room like a barge pulling away from a dock. She disappeared through a doorway far back in the room.

"I WONDER where she's going," Monk said.

"We'll just have to wait and see."

"Do you think she knows anything?"

"She might—or possibly she's after another twenty-dollar bill."

A man came in and sat down at a small table along a wall of the room. He was alone. He was a neat, dainty, fussy little man. He pulled his trousers up carefully as he sat down, crossed his knees, arranged his coat sleeves so that a bit of white shirtsleeve was visible.

Monk, drinking his beer, frowned as he watched the man.

A dance number had ended. As couples returned to their tables, there was a brief sharp roll from a snare drum. The band leader stepped to a microphone and announced:

"And now, ladies and gentlemen . . . Angela!"

Everyone started clapping.

Monk remarked, "She must be good."

The lights went off completely. They sat in darkness for perhaps ten seconds. Then a bright spot came on, searched across the dance floor and found the girl. The white beam climbed up shapely, bare legs, across slim, boyish hips, then fully bathed the rest of a trim, lithe figure. She had auburn-red hair and bright, eager features.

Again everyone applauded loudly.

The band swung into a fast, staccato dance number.

The girl named Angela was fast, nimble, graceful. She did a novelty number that indicated years of practice.

Mammoth Fifi cruised back to their table while the girl was still dancing. She sat down. Her voice was low in the darkness of the room. The band played softly now, fitting the changed mood of the dance.

“Angela will tell you what she can,” Fifi told them.

“Angela?” Ham looked at the big woman in the vague light.

“Angela knew her better than anyone. Sybil was a strange woman, in many ways. Never could quite figure her out. Angela could, though. You talk to her.”

The dance had ended. The slim-built, red-haired girl was called back for an encore.

Fifi said, “I’ve arranged it for you. You go back through that doorway where I went, and then up the stairs. Her room’s right at the top.” She moved a fat hand. “You’d better go now while it’s dark. I don’t want customers thinking things. We run a good place here.” She added: “The check for the drinks is ten dollars.”

Ham dropped a bill on the table, murmured, “Thank you,” and they made their way across the room, near the wall, beyond the moving spotlight.

Monk said quietly, “I’ve tasted better beer.”

“And cheaper!” said Ham.

Monk glanced toward the small table where little fussy-pants had been sitting. The table was deserted. They passed through the door, closed it, saw the narrow flight of stairs and started up.

They could hear the customers calling Angela back for another encore. The music started up again.

At the head of the stairs light came from a doorway that was ajar. Ham peered inside, opening the door wider. They saw a dressing table, jars of make-up cosmetics, a dancer’s skimpy costume flung over a chair.

“I guess this is it,” said Ham.

They sat down.

Shortly the music ended. In a moment they heard footsteps coming quickly up the stairs. Then the girl was in the room. She went directly to a closet, reached inside, removed a pale green dressing gown from a hanger and wrapped it around her.

Ham gave her his chair.

Monk stared at various objects in the room in an attempt to keep his roving eyes off the girl. But his gaze crept back again. That combination of pale green against beautiful red hair was something, he decided.

ANGELA was breathing deeply. A fine bead of perspiration covered her forehead.

She said abruptly, "Why are you looking for Sybil?"

"It's very important," Ham said.

"Who are you?"

Ham had anticipated the question before they had come up here. Now that he had met the girl face to face, he decided to tell her the truth. She looked honest, direct. He liked her wide-set eyes.

So he explained their connection with Doc, introduced himself and Monk, gave their hotel address. "If you care to check on us—"

"I believe you," Angela said.

Ham then told her what had occurred. He covered every detail, for he knew that if he expected the girl to be helpful to them, he had to be fair with her.

He ended with, "So you see, Angela, we've *got* to find her. She's either innocent or she isn't. But as long as she is missing, she will be considered guilty. Finding Sybil is the only solution to the mystery. Have you any idea where she is?"

The dancer's pleasant blue eyes clouded.

"The last time I saw her was about a year ago. She was in Boston at a . . . sanitarium."

Ham stiffened. Here was something that no one had mentioned until now.

"Why?"

"She . . ." Angela seemed reluctant to go on. Then she blurted, "No one knew this! I guess I'm the only one. Sybil once told me. She said it would come over her every now and then, and no matter what she did she could not control it."

"What?" Monk was curious.

"The horrible urge to commit suicide!"

"But you said a sanitarium—" Ham prodded.

The dancer nodded. "When she got those suicidal urges, she found that drinking helped numb her brain. She'd drink until her mind was stupefied, until the awful depression in her mind had passed."

"So that explains the sanitarium?"

“Yes. That's when I saw her last—a year ago. You know the kind of place—the 'cure' in forty-eight hours, strictly private, patients admitted at any hour of the day or night.”

Ham nodded.

“Well, Sybil was there. She phoned me.” She named a private institution in the Back Bay section of Boston. “She looked awful. She couldn't even remember what had taken place for almost a week. She told me she was going away for good.”

“Where?”

“She'd mentioned it once, though I don't know the address. It was a secluded lodge up in Vermont, somewheres near Burlington, I think. Her husband had turned the place over to her when they had separated. He never went there. From the way she spoke, it was suitable for all-year living. She said she'd write to me and give me the address . . .” Her words trailed off.

“And?” Ham waited.

“She never did. That was the last I ever saw of her.”

HAM thought a moment.

“Did you ever check with this sanitarium place again?”

“Yes. They claimed they had no record of her address.”

There was one part of the story of Sybil that Ham had omitted. He came to it now.

“The reason . . . another reason why we're so curious about her,” he told the dancer, “is because of a strange incident that has happened. It seems to be a direct connection with her. Do you recall the kind of perfume she used?”

A slow wonderment seemed to flow into Angela's eyes. She stared curiously at Ham.

“Why, yes . . .” she murmured, and then stopped.

Monk asked quickly, “Is there something wrong?”

For, suddenly, the dancer looked frightened.

“Now that you mention it—yes!” she said. Her wide eyes went from Monk to Ham, and were a little glassy now.

“What?” continued Ham.

“There was a man to whom I was engaged. We were going to . . . to be married. This was about four months ago.” Her eyes continued to stare, as though some startling scene were forming in her mind.

“He was my agent. He'd handled Sybil awhile too, when she was singing, before the . . . the drinking part of it started. Good heavens, I don't see how. . .”

“Go on,” said Ham. “What is it?”

“Marty—that was his name—he came here one day excited about something. It was about Sybil. He said he thought he knew where she was. Then, that night. . .” She was trembling, deeply shaken. “He was found shot, in a car, right outside the club here. He—died!”

Tears rolled down the girl's smooth cheeks. She made no sound, just sitting, crying, biting her lips.

Ham moved across the room, saying nothing, waiting for a moment. Finally she looked up.

“I was here that night. There was a lot of excitement. I was with him . . . just before he died. I remember a word he said just before . . .”

She drew in her breath very slowly. Her eyes were frightened again. “He said . . . 'gardenia!’” She stood up, staring. “I'd never connected it with Sybil. I was puzzled. But now . . . what you just said about it . . . I mean, the gardenia part of it!” She gave a little cry. “You don't think. . .”

Ham admitted, “I don't know what to think, Angela.”

“Did they ever find out who shot Marty?” asked Monk.

The girl shook her head. She sat down again, murmuring softly, “I don't under—stand . . .”

Behind them, from the hall doorway, the thin, expressionless voice fell on their ears like drops of ice water.

“You will please not move suddenly. Otherwise I shall have to shoot you.”

Monk and Ham did not move. The chemist wished he had had eyes in the back of his head. If he could see the guy, he might try a trick.

Through Ham's mind raced the remark Fifi had made about there being trouble here just that one time. Marty, the dancer's friend, of course. And now it looked like trouble was starting all over again!

He and Monk turned around slowly. The girl sat in the chair, frozen.

Monk's eyes batted.

It was the small, dainty, fussy-looking man.

## Chapter X

MONK remembered seeing the man in the dining room downstairs. His eyes were very pale, with about the expression of a dead fish. They were as cold-looking as sea water.

The automatic, held carefully in the man's right hand, looked cold too.

The neat little man had stepped a foot inside the room. He eased the door partially closed behind him, using his right heel. No one moved. The man's quick, cold eyes examined each of them minutely.

“It's too bad,” he said finally.

“What's too bad, pal?” demanded Monk.

“You shouldn't've done it. Trying to find out things.”

“Listen, you little cream puff,” roared Monk. “I get my hands on you, and you'll—”

“Monk,” Ham said warningly.

Ham was watching the dainty little man carefully. The small, well-manicured hand that held the automatic was as steady as a rock. The lines of the man's face were wooden.

“Too bad for her, too,” said the man, eyes shifting to the red-haired dancer. The fishy eyes moved as though they were controlled with an electric switch.

Angela was starting in horror. Her mouth opened, and you could hear her tense breathing in the quiet room.

“Scream,” the little man said, “and you get it right here.”

The rasp of her breathing quieted. Ham's eyes were guarded. Monk swayed forward on the balls of his feet, a careful, almost imperceptible movement.

“Don't try it,” said the little man. Something had worked the electric switch button and his eyes were on Monk.

Downstairs, the band was playing again. It had started after a short intermission. The man with the gun seemed to be waiting for something. He moved backward carefully and daintily, until his back touched the door. Then he stood motionless again.

Finally they all heard the other voice, a single word.

“Okay.”

It came from directly beyond the door.

The neat little man stepped aside deftly. The door pushed open. There was a figure out there in the dim-lit hallway, a man, his face in shadows. He was big.

The dainty man motioned with his left hand. “All right,” he ordered. “Turn right outside this door and use the back stairs. The girl first, one at a time. Start walking!”

His right hand, the one with the automatic, did not move a fraction of an inch.

The girl took a jerky step, paused. She seemed paralyzed. She looked at Ham, eyes fear-filled.

Ham caught a glint of light off blue steel cut in the hallway. The large man was waiting there, ready, a gun also covering them.

Ham said, “You'd better do what he says, Angela.”

The dancer walked stiffly forward. The little man gave a slight nod, indicating that Monk should follow. Then he motioned Ham into the single file march.

Then they were in the hallway. Nothing was said. There was no sound except the steady throb of the dance band, muffled, from below. It seemed a million miles off. The rear stairs were a dozen feet away.

The girl, without a sound, crumpled to the floor. Knees, legs collapsed in one swift movement. She went down in a little helpless heap.

THE big man, standing a little to one side, made a quick involuntary movement to catch her.

Monk dived—low, fast, a terrific driving tackle that sent him crashing against the large man's legs.

There was a shot. Glass shattered in a window at the end of the hall. The shot missed Monk's spine only because his plunge had been accomplished with blinding speed. He was in motion the instant the girl had wavered.

The fussy little man's shot at Monk's back was his mistake. He should have watched lean, wiry Ham.

Ham's fist clipped the man's neck before the automatic had completely swung toward him. The chopping movement of his arm continued downward and knocked the little man's gun arm aside.

The fellow staggered, but he did not drop the weapon. His fishy eyes were glazed with pain from the neck blow, but he struggled furiously to retain his hold on the automatic. He was so small that he was as quick as a fox.

The girl lay there.

Monk's powerful body had carried the big man to the floor in a crash. Instantly the chemist's left arm was around the man's head, his fingers playing to catch the fellow's chin. He yanked the head sideways until neck muscles cracked. Curses streamed through the big man's clenched teeth.

At the same time, Monk's right hand held the fellow's wrist in a vise. It was the arm that held the gun. The man was flat on his face on the floor.

Monk continued to twist chin and gun arm relentlessly. A groan escaped the man's lips. He kicked, squirmed, tried to heave up from the floor. He managed to roll over.

His knees doubled. His feet planted themselves in Monk's belly. Then the legs straightened in a mighty drive and Monk flew across the hall.

But he had been clutching the big man's gun. The gun came with him and was now in his own fist. Monk untangled himself from the wall—his head had struck the baseboard and the pain sent rage squirming through him—and reversed the weapon in his hand. He had been holding it pointed at himself.

The big man, by this time—in no more than three seconds—had pounded down the rear stairs. A door slammed open and shut.

Monk went down the stairs also. He did not take time to look at Ham. He was confident that his partner could handle himself.

Monk flung the door open and found himself in a dark, wide, deserted space behind the night spot. A stone's throw away was a black, impenetrable curtain—a border of woods.

Dry brush snapped as Monk tried to pierce the cold, dark gloom with his eyes. He pumped a shot in the direction of the sound. The heavy gun jumped in his fist.

Only a heavy silence came from the woods.

Keeping down low, moving off to the left away from the rear doorway of the building, Monk started a careful approach toward the woods. There was still no further sound of brush crackling.

He heard movement somewhere behind him, to his right.

He paused, turned. “Ham?”

The sound going quickly across the yard was the noise a scurrying rat makes running across a roof.

THE little guy! Monk tried to see him, but the dark curtain of the nearby woods was a perfect screen. Regardless, he sent a shot that way.

And there came a flash and gun sound from the other direction, off to the left, where he had heard the big man enter the woods. The guy had another gun!

Monk dropped flat on the ground. He did not fire again. The big guy would be watching for the flash, and there was no protecting cover anywhere.

He waited, wondering about Ham, listening for the slightest sound over there in the blackness that would give him some kind of a target.

Breathless seconds passed. Then, softly, Ham's voice!

“I'm right behind you,” whispered Ham. He wanted to be certain his quick-acting partner didn't shoot him by mistake.

“Keep down,” warned Monk, quietly.

Monk's eyes continued to watch the blackness ahead. He could see better now. An opening took shape in the trees, and he saw that it was a roadway, no doubt a service driveway that came in behind the club. The roadway cut through the woods and probably came out on the main highway somewhere nearby.

Monk recalled how the dainty little guy had entered the club dining room shortly after their arrival. He must have been in that car that had trailed them. But when they had waited there in the cab, in the parking area beside the building, no other car had entered. Which told Monk it must have been driven in the other way, through the woods, and was hidden there now.

He quickly explained this to Ham.

“Sneak around front and get the cab. Step on it. They'll make a break for it any minute!” Then, worried, “You all right, Ham?”

“That little squirt had a knife. Tried to cut me. Slashed my coat, dammit!”

“You hurt?”

“I’m all right.”

There was a stretch of lawn on this side of the long, rambling building, some shrubs, a few scattered trees. Ham disappeared, the shrubs screening him.

Monk got up and started toward the woods. He was not the type to wait for things to happen. He decided a couple of skunks needed smoking out.

The gun cracked.

This time Monk heard the thin whine of the pellet uncomfortably close to his head.

Immediately he got down on his belly again. The gun flash had come from a new direction. They were moving around. The roadway! That's where it came from.

He braced his left elbow on the ground, rested the gun across his left palm, and sent two shots searching into the woods.

He heard the car motor start. Instantly the engine roared. He could tell the car was moving. There were no lights showing.

Monk jumped up and muttered, “Dammit!” He wondered what the blazes was keeping the cab driver and Ham. Then he saw headlight beams showing around the other side of the rambling building. He started running toward the sound of the approaching car. He came around the rear of the club.

HAM was driving. Monk leaped on the running board beside him. Ham called out, “Had to drive it myself. The hackie's out front yelling murder.”

The moving car's headlamps picked out the road through the woods. Monk yelled, “They've got a car, like I said. They just left. Can't you get this thing out of second gear?”

Monk clung to the frame of the open window as Ham sent the car leaping into the curving woods road. The other car was out of sight.

Their headlamps bored a white funnel through the trees. The road kept curving, enough that the other machine remained out of sight.

Then, suddenly, the narrow driveway ended abruptly in a cross lane through the woods. Dust floating in the air told them the first car had swung right. Ham jammed the wheels that way.

One headlight blinked out. Then the other, accompanied by the sound of a lead pellet ripping through the metal headlamp reflector.

“Keep going!” bellowed Monk.

“I am, you dope!” snapped Ham. “But I can't see!” He had to slow down. He drove more by feel than by sight, letting the wheels find the ruts in the narrow road.

It was a full two minutes before the road curved out to the main highway. Ham drew up, jumped out.

Both of them listened.

The chilly night was quiet. The other car could have gone either way along the main road. It would have been impossible to trail the machine anyway—without headlights.

“We’d better see if Angela is all right,” said Monk. He climbed back into the cab with Ham. The lawyer drove back down the highway toward the roadhouse.

He said, “She didn’t faint.”

“Huh?” said Monk.

“Only a girl as nimble as her could have done it so neatly. It was the break we needed, and she knew it. I want to thank her. She got up and ran into her room just before I took out after the little guy.”

“I’ll say we’ve got to thank her!”

They turned into the club parking area. Apparently the sound of the band had covered any noise of the shots. Everyone was still inside the place.

Except the cab driver. He appeared out of the darkness and ran up to the car, as Ham pulled up behind the building.

“Now, look,” he started. “You guys pay me and I get out of here. Ten bucks and I go away and I don’t ask any questions. Me, I’m a peaceful man. I . . .” He saw the smashed headlamps. His hands clutched his cheeks. “Now lissen—” he started in a wailing voice.

Ham and Monk entered the rear door and hurried up the stairs. Monk was first into the dancer’s small dressing room.

“Angela, we sure didn’t mean to—”

He drew up with a jerk. Things were in disorder. The clothes closet door hung open.

“Maybe—” Ham started to say.

The cab driver arrived in the doorway. He asked, “You looking for a girl?”

“Where is she?” demanded Monk.

“She had a suitcase, and I guess it was her car. She got in and drove away. Imagine—she only had on a bathrobe!”

## Chapter XI

DOC SAVAGE was incapable of movement. His brain seemed to be all right, but he simply couldn’t wiggle a finger. He guessed he was lying on his back.

He knew his brain was functioning because he could plainly see the snow. White snow, millions of particles of it. It came down in a steady driving curtain all around him.

Strangely, it did not feel like snow on his face. It should have been cold, and wet, touching him as it fell. Instead it was very hot. Funny about the snow, he thought.

He blinked his eyes. Probably it would be wise if he got up and found some sort of shelter. It wasn't very smart lying there in the snow—especially hot snow. There was no sense to that. He started to raise up. At least, he thought he did.

Nothing happened. He was absolutely helpless. Come on, body, get up! Move! What's wrong with you?

Body ignored him. It just wandered away from there and said the hell with you. His brain was left behind. And his eyes. His eyes watched the snowflakes. They kept pelting him relentlessly and they were as hot as boiling water. They got into his mouth and gagged him.

He coughed.

The sound scared the snowflakes away. They retreated. They became hundreds of little marching columns, all in neat rows, far off.

Then the columns started marching toward him from all sides. Mass attack! The columns broke up, deployed, and each individual snowflake started an independent attack upon him.

Next, they started shooting darts at him. He knew they were darts, because he felt the tiny prickling shocks all over his body. He tingled all over.

He'd had enough of this!

He concentrated every faculty on getting up from there, away from the snow. Sweat rolled off his brow. Muscles strained. For the barest instant he was able to think more clearly and he knew something was wrong with him. Get up! Get up!

Doc gave a tremendous jerk. Whatever it was he had been lying on was no longer beneath him. He was falling. He fell through space for a long time.

Finally he struck the floor. It jarred beneath him. He was flat on the floor, face down.

But he couldn't push himself up. Arms, legs, his entire body had pins stuck to it all over. His muscles were soggy sponges. Sweat continued to roll off his face in sheets.

Briefly, his mind cleared again.

As though he were viewing a strip of movie film, tiny pictures flashed before him. Each was a frame in the film, and was there only an instant. They came one after the other.

THERE was one about Ham and Monk. Their hotel, that was it. He had gone there. Why? He couldn't remember.

Then Higgins.

Higgins, the big lieutenant of detectives who looked fat, and wasn't. Higgins was trying to tell him something. Higgins had the wrong slant on the case, though, and ought to be told. Doc would put him straight . . .

The sanitarium, that was it!

Doc had gone there. He remembered talking to Anne, the banker's invalid sister, there in the big, old, quaint second-floor bedroom of the Beacon Hill house. Anne must have told him about the sanitarium part of it. She had known, and she had always wondered . . .

An office, a doctor's white, efficient, orderly-looking office. He had been talking to someone, an assistant the doctor had called in.

Big jovial Hank Watson, the flyer, was in it somewhere. Oh, yes. Hank was to meet him here at the sanitarium. Hank was to follow along later.

He had to warn Hank Watson, he remembered now. He had to warn him because the same thing was going to happen to Hank! They'd trick him the same way!

Doc had been going down a hallway with the assistant director of the sanitarium. They'd been talking. "We'll see Doctor Kirk," the man had been saying. "He handled that case. Right this way, sir."

A door, a key turning in a lock, a room beyond. A dark room. He had drawn back, suddenly cautious. But too late. Men came out of the room and there was a fight. He remembered this now. A terrific fight. The lights were suddenly out and they were fighting and the men, guards apparently, overpowered him.

The pin pricks!

They had jabbed something in his arm as several powerful men held him. They had done it several times.

He'd been drugged!

Doc found himself half pushed up from the hard floor. His body was soaked with perspiration. He hung there, his body so tired he couldn't move any further. He looked around him.

It was a room, a small, immaculately white room. There was a single door that looked solid and impenetrable. But he had to get to the door. It appeared to be the only exit from the small white room. It was the only way out.

His arms gave way and he collapsed to the hard floor. His eyes closed. Sleep! It would be so pleasant to just lie there and sleep for a long, long time.

Get up! Get up!

You're drugged. You've got to fight off the sleep and the drug and warn Hank Watson. Drink some water. Drink a gallon of water. But there *wasn't* any water!

He lay there, unmoving.

DOC had no way of telling how much more time passed. Minutes? Hours? How could he tell? He found himself still lying on the floor.

The snowflakes had gone away. The prickling was still all over his skin. He dragged himself to his feet. He saw the bed. He took two steps and started to go to sleep again and clutched wildly at the metal bedpost. He held onto the cold metal bedpost and muttered grimly, "Stay awake, stay awake. It's your

only chance!”

He was so very tired.

Doc forced himself to let go of the bedpost and stand erect. Every nerve in his big frame cried out in protest. It would be the nicest thing in the world just to lie down a little while. The soft bed, eyes closed, comfort . . .

He walked. Back and forth, swaying, head reeling. He kept his gaze away from the bed. Stay on his feet, that was the thing. Walk, walk, walk!

How much more time passed he did not know. The tingling left his toes. He felt strength creeping back into his finger tips. Slowly, though, he was overcoming it instead of allowing the powerful drug to overcome him. Give him another hour and he might have some strength. Then he'd go to work on the heavy door.

But fate was against him.

He heard heavy footsteps approaching along the hall outside the room less than five minutes later. The sound told him there was more than one man.

And Doc didn't have the strength to push over a chair! If they'd only waited a while longer . . .

There was only one thing he could do. Lie down. Pretend. Let them think the drug had taken total effect. His only hope now was in stalling for a little more time, until the dope had worn off.

He got on the bed, face down, and lay still.

A key turned in the heavy door and it opened cautiously. A man's voice said, “All right?”

“Yeah,” the second man said. “Come on.”

“Better be sure!”

“Hell, Doc Savage has enough dope in him to keep him out for a week!”

“Yeah, but he's in perfect shape. You saw the battle he put up. It took six of us!”

“So I gave him six times the usual dose. You think I was taking any chances, pal?”

“Okay, then.”

Hands took hold of Doc and swung him over on his back. He was as limp as a dead man. The men grunted. Doc's eyes were closed, every part of him completely relaxed.

When he felt the ropes suddenly fall, snakelike, across his body, he had to resist the impulse to struggle. He wouldn't have had a chance. He was still too weak. He had to bide his time—if there *was* time!

He was securely bound and trussed. A gag was placed in his mouth, and taped. Bandages were also fastened across his eyes.

“Get the cart,” said one of the men.

Doc heard rubber tires making tacky sounds on the waxed linoleum floor. He was placed on a flat, hard surface, and then they were wheeling him along hallways. A sheet had been placed completely over him.

He was on a hospital cart.

Then he felt the sharp coolness of night air. There was another man now. The cart was loaded in what must have been an ambulance. He felt the wheels locked into place with clamps. Another rope tied him securely to the carriage-like affair.

He didn't recognize any of the voices.

Then the three men climbed in the seat and they drove off. He could hear everything they said, for the seat itself was inside the long body of the ambulance.

One of the men said—the third one who had apparently joined them, “So we're going to take him to Vermont?”

“Safer, huh?”

“Yeah. Higgins is busting the town wide open. The law might move in any minute. Wouldn't we look cute with a corpse on our hands?”

“Wouldn't we, though?”

“Especially this guy Savage!”

“Yeah. Vermont's better. Nobody'll ever know.”

There was silence for a little while. There were traffic sounds. These soon thinned out, and so Doc estimated they were driving westward out of the city. Any other direction, and there would have been traffic for a longer time. The sanitarium was in the west end, the Back Bay section.

The jouncing of the car was a boon to Doc. Otherwise he would have surely gone to sleep, the temptation was so overpowering. But the jolts stirred his brain. Will-power was locked in combat with the drug.

One of the men said, “How did Jigger and Al make out with the other two Doc Savage guys?”

“Jigger followed them when they left the hotel. He called us from the Seaview. Him and Al will handle it.”

**AIRPORT!**

Doc remembered the questions he had asked the man in the control tower at the field. There had been no report yet. Doc had planned to call. And now . . .

He was trying to estimate time as the ambulance moved through the night. As near as he could tell, it was about a half hour until they rolled onto the airfield. He heard the inertia starter of a plane motor. The motor took hold, coughed, then settled into a steady drone. Another motor followed. They seemed to be directly underneath the engines.

The ambulance had stopped moving. He was being unloaded. Doc had to strain his ears now to hear the men's voices above the sound of the engines. Luckily, they were yelling, in order to make themselves heard.

“Nice timing, kid,” someone said. “We told them we had a body to take along tonight, but just the same it's best we don't stall around.”

Someone answered, “This air freight gag's the thing, all right. You can carry *anything* and no questions asked.”

Then they were inside the plane. Doc was unstrapped from the cart and roughly dumped on the floor. His other bindings were still in place. The men's voices faded toward the rear. The space inside the plane must have been the size of a boxcar!

Someone said, “All right, you two guys. Back to the hospital. You don't know a thing. Never heard of Doc Savage.”

“Of course not.” The speaker laughed harshly. “What does he look like?”

“He ain't going to look very good.”

Doors closed as though a garage were being shut. Almost instantly they were taxiing down the long field. It was a large twin-engine job, Doc could tell by the sound of the motors and the heavy, solid movement of the plane across the ground. Finally it swung, the brakes were applied, and the pilot made his checkoff. The plane swung slightly again and was on the smooth runway.

The motors stepped up to a thunderous, vibrant roar. They started down the runway. They were airborne swiftly, and so Doc knew they were flying light. Soon the pilot feathered the props and the engines quieted. They settled down to steady flight.

Doc wondered who else might be in the plane besides the pilot and the one man who had boarded the plane from the sanitarium. He had no way of telling, for he could hear no one talking. They were up forward in the cockpit.

Vermont!

They had mentioned that at the hospital, somewhere in that confused past while the drug had been taking hold of him.

He linked this with the information Green's sister, Anne, had given him up there on Beacon Hill tonight. Or was it tonight? How much time had passed?

Anne had told him of the lodge in Vermont that her brother had turned over to his estranged wife. No, he never went up there to the place anymore. But Sybil had gone there a few times. She was a strange girl, the sister had told him. There were those times when she had gone away, alone, telling no one . . .

The lodge, Anne had said, was near Burlington. Doc knew there was an airport there. It was on the air route to Montreal.

He estimated distance and flying time. The plane, a two-motored job like this, should make the run in a little over an hour from Boston. That was little time, and every moment of it was precious—if he wanted to live!

His mind was much clearer now. Perhaps it was the altitude that helped him. Doc started his task methodically, calmly, knowing that everything depended upon coolness and speed.

Fighting the drug as he had, he was still wet with perspiration. That helped. The ropes that bound him moved just a trifle when he worked his arms.

## Chapter XII

THEY had bound his arms down at his sides with the cords, and not behind him. They had done this so they could lay him flat on the hospital cart.

He was able to wriggle his fingers. He kept working them, bending them, striving to reach a rope that passed around his body.

At the same time he chewed on the gag in his mouth. It was a ball of gauze, and he kept biting at it with his teeth. The dryness in his throat, the gauze choked him. He tried to stretch his mouth wide, working his jaws, to loosen the adhesive that held the gag in place.

The adhesive tore at his cheeks. He bit on the gauze and swelled the muscles in his cheeks. The adhesive gave slightly. Hope flamed within him.

Sweat rolled down his face, and got beneath the adhesive, and this helped too. He could open his mouth a little wider now. He strained until his jaw almost cracked.

The adhesive gave way. He spat out the gag.

Time was passing all too quickly. How much did he have left?

Now he bent his head forward, his entire body from the waist forward. Supple muscles aided him. Another man's back could not have withstood the tremendous strain.

He bent double. His teeth found the heavy cord around his waist. He worked at the cord with his strong teeth, pulling it sideways, knowing there must be a knot somewhere.

Finally the knot touched the fingers of his right hand. Quickly his nails dug into the fastening.

He estimated it took a half hour before he finally worked the knot open. His nails were torn and bleeding. He had to work in complete darkness, for his eyes were still bandaged.

Then the cord loosened. Within moments his arms were free of the loops that had been passed around them to hold them at his sides. He immediately tore the bandage from his eyes.

It was dark! It was night. He lay in the big cargo hold of the plane, and he saw the dark outlines of two small windows, but it was dark night still.

A moment later he had his feet unbound and he was free.

His ears had cracked once. They snapped again, and he knew they were losing altitude fast. He listened to the motors. They were coming down for a landing!

Doc was on his feet, gripping metal framework that separated the storage bins where small cargo was usually carried. He moved forward toward the pilot's cockpit.

Already the plane was smoothing out in the glide path to the airport.

The doorway to the cockpit was not closed, as it would be on a commercial airliner. It was fastened

open. Three men were in the cockpit.

The pilot was the tall, gaunt man without eyebrows—the chauffeur, Jenkins!

Another man, a stranger, sat beside him at the dual controls.

Behind them, in an extra seat, sat the third man. He was heavy, dark.

Each had his seat strap buckled as the plane came in for the landing. The man in the extra seat held a gun across his knees.

Doc heard the pilot saying, “The minute we’re on the ground, go back there and get ready to unload him. The sedan will be here to meet us. It’ll be dawn pretty quick, so we’ve got to hurry.”

The spotlights came on in the forward edges of the big wings. The runway lined up below them. In a moment they would land.

Doc swiftly returned through the big cargo hold of the plane. He had no gun, no weapon of any kind. He imagined all three men carried guns. And a car was meeting them. That meant still additional opposition.

His only chance to remain alive, for the moment, was in escape!

And so he worked his way through the long cavernous interior of the cargo plane. He crouched near the rear door—doors that could be opened wide to admit a crate or a truck.

Wheels touched the runway. They bounced a little, then rumbled along the runway. He felt the pilot start to apply the brakes.

Doc had to judge his move to the split second. A flyer himself, he was able to estimate ground speed of the plane even in the darkness where he was hunched down.

He heard the heavy buckle of a seat belt hit the floor as one man unloosened his belt. Now!

Doc had been holding the big door lever ready. He gave it a yank, flung open the doors, faced backward and dropped. The door opening at the rear of the cargo plane was at truck platform height. It was only a short drop to the ground. The plane had left the runway and was rolling across grass.

DOC hit, doubled up, rolled forward like a rubber ball. He snapped to his feet and started running. He dashed across the wide field that was the quiet, dark airport. At this pre-dawn hour, the field was deserted. Only the red marker lights glowed eerily in the solitude.

He made out the dark outline of a long, low-built car moving along the far side of the field without

headlights. The car the pilot said was meeting them!

Doc swerved, sought refuge. The plane motors had been killed. There was no sound except the faint purr of the dark car over there, moving up toward the plane.

They'd search for him, naturally. They'd comb the field.

Ahead, Doc saw the square outline of the airport office. It was in darkness also. Atop the office was the glass-enclosed field tower. Its roof was flat . . .

They'd never suspect he was right *above* the field, close to them!

The porch leading to the office contained angular wooden supports to the tower room above. Doc clutched a support, swung his legs up, hooked the edge of the platform-like extension above him. He heaved up to the tower room platform.

The second story was no more than seven or eight feet high. He leaped upward, caught the flat roof edge with his hands. An instant later he had swung himself up to the roof. He flattened out, waiting.

They were quiet about it. For awhile he could hear no sound. Then he heard them moving about in the darkness. Voices spoke softly close by. He couldn't distinguish what was being said. The voices faded.

Somewhere in the darkness hangar doors creaked open. He heard the plane trundled inside. The doors closed.

More silence.

The field took shape there beneath him, and he realized there was a vague grayness in the sky now. Dawn was starting to break. Soon he saw the hangars, and a car parked over there by one of them.

The sedan—the custom-built sedan with the porthole type rear window!

The oncoming dawn apparently worried the searchers. They were holding a conference beside the car. Then Doc saw them climb into the machine.

It went away from there, following the airport road out to a main thoroughfare. Soon the sound of its motor faded into silence.

DOC came down off the roof.

The first thing he did, when he was certain that the sedan was not going to return, was to hurry across the empty airfield to the hangar where he had seen them lock up the cargo plane.

He realized the hangar would be securely locked. He wasn't interested in this, or the plane itself. It was the name painted across the front of the hangar that he wanted to see.

The letters took form in the scant early-morning light: CHARTER AIR FREIGHT, INC.

Doc stood there, frowning. He remembered his conversation with the man in the tower at the airport outside Boston—the field near which the custom-built sedan had so mysteriously vanished. He had requested a report on every plane that had left the airport early last evening—at least he *thought* it was

last night.

The man in the tower had said that would take time, since Doc wanted every flight *destination* checked upon. In fact, he had asked for a report—via phone—from each destination itself. He had asked for information only on cargo-carrying transports.

He had realized the checkup would take a little time. He had planned to call the tower back after his visit to the sanitarium. And then . . .

Doc was trying to find an unfastened window to the field office beneath the tower. Someone would soon be reporting for duty. But he couldn't wait. He had to call the Boston field. Also he had to contact Monk and Ham . . .

The windows and door were locked. So he picked up a small stone, smashed a glass in the door window, reached inside and unlatched the door. He went immediately to one of the phones on the office desk and put through a call to the Boston airport.

It took five minutes to make the connection. A different dispatcher was on duty in the airfield tower. But the man had a report that had been turned over to him, in the event that Doc Savage called.

Doc said quickly, “Never mind the other reports. I'm interested only in Charter Air Freight, Incorporated. Last night”—there was an electric clock on the desk, and it showed month and date, which told him that it *had* been last night—“one of their cargo jobs left there for Burlington, Vermont. Am I correct?”

“That's correct, Mr. Savage,” said the man.

“Who owns Charter Air Freight?”

“Just a minute. . .”

Then Doc listened as several names were read to him. “Several of them have an interest in it,” he was told.

One of the names mentioned, verified a suspicion that had been in Doc's mind. He said, “That's all—right now. Thank you.” He hung up. It was more imperative than ever that he reach Monk and Ham!

He put through the second call.

## Chapter XIII

MONK was still puzzled as he and his dapper partner reached their hotel in a cab.

“I don't understand it,” he complained. “Green's house all in darkness like that? Where's Doc? Where's Velma? Certainly that sister, Anne, should be there. How could she leave? They say she's an invalid—”

Monk said, “Dammit, how do *I* know? Maybe there's some message from Doc here at the hotel.”

But when they picked up their room key, there was no message for them in the box. Ham's gaze touched

a stack of newspapers on the room clerk's counter. Early morning editions had just been delivered.

Monk saw the headline. He made no comment, however, until Ham had purchased a paper and they were away from the desk, heading for an elevator. The lobby was deserted.

“So Higgins finally gave it to the papers!” said Monk, indicating the headline.

Ham said, “He probably couldn't hold them off any longer. I guess Higgins has the case wrapped up.”

The headline read:

## BANKER DISAPPEARS WITH HUGE SUM!

Ham read the news beneath the headline as they rode up in the elevator. He gave Monk a quick summary as his eyes raced down the full column. “Higgins says the 'disappearance' was a clever scheme on the part of Ernest Green to rob the institution he worked for. He ties this disappearance in with the recent robberies of two of Green's branches.” He looked up a moment. “It seems that same custom-built sedan was seen at one of the branch holdups. It disappeared the same as it did last night.” Ham read some more.

“Here's something!” he added. “Higgins has it figured that Green's wife, Sybil, is in the deal with him. The two of them, Green and his wife, planned the whole thing. Higgins states the case will be completed the moment they locate Sybil.”

“This,” mused Monk, “is going to be tough on Velma Lang. She had a lot of faith in that boss of hers.”

“Yes,” agreed Ham.

They walked down the hallway to their room.

“Funny about that sister, Anne, though.” Monk frowned. “Wonder why no one was there at the Green's house.”

Ham was puzzled too.

“But I'm more worried about Doc,” he said.

They obtained the answers to both questions a moment later. They found their room door unlocked and big, blond Hank Watson, the aviation editor, sitting in there waiting for them.

THE big flyer jumped up, relief on his face. “I identified myself at the desk,” he told them. “So they let me come up. They know me here.”

“Where's Doc?” Monk asked immediately.

“Vermont,” said Hank Watson quickly. “At least, if I'm any good at sleuthing, that's where I *think* he is.

And we've got to get up there fast. I've called the airport. I've got a plane chartered and waiting. I thought you'd never get here."

He went on to explain: "Doc visited this sanitarium tonight. I was to meet him there later. When I got there he was gone, but strangely, his car was still parked nearby. No one there claimed to know anything about it."

"Sounds bad," commented Ham.

The flyer nodded. "But I got a call from the airport. Doc tried to contact you fellows here. He's waiting at the airport in Burlington. He's found out something pretty important, I guess. So I went ahead and made arrangements for the plane."

"Swell!" cried Monk. "Let's get started."

Ham wanted to know, "How long will it take?"

"I've rented a fast job. About an hour from the airport," Hank said.

They hurried out. The flyer had Doc's big coupé parked around the corner on a side street. Several cars were lined up there, parked for the night. Dawn had broken, but the sky overhead was still lead-gray. The sun had not yet come up.

As they headed toward the car, Hank was telling them, "Doc Savage called from the airport in Burlington. Near Burlington is where that lodge is where Sybil Green used to go. The solution to the mystery must be there . . ."

As they climbed into the coupé, Hank Watson's words became indistinguishable to the red-haired girl sitting in the car directly behind the Doc Savage machine. She raised up as the coupé pulled quickly away from the curb. Her blue eyes were frightened, but at the same time they held determination.

Etched on her brain were the words the blond man had been saying. Vermont—yes, Sybil used to go there! She thought perhaps she ought to tell the police right away. Perhaps *they* could do something. And she was terrified. She wanted protection. Seeing the police at once was the logical thing to do!

She drove to headquarters.

THE fast, single-engine plane went into the traffic pattern around Burlington airport. The sun was well up now and the view was serenely beautiful.

The field was built on a plateau just west of the tree-shaded town itself. Not far away were the old, vine-covered buildings of the University of Vermont. The town itself was built on a hill, and at the foot of this was Lake Champlain, wide at this point, the peaks of the Adirondack Mountains visible on the far side of the lake.

Hank told his two passengers as he started to put the plane down: "I called here before we took off. There will be a private car available. Doc's probably waiting." His eyes were worried a moment. "Do you think we'll be in any danger?"

Monk laughed gleefully. "Mister, trouble's what we have instead of breakfast." He eyes widened. "Say, we haven't *had* any breakfast, have we?"

Ham said, "You're not very worried about Velma, are you, halfwit?"

Monk's eyes instantly sobered. "Say, that's right! Where is she?"

"I have an idea she's a captive up here," said Hank Watson. He looked upset.

Then, for the next few moments, he was occupied putting the plane down on the runway.

The moment they had rolled to a stop, near the far end of the field, the car came up alongside them, just beyond a fence.

Doc Savage stepped out of the car.

"Hurry!" was all he said.

AN attendant was coming out to take care of the plane. Doc pulled up to a gate to meet them. They climbed into the car, obviously a rented machine somewhat the worse for wear.

"What have you found out?" Hank Watson asked the bronze man.

“We'll soon know. The police are up there now—at the lodge. It's an isolated camp along the lake. We've got them trapped,” Doc said.

Doc was driving, following a road that skirted the town of Burlington. Beyond the city limits he swung toward the lake, following tree-shaded roads that wound downhill. Occasionally they could see the wide lake spread out there beneath them.

They passed a summer colony of bungalows. These dropped behind. The road that Doc next followed wound through a pine forest near the lake. It was shady in the woods, and quiet. The coolness of fall was in the morning air.

Doc drove for another five minutes. Then he pulled up alongside the narrow woods road and motioned everyone out.

“From here,” he said, “we'd better proceed on foot.”

From some distance away, muffled by the trees, they heard the sound of a shot. Hank Watson stiffened. “What's that?” he demanded.

“That's trouble,” Monk said. He looked expectant. “I've got that gun I took off the guy at the Club Seaview. But I've only got a couple of shells left in it.”

It appeared Doc Savage had two guns he had obtained from the local police. “All they could spare,” he told them. “They have only a small police force here. They'll need any help we can give them.”

He handed one of the guns to Ham, kept the other for himself. “Do you have a gun?” he asked Hank Watson.

The flyer shook his head.

“Be careful, then,” Doc warned.

He had some extra shells of the right calibre for Monk's weapon. The chemist loaded the weapon and dropped the additional shells in his pocket.

“Let's go,” he said anxiously.

Doc led the way, explaining further, “They are barricaded in the lodge. It's on the edge of the lake. They've got Velma Lang in there with them.”

Hank Watson gasped with dismay.

“Is she all right?”

Doc did not answer the question. He had pushed on ahead, and apparently had not heard. Soon, though, he drew up. He held up his hand in caution. “Better spread out now.” He motioned to Hank Watson. “You'd better stick with me.”

They heard a volley of shots, louder now, directly ahead. But they could see nothing because of the thick growth of pine trees.

Then, abruptly, a steady *rat-tat-tat-tat* shattered the soft stillness of the morning.

“Machine gun!” said Monk excitedly.

He went racing off. Ham followed.

Doc steered Hank Watson in another direction. The big blond fellow's features were pale. "Where are you going?" he asked somewhat shakily.

"It sounds like the police are smoking them out of the lodge," said Doc. "We'll approach from the back way."

Shortly the pine trees ended in a clearing alongside the lake. The lodge site was on a bluff overlooking the water. In front of them was the big rustic lodge building itself. Both saw a back kitchen door standing open.

Doc nodded. "They've made a break for it, all right."

The rattle of the machine gun came again. Above it the throb of a motorboat, staccato in the clear, cool morning air. The sound of the motor ended just as they dashed toward the high bluff edge.

The explosion followed.

A MOMENT later they saw the craft out on the lake. Greasy oil smeared the water. The motorboat was sinking. Four men's heads bobbed up and down out there in the water. One head disappeared. It did not come up again. The three other figures kept swimming, away from shore. The machine gun ripped loose a volley again. Doc and Hank Watson glanced downward. Police officers were down there on the strip of sandy beach. One held the deadly weapon. It was he who had sent a blast out across the water.

The swimming figures saw the pellets strike the water ahead of them. They turned, started back toward shore. Capture, obviously, was better than death!

Two police officers were with the third officer who was handling the machine gun.

Doc saw Monk and Ham join them.

Hank Watson, still upset, touched the bronze man's arm.

"Velma—" he started.

Doc nodded, "Come on."

They went toward the house, up the rear steps, through the doorway that had been flung open. Wood in the door was splintered from gunshots.

They moved through the pine-walled rooms of the lodge. The place was beautifully furnished, large, spacious. They came to a huge living room. Indian rugs lay on the polished, broken-length pegged flooring. There was a massive open fireplace.

"Velma!" Hank Watson called out, "Velma!"

The slender, tall brunette appeared on the stairway from rooms above. No longer was she serene, with that quietly thoughtful look about her.

Her eyes stared fixedly as she walked stiffly down the stairs to meet them. She seemed dazed.

She said unsteadily, "I . . . I thought I was going to be killed. The police surrounded the house. They were shooting . . . I hid upstairs."

"Good God!" breathed Hank Watson. "You were a captive here?"

She nodded. She moved slowly across the room and sat down on the edge of the sofa. Shock seemed to grip her.

Monk came into the living room. He saw the banker's secretary. A grin lighted his homely features.

"Velma, don't you worry any more," he said brightly. "Everything's under control. One dead and three captured."

The woman looked up. She looked at Monk as if she had never seen him before in her life. There was no expression in her eyes.

Doc said to Monk. "Stay here a minute," and went out.

He met the local police officers outside. They had the prisoners handcuffed. One was tall, gaunt, without eyebrows or hair. He was breathing hard. He was Jenkins, the chauffeur.

The other two men he had not seen before. They wore expensive, custom made clothes. The clothes were now sodden. Doc looked them over.

He said to the police officers, "Those two will be the pair who posed as the borrowers at Green's bank. I'll call Higgins in Boston and have him send detectives up here to pick these three up."

Ham came up. His eyes were excited. "Doc, Ernest Green was in that boat. He was dead, weighted down with irons. They had him in the boat ready to bury him in the lake!" He indicated the local police officers. "They told me."

Doc said quietly, "I kind of figured Green was already dead." He explained about the cargo plane. "They ran the custom-built sedan right onto the cargo plane and flew up here early last night. That's why it disappeared so mysteriously."

Ham said, "Another man who was helping these guys just drowned out there in the lake. We'll have to drag for him. That leaves two more." He explained to Doc what had happened to him and Monk at the Club Seaview.

Doc seemed to have it already figured out.

He told Ham, "That will be a little fancily dressed man named jigger and a pal of his. I've already called Higgins in Boston and they'll be picked up. They're covering every route out of the city. I called from the airport."

"What about Green's invalid sister—the one named Anne?"

"I took care of that last night," said Doc, "before I visited the sanitarium. Since she was the only one left who knew anything about Sybil, she was in grave danger. I had Higgins arrange to have her taken to a place where she would be safe. She's with Higgins's wife, in their home."

"And Sybil?" Ham was tense.

"Tell them," said Doc to one of the policemen from the nearby town.

The officer said grimly, “Sybil was known around town. She used to visit here. She's buried right on this property. She committed suicide about four months ago.”

Ham's mouth was wide. “Then it wasn't Sybil at *all*?”

Doc shook his head.

He supervised the loading of the prisoners into a police car. One man was left to guard the three captives.

The remaining two officers, Ham and Doc returned to the lodge living room. The officers stood aside, watching Doc Savage, both somewhat filled with pride that they were working with this famous man.

Velma Lang still sat there on the divan, shaken, her eyes sort of glazed. Hank Watson was talking to her. Monk stood to one side, trying to look like a man looks when he is jealous. He looked like an overgrown school boy pouting.

Doc said quietly, “All right, Miss Lang. Shall we go now? I'm afraid the honeymoon is over—for you!”

## Chapter XIV

HANK WATSON leaped to his feet. Monk and Ham looked shocked. The woman stood up, facing Doc Savage, looking at him steadily. Her eyes became very green and very fixed.

“Yes,” Doc said without feeling. “Velma master-minded the whole thing. Too many things pointed to her. She had been in love with Ernest Green—or rather, with his wealth—for years. He turned her down for Sybil. But Velma didn't give up. She figured she could wait. But even after Green and Sybil were separated, the banker didn't make any proposals. Which left Velma a woman spurned.” His unusual flake-gold eyes flickered. “There is no one more dangerous!”

Velma Lang kept looking at him. Hank Watson seemed speechless.

Doc continued: “Only Miss Lang could have made that switch in appointments for the borrowers who came in about the loan. That bothered me all along. She herself made the original appointment—and *she* changed it. That gave her two hundred thousand right there—in addition to what was stolen in the two recent holdups at the branches.”

Monk asked, “But the gardenia business, Doc?”

“Again, the subtleness of a woman,” Doc Savage pointed out. “Velma dropped a little of the perfume in the ventilating system at the bank just before she left yesterday afternoon. The odor was spread around when the system started up again.”

Anticipating Monk's next question, he added, “Velma herself registered at the hotel, planted the gardenia odor there again, then took you there—another ruse to point suspicion toward a woman already dead.”

Monk told Doc about the incident at the Club Seaview, the murder of a theatrical agent named Marty—Angela's friend.

Doc looked at Velma Lang. “You carefully eliminated all danger, didn't you? I imagine this Marty had learned something about Sybil. You had to shut him up.”

The answer was in her eyes, weirdly green as polished glass now, filled with a burning hate.

Abruptly she said acidly, “All right, damn you! Let's get it over with. You know enough now to be able to prove everything. What are we waiting for?”

She moved toward the waiting police officers.

Hank Watson leaped in front of her, facing Doc Savage and the others. The long target pistol had appeared from beneath his coat and now swept the room. He kept everyone covered.

“THE hell you will!” he said viciously. No longer did he look frightened or pale. His eyes were the eyes of a man who would swiftly kill.

“Fools!” he rapped. “Do you think *she* did it? I've loved her all these years. I've waited. I planned the whole thing. I wanted the money for her. I did it, I tell you!”

Doc was shaking his head slowly, watching the target pistol in Hank Watson's steady hand.

“No,” he said quietly. “You didn't plan it, Watson. You haven't got the brains for that. You received a dishonorable discharge from the air corps because of stupidity that once caused the death of your own flying mates. No, Velma planned everything—and you merely helped. You owned an interest in Charter Air Freight, and you had access to the planes. Velma flew up here last night. You were merely a dupe for her. Velma doesn't love anything—except money. Plus the fact that she hated Ernest Green.”

Hank Watson glanced swiftly at the brunette. “Tell them, darling. Tell them you had nothing at all to do with it . . .”

The women turned her head. That impersonal stare was in her glassy green eyes. She said without emotion:

“Why don't you shut up, you fool?” She spoke to big Hank Watson. “Of course, I did it. I've never loved you. We're both going to hang, so what's the difference. You might as well know.”

Silence, the taut stillness that followed her words, was tension-filled.

Everyone watched Hank Watson. As understanding slowly came to him, an almost insane light came into his eyes. He started laughing. It wasn't a pleasant laugh.

He pointed the gun at Doc Savage, cursed, cried out, “All right! All right! *I'll take everybody with me!*”

His finger jerked the trigger of the target pistol.

Doc Savage did not move.

He said calmly, “You got that pistol out of my car. It contains a safety catch that works differently than any other kind of safety device. By the time you figure it out, Monk will have taken the weapon away from you.”

Monk had already made his move. A snake couldn't have struck faster. The long-barreled pistol was in his hand.

The police took Velma Lang and the flyer out of there.

THE room was a small office at the Burlington police headquarters, in the city hall building that faced on Church Street. Doc put down the receiver and looked up. Ham and Monk were waiting for him.

“We'll have to go back to Boston after we finish up things here,” he said. “Higgins wants a few more questions answered. Oh, yes—he says Jigger, the prissy little fellow and his partner have been picked up. It seems that dancer named Angela gave them a lead.”

He glanced at Monk, a slight smile touched his mouth. “Especially, Monk, our friend Higgins wants to talk to you.”

“That big lug!” grumbled the chemist. “Why?”

“A little gag you pulled trying to get into the hotel with Ham, here, and Velma Lang. I believe you were trying to throw a supposed police plain-clothes man off the scent?”

“Yeah, but what—”

“The man you accused of stealing a woman's purse just happened to be the mayor himself. That's one you'll have to straighten out yourself!”

Ham did not see Doc's guarded wink—because Ham Brooks was doubled over howling with laughter.

THE END

