

DOC SAVAGE

THE TERRIBLE STORK

Kenneth Robeson

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WHO IS

DOC SAVAGE

The bronze giant, who with his five aides became world famous, whose name was as well known in the far regions of China and the jungles of Africa as in the skyscrapers of New York.

There were stories of Doc Savage's almost incredible strength; of his amazing scientific discoveries of strange weapons and dangerous exploits.

Doc had dedicated his life to aiding those faced by dangers with which they could not cope.

His name brought fear to those who sought to prey upon the unsuspecting. His name was praised by thousands he had saved.

DOC SAVAGE'S AMAZING CREW

"Ham," Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, was

never without his ominous, black sword cane.

"Monk," Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, just over five feet tall, yet over 260 pounds. His brutish exterior concealed the mind of a great scientist.

"Renny," Colonel John Renwick, his favorite sport was pounding his massive fists through heavy, paneled doors.

"Long Tom," Major Thomas J. Roberts, was the physical weakling of the crowd, but a genius at electricity.

"Johnny," William Harper Littlejohn, the scientist and greatest living expert on geology and archaeology.

**WITH THEIR LEADER, THEY WOULD
GO ANYWHERE, FIGHT ANYONE,
DARE EVERYTHING—SEEKING EXCITEMENT
AND PERILOUS ADVENTURE!**

Omnibus #1 THE ALL-WHITE ELF, THE RUNNING
SKELETONS, THE ANGRY CANARY, *and*
THE SWOONING LADY

Omnibus #2 THE MINDLESS MONSTERS, THE
RUSTLING DEATH, KIND JOE CAY, *and*
THE THING THAT PURSUED

Omnibus #3 THE SPOOK OF GRANDPA EBEN,

MEASURES FOR A COFFIN, THE THREE
DEVILS, *and* STRANGE FISH

Omnibus #4 MYSTERY ISLAND, ROCK SINISTER,
MEN OF FEAR, *and* THE PURE EVIL

Omnibus #5 NO LIGHT TO DIE BY, THE MONKEY
SUIT, LET'S KILL AMES, ONCE OVER
LIGHTLY, *and* I DIED YESTERDAY

Omnibus #6 THE AWFUL DYNASTY, THE
DISAPPEARING LADY, FIRE AND ICE, *and*
THE MAGIC FOREST

Omnibus #7 THE MEN VANISHED, FIVE FATHOMS
DEAD, THE TERRIBLE STORK, *and*
DANGER LIES EAST

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DOC SAVAGE

THE TERRIBLE STORK

I

"What? Sixty-five?" screamed the auctioneer. He clutched his forehead, indicating that the shock was about to kill him. He said, "I'm dying! I'm murdered!"

This got just one titter, from one man, out of the eighty or so in the auction room. The others were silent; it was hot in the room, the chairs were hard, and nothing much was happening.

"Sixty-five *dollars!*" the auctioneer said. "Who'll bid seventy?"

But this didn't get a laugh either, until he yelled, "Okay, okay, my error, the bid was sixty-five *cents*. Seventy? Do I hear seventy *cents?*"

Monk Mayfair, the famous chemist, said, "That auctioneer is quite a comedian. Bob Hope had better watch out."

Ham Brooks, the equally famous lawyer, shifted miserably on the hard wood chair. "He's about as unfunny as you are," Ham said, wishing he had a pillow to sit on. He stared at his black cane.

"Ain't I unfunnier 'n that?" Monk Mayfair asked. He was a short, wide, hairy man. It was obvious why he was called

Monk. "Shucks, now you got me worried," he said anxiously. "You've really got me worried."

"Worried about what?"

"When we're gonna get outa here," Monk said. "That's what's worrying me."

"I agree heartily," Ham said.

"Seventy," a voice said.

"Sold!" the auctioneer said.

"Oh, dry up!" muttered Ham. He wondered if a crack in the seat of the chair was going to catch him and pinch him. That was all he needed to make the afternoon complete.

Doc Savage asked, "Why don't you two take a nap?"

Doc Savage was a bronze-colored giant of a man who was conspicuous in the auction room in spite of the long raincoat he'd worn so as not to be conspicuous. Monk and Ham looked at Doc Savage. Ham asked, "Go to sleep? On these chairs!"

"Doc's being funny," Monk said. "He made a joke. Yes, sir, the auctioneer's humor is contagious." Monk's very large humorous mouth was all that saved his face from being frighteningly homely. He added, "No kidding, why don't we go somewhere else? What've we lost in here?"

Ham Brooks showed lively interest. "You bet! Go somewhere else. We've got the afternoon off, and we just

started out for a walk, got tired, and came in here for a rest. Now what are we staying for?"

"Why don't we repair to a burley-cue show?" Monk asked.

"That's two good ideas from you in a row," Ham said. "Goodness, what kind of vitamins are you taking?"

The auctioneer held up a small shiny metal statuette of some kind of a bird, apparently a stork. "Who'll start it at fifty cents?" asked the auctioneer.

"Fifty," a voice said.

"Fifty cents is bid. Who'll give—"

"Fifty *dollars* is bid," the bidder corrected.

Doc Savage straightened on his chair. Straightening made him taller than anyone in the room, enabled him to see over people's heads. He said, "What on earth!" His eyes, which had been sleepy, became wide with interest—his eyes were more gold than brown, like pools of flake gold. He added, "Fifty dollars for that thing!"

"What is that thing?" Ham pondered.

"Some kind of a boid," Monk said. "This is gettin' dull, pal. What say we scammo to the girlies?"

"Fifty *dollars*!" The auctioneer got his eyes back in their

sockets. "Who'll give a hundred?"

"Good God!" Monk sat up suddenly. "Fifty *dollars*?" He added, "Say, what's that thing made of, platinum?"

Clear and tight as a bell, a voice came from the other side of the auction room.

"Two hundred dollars," it said.

Monk swallowed. "My, my," he said.

Doc Savage had swung his head. The bell-like voice of the second bidder belonged to a clear-skinned young man who looked brown and outdoorsy.

"Five hundred!"

This was the first bidder again.

Doc located him. He saw a wide man who had blue eyes and the cherubic smile of a cupid.

Ham asked, "Know the bidders, Doc?"

"No."

The bell-voiced young man said, "Five hundred and one dollars is bid."

"A thousand," said the fat, wide, smiling man.

"A thousand and one."

"Two thousand." The fat, wide man's smile wasn't genuine. Apparently his face just happened to be shaped that way.

"Two thousand and one."

"Three thousand."

"Three thousand and one."

Monk swallowed.

"Five thousand."

"Five thousand and one," said the bell-voiced young man grimly.

Astonishment was sweeping the auction room. Here and there customers were getting to their feet in order not to miss anything; some still dozed, not knowing what was going on.

A lull had hit the bidding. Outside, the noises of Forty-sixth Street made a quarrelsome background. The auction room itself was large, forty feet wide and about sixty feet long. It was a ground-floor storeroom which, for lack of any more permanent tenant, had been rented to the auction company, together with an upstairs floor and mezzanine for storage purposes. The auction firm itself was not a large one, but it was reliable. It made a business of disposing of estates, usually art objects and furniture collections.

"Five thousand and two dollars," a voice said.

Doc Savage and Ham Brooks both started violently, for the

bid had come from between them. It was Monk Mayfair.

"You fool!" Ham was dumfounded. "You haven't got five thousand and two dollars!"

"Huh? Gosh, I haven't, have I?"

"Why'd you bid?" Ham demanded.

"The suspense got me," Monk muttered. "I guess I became hypnotized or something."

"What do you want with that thing?" Ham asked angrily.

"I don't want it." Monk became alarmed. "My God, do you reckon I'll get it?"

Ham looked at him bitterly. "I hope you do," he said. "I would like to see what you would do with a five-thousand-and-two-dollar tin stork."

"You think it's tin?"

"How the hell do I know what it's made of!" Ham was irritated with his friend. "If you think you're going to borrow a single thin dime off me to pay—"

"Ten thousand and three dollars," bid the bell-voiced young man.

"Whoosh!" Monk subsided gratefully. "Saved by the bell," he said. Sweat had popped out on his narrow forehead. "What'd I bid on the thing for?"

Doc Savage's flake-gold eyes were alert, interested. He said, "Ham, that thing can't be worth ten thousand." His size, which was considerable, was deceptive until one was close to him. "The intrinsic value of the statuette cannot possibly be ten thousand," he added.

"How about platinum?" Ham was doubtful. "Would it be worth that kind of money if it were platinum?"

"Very doubtful."

Monk had an idea. "Maybe it's got diamonds and rubies in it." He became enthused. "I'm gonna bid again!"

Doc and Ham eyed him in alarm.

"Ten thousand on something you don't know what it is!" The usually punctilious Ham was getting mixed up.

"Ten thousand and four dollars," Monk explained. "That's what I think I'll—"

"Fifteen thousand dollars!" bid the fat man. He seemed angry. His smile was beatific.

Monk swallowed.

"Go ahead, bid," Ham sneered at him. "You didn't have five thousand, so it won't hurt you to bid fifteen."

"Fifteen thousand and one," said bell-voice.

Doc Savage was on the edge of his chair. "Monk." He

nudged the homely chemist, directed, "Monk, go up and take a look at that thing. See what it is."

Monk batted his eyes. He was dazed by the bandying of so much money around an eight-inch-high statuette of a skinny bird, apparently made of tin. He seemed stupefied.

Ham said, "Dopey has dropped his marbles." He added, "While he's picking them up, I'll go look at that thing."

Doc shook his head. "Monk is a chemist. Let him look. Or both of you go look."

Ham leaped erect. "Come on, Gunga Din." He began tramping on toes, reaching the aisle. Monk lumbered after him, and the seat occupants hastily removed their toes from danger. Monk was mumbling, "I'm a chemist. I can tell what kind of tin that thing's made of. God bless us!"

The fat, smiling, cherub man had drawn a gun and was pointing it at Monk and Ham. "Get back!" he said. The gun was about two and a half pounds of blue steel, an impressive cannon. "Sit down!" he added. He sounded determined.

Monk and Ham halted.

"Hey!" Monk yelled. "That guy's got a gun!"

Suddenly this was no longer an amusing interlude in a dull afternoon.

Monk and Ham froze. There was nothing else they could do. Doc Savage instinctively ducked for safety. So did the others

who were quick thinkers.

"Here, here," said the auctioneer loudly. "Sit down! Don't interrupt the auction." He hadn't noticed the gun. "Sit down!" he yelled. Then he saw the gun and turned remarkably white.

Doc warned, "Be careful, Monk!"

Monk addressed the fat man loudly. He asked, "Brother, you wouldn't want to shoot me, would you? You don't even know who I am."

Ham said, "Sit down, you fool!"

"Sit down!" the smiling fat man said.

He didn't sound as determined this time. Monk was encouraged to be foolish.

"Brother, I'll sit down," Monk said, "as soon as you put away that gun. Not before. I won't be threatened. I won't be—"

Blam-m-m-m! Gun sound was the voice of thunder in the auction room.

Monk croaked, "Oh, God!" He went down, upsetting two chairs and also bringing Ham Brooks to the floor.

Ham thought Monk had been shot. He gasped, "Why, the dirty—" He started to grab for his own armpit holster. Monk clutched him, kept him from getting to his feet. "Stay here," Monk said. "There's nothing like having something solid under you when you quake with terror."

"They shot you!" Ham was gasping with rage. "I'll show the fat so-and-so—"

"Shot me! Where?" Alarmed, Monk felt of himself in search of wounds. "Where? Are you sure? I thought the fat man got shot. I thought the guy with the bell voice shot him."

Ham reversed himself. "Go ahead, stand up, get shot," he said. "I've got a notion to shoot you myself. What's the idea, scaring people?"

Monk said, "Who's more scared than I am?" He started to lift up and look around, changed his mind. "Take a look and find out what's going on, will you?" he suggested.

"I wonder if we can crawl to the door without getting shot at?" Ham pondered. He didn't do any looking.

Suddenly, deafening, the gun sounded in the room again. *Blam-m-m-m!* It sounded like the same gun. *Blam-blam-blam-m-m-m!* That time it seemed to be a different gun. It ran more to soprano.

"Who're they shooting at now?" Monk wanted to know.

"Doc, probably," Ham said.

"Serve him right, too," Monk said. "It was his suggesting we look at that stork thing that got everybody all worked up."

Except for the ear-splitting sounds of the guns, it had been remarkably quiet in the room. It was a paralytic sort of a stillness. Born of astonishment, it lasted only until

understanding arrived. Everyone seemed to get the idea simultaneously: the idea was that bullets were flashing about. Suddenly every man was trying to get behind or under something, preferably two or three of his neighbors. The noise was an avalanche.

The auctioneer gazed in horror at the confusion before him. Abruptly he emitted a girl-like scream, whirled and dashed into the nearest refuge, which happened to be a large vault in a rear corner of the room—the premises had once been tenanted by a bank. The auctioneer hauled the door shut behind him, foolishly locking himself inside the vault.

He had taken the stork statuette with him because he had been holding it in his hand at the time.

The fat, smiling man and the young, bell-voiced man now got cautiously to their feet. They saw each other. *Blam-m-m!* *Blam-mm!* Each shot at the other. Neither hit his target.

Crawling on the floor, the fat, smiling man and the young, bell-voiced man now departed. The fat man reached the street ahead of the other and was out of sight down a subway kiosk by the time his enemy appeared. Fortunately the latter did not choose the subway. He ran a block and hailed a taxi.

Noisily, and too late, the police arrived, two green and white carloads of them. The sirens fell silent in the street as they entered the auction gallery premises. There they began collaring everyone who had lacked the foresight to make a discreet departure.

Half an hour later, the police vacated. They had failed to connect the two most outstanding events of the afternoon—the sky-high bidding for a worthless-looking statuette, and the target practice between the two bidders. The explanation for this error lay in the fact that the auctioneer, who had had the only really good view of proceedings from his podium, fainted shortly after they released him from the vault.

He had the stork statuette in his hand when he came out of the vault. He dropped it when he passed out from shock. Someone picked it up and put it on a table with the other stuff that was to be sold.

Before departing, the police gave a verdict: Two guys who didn't like each other had shot it out.

An ambulance, which had arrived with the swarm of police, carried the swooning auctioneer off to a hospital.

Another auctioneer mounted the stand. "Quiet! Quiet!" he yelled. "Your attention, please!" He beat on the stand with a wooden mallet. "Quiet! The auction sale will be resumed as soon as we get quiet," he bellowed.

Doc Savage, Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks found seats for themselves.

This auctioneer was large, sandy-haired and serious looking.

Monk Mayfair said, "I hope he's funnier than the other one."

Ham whispered, "I hope the police don't find out that we failed to tell them the shooting started because we started to take a look at that tin bird." He was worried.

"Why didn't we tell them?" Monk wanted to know. "I mean, why didn't *you* tell them? You're so pure and honest."

"Because I didn't want to go to a police station and spend an hour or two re-telling the story," Ham said. "Why didn't you?"

"I don't wanta tell 'em." Monk looked coy.

"Why not?"

"They woulda run me in their bastille, I was afraid," Monk confided. "On account of our telling them the shooting started because we wanted to look at the tin stork wouldn't have been a very logical story, do you think?"

"I doubt if the police would have believed it," Ham admitted.

"I doubt it, too. So I kept my gapper shut." Monk leaned back comfortably. "The police are very eager to make people out liars."

Ham suggested, "Why don't you try telling them the truth?" He examined his immaculate suit critically. "Things certainly picked up for a few minutes, didn't they." He snapped a bit of

lint off his sleeve. "What are we hanging around for?" he asked. "Why don't we go home?"

The new auctioneer had things quiet enough to satisfy him.

He surveyed the crowd with contempt. It was considerably smaller than it had been prior to the shooting.

"Sale is resumed!" The auctioneer hit the stand a bang with the mallet. "You bid, I'll sell!" He scowled at them as if they doubted his word. He yelled, "You make me a price, and you've bought something, brother."

He snatched up the handiest piece of merchandise.

It happened to be the tin stork statuette.

The auctioneer yelled, "What'm I offered for this fine piece of art? And brother, I mean business."

Doc Savage spoke quietly.

"Fifty cents," Doc said.

"Sold!" shouted the auctioneer. "Brother, I mean business, as you can see."

Doc Savage hastily visited the wrapping counter, paid fifty cents in cash and the sales tax for his purchase, and walked out. He was shaking his head slowly in amazement. The auctioneer apparently hadn't known a thing about the fifteen thousand dollars bid on the stork statuette prior to the shooting.

But he got plenty of attention from those who knew what had been bid on it previously. From a beginning of startled gasps, the room went into an uproar of surprised talk.

Not understanding, the auctioneer hammered with his mallet and demanded silence. He didn't get it.

"Hurry up!" Ham urged the package desk clerk. "Don't bother wrapping the thing. I'll just carry it."

A large man with a greasy face was trying to get the auctioneer's attention. He was yelling, "Cancel that sale! I'll pay more." He picked up a chair and hammered the floor with it.

Monk Mayfair went over to the large, greasy man and said, "Buddy, you want to buy that thing?"

"For it I give five dollar," the man said. At the auctioneer, he screamed, "Cancel the sale! She's a mistake! I pay lots more!"

Monk said, "Buddy, would you like to go to the police station and explain why you want that little doo-lolly?"

Round-mouthed, round-eyed, the large man stared at Monk. Monk evidently looked like a cop to him. "I don't want it," the man said. Fear made a bubble of saliva appear at the corner of his mouth. He added nervously, "I just make a buck maybe, thassall."

"Sit down," Monk said.

The man sat down. Doc Savage was near the door with his

purchase. Ham was already at the door, waiting. Monk joined them.

They piled into the first taxi which came along. Doc gave the driver an address. The cab got rolling.

"Great beavers!" Monk said. He suddenly doubled up with mirth. "Hah, hah, hah!" he yelled. Amazed enjoyment made his voice squeaky. "Can you beat that? Fifteen thousand dollars bid. And he sold it for fifty cents!"

Ham chuckled. "I wouldn't want to be that auctioneer's blood pressure when he discovers what happened."

Their cab driver was smoking a cigar. He executed a snappy turn into Sixth Avenue, aiming for a pedestrian who was crossing Sixth Avenue at Forty-third Street.

Doc Savage said, "We will return the stork if its value seems greater than the sum I paid."

Monk gulped. "Return it?" He was dumfounded. "Why should we return it?"

"We practically stole it," Doc said.

Ham Brooks snorted. "Listen, I've been hooked by these gyp auction galleries, and they didn't give me my money back. They just laughed at me when I complained. They told me I had no legal redress, and they were right. Now I'd like the pleasure of telling one of *them* to go to hell, that they have no legal redress."

"This place isn't a gyp outfit," Doc said.

Ham grimaced. "You're really going to return it?"

"If I decide we swindled them, yes." Doc was firm on the point.

Monk sighed. "I'm glad I'm not so honest," he said.

III

Doc Savage maintained a headquarters on the eighty-sixth floor of a midtown skyscraper which had been completed just in time to encounter the leasing slump of the early nineteen thirties. Doc's father, now deceased, had sunk some money in the building and in the process had acquired a permanent lease on the eighty-sixth floor. This had been about all Doc had inherited from his father in the way of property, although there had been a large heritage of adventure thrown in.

The elder Savage had been a remarkable man, more than somewhat on the screwball side. Doc had never known him well. His father had always been off prowling the unique corners of the earth. Doc, whose mother had died shortly after his birth, had been placed in the hands of a series of scientists, thinkers, judo experts, wrestlers and what-not, for training. His upbringing had been unorthodox and it was only an act of God that had kept him from growing up into more of a freak than he

was.

The purpose of the strange upbringing, as nearly as Doc had been able to learn, was to create for the world a sort of modern Galahad, a righter of wrongs, a punisher of evildoers who were outside the law. Most kids wind up doing exactly the opposite of what their parents expect them to do, but Doc was more or less what the elder Savage had expected him to be. Possibly somewhat less. But the training had made him a man unusual enough to earn, in his own right, a reputation which in some quarters was phenomenal.

The simplest explanation of Doc Savage was that he was a professional adventurer. He was that because he liked it. The unusual, the unique, the exciting, the dangerous, fascinated him. He followed it as a career. Associated with him were five assistants: an engineer, a chemist, a lawyer, an electrical engineer, an archaeologist-geologist.

Monk Mayfair and Ham Brooks were two of Doc's assistants. Monk was the chemist, Ham the lawyer. There was no formal agreement that they were to work for Doc, no contracts or articles of incorporation. They simply worked with him because they liked excitement, too.

Headquarters consisted of a reception room containing an ancient monstrosity of an inlaid desk and a safe big enough to hold a jeep, a library which contained one of the most complete collections of scientific works extant, and a laboratory which occupied over half of the floorspace.

Monk sailed his hat on to the inlaid desk in the reception

room.

"Let's see what that thing is," he said.

Doc Savage removed the stork statuette from his pocket and stood it on the desk. It fell over. He stood it up again, and this time it remained erect.

"Won't even stand up," Monk commented. His small eyes were glittering with interest. "Now, what is the thing?"

Ham was positive. "It's a stork," he said.

They studied the statuette from all angles. It was eight and one-sixteenth inches high. Doc measured it with a ruler. It was one and twenty-seven thirty-seconds of an inch wide. It weighed one pound, seven ounces and forty-eight grams. They had it in the laboratory when they found this out.

"It's a stinky looking stork," Monk said. He was growing puzzled. "I could make a better looking stork myself," he added. "The legs on this one are too spindling at the top."

Doc Savage went to a case and got out some chemicals and a piece of apparatus. He was going to run an assay to learn what kind of metal the stork was made of.

"It's not tin," Ham said.

"It's a spindleshanks stork," Monk said. "I hope it's made of platinum."

Ham became excited. "Maybe it's made of some new, rare

kind of steel!"

"I would say it was steel," Monk said, excited himself.

Doc Savage made several tests. He did it the hard way, without removing samples of metal from the statuette. He used acids, and did a magnaflux test, X-rays, and some other tests.

He gave his verdict.

"Ordinary high-grade steel," Doc announced.

Even Monk was surprised. "That all?" He frowned at the steel bird. "What do you know about that!"

"It's not even worth fifty cents," Ham exclaimed. "We got hooked!"

Doc handled the bird thoughtfully. He rapped it against the edge of a table. The legs vibrated from the tapping, making a note like a tuning fork.

"Seems to have been formed with an emery wheel." Doc was holding the thing up to the light, turning it so that the marks were more noticeable. "Hand made," was his verdict. "Whoever made it put more than fifty cents' worth of time on it."

"Maybe we can find the owner and get our fifty cents back by selling it to him," Monk suggested.

Doc frowned. He was defeated.

"Maybe this isn't why we went to the sale," Doc said. He sounded confused.

Ham jumped. "Hey!" he said. "Did we go to that sale on purpose? I thought we just happened in there."

"We just happened to go to it on purpose," Doc told him. "You know Billy Copeland?"

"Sure," Ham said. "You don't mean that place was Billy Copeland's Auction Galleries?"

"It was Copeland's place."

Monk knew Billy Copeland, too. Slightly. Copeland was a white-haired old gentleman, hell on wheels with the chorus girls, who conducted a very genteel business of disposing of the odds and ends of estates. His reputation was good with his customers, and while he rarely got hold of a fine piece of art or merchandise, his sales were not junky.

Greatly alarmed Copeland had related over the telephone that morning that his store had been burglarized during the night. Or rather, an attempted burglary had occurred. Four men had broken into the gallery—four men that the watchman saw, although there might have been more—and had attempted to obtain something or other from the collection which was to be sold that day.

"The articles to be sold the following day are always assembled in the rear room the night before," Doc Savage explained. "The four burglars broke into the place, and overpowered the night watchman. They demanded that the

watchman tell them where the stuff was which was to be sold today. They were not interested in anything except what was to be sold this afternoon. The watchman refused to tell them, and the burglars were alarmed by a passing policeman and fled before they found what they came after."

Copeland, the auction gallery owner, Doc continued, had become puzzled when he had checked over the articles which were listed in the catalogue for sale this afternoon, and found nothing which in his opinion was worth the time of one man to steal. Much less the time of four men.

Doc glanced at Monk. "Copeland said he thought of us because it seemed unusual to him. I wasn't doing anything, so I told him I would drop around to the auction this afternoon and see what happened."

Monk scratched his head.

"How's Copeland know there'd be an uproar at the auction?" Monk demanded suspiciously.

"He said he didn't. But if the men were after something that was to be sold this afternoon, he reasoned they might bid for it." Doc turned the stork statuette in his hands slowly, looking at it in disgust. "Incidentally, the watchman they overpowered last night was supposed to be hanging around to identify his assailants if he could. I didn't see any sign of him."

"Funny Copeland felt there'd be a mess," Monk said. He was suspicious.

"There's nothing funny about Copeland," Doc Savage said.

He hunted and found a piece of tissue paper. "The funny thing is why anyone wants this steel stork." He wrapped the stork in the tissue paper. He dropped it in his coat pocket. "Why don't we go eat?" he said.

"I know a good French place," Ham said.

"I'm as hungry as a curly wolf," Monk said.

Ham examined Monk briefly. "I wouldn't say you were any too curly," Ham said.

The man with the diaper satchel seemed to have been waiting for them on the sidewalk. He came to them in a hurry and said, "Oh, thank God! Thank God, indeed!" He was a long-faced man with sunken cheeks. "I'm so glad I found you, Mr. Savage," he said. He was a sad looking man. "You are Mr. Savage, aren't you?" he added anxiously.

Doc Savage kept most of the astonishment off his face.

"Yes, I am Savage," he admitted.

"I'm so glad," the sad man said. "I knew you were, though. No one else looks quite like you." He clutched Doc's sleeve with one hand and used the other hand to point excitedly. "She's over there," he said.

"Who's over where?" Doc asked. He noticed that the man's satchel was fastened with zippers, but the zippers weren't closed.

"The girl," the man said.

"What girl?" Doc asked.

"Miss Nobel," the man said.

"Miss who?"

"Nobel. Ada Nobel," the sad man said.

Doc turned to Monk, asked, "Friend of yours? You know her?" He was stalling for time. The fact that the man's little bag was not zippered had aroused his suspicions.

Monk's mouth was open. Without seeming to close it, he declared, "Don't know the girl. Maybe she's one of Ham's."

The sad man pointed. "Please!" He was getting frantic. "She wants to talk to you," he urged. "There's not much time."

He was pointing at a sedan. The car was big and black enough further to alarm Doc Savage.

Doc said, "Do you mind?" He reached down and got hold of the handles of the diaper satchel.

The sad man cursed. He tried to jerk the bag free. He struck at Doc, missed when Doc leaned out of the path of the blow.

The sad man cursed again. "Damn you, we want that stork!" he cried hysterically.

The sad man then tried to dash the satchel to the sidewalk. Doc, using both hands and shoving with his shoulder, prevented this. The sad man let go the bag, then endeavored to

kick it. Doc blocked the kick.

Now the sad man tried wildly to strike, kick, or hit the bag. He tried with feet, elbows, knees, shoulders. He tried to butt the bag with his head.

Monk had a horrifying thought.

"Nitroglycerine!" Monk screamed. "Run!"

He began running himself. His feet skidded somewhat until he got going, after which he gave a fair imitation of a rocket and vanished around the corner of the building.

Doc held the bag over his head. The sad man jumped, trying to hit it with his fists. Doc punched him in the middle, and the sad man fell down.

Out of the dark sedan got two men. One wore a blond page boy bob wig, but he was, unmistakably, a man. Both wore blue suits. In their hands were guns. They fired.

Ham was already behind a parked car. Doc joined him. A bullet knocked its way noisily through the body of the car.

Ham said, "I know a place for us!" He was very scared. He added, "Oh Lord, put that bag down!"

Doc placed the diaper satchel carefully under the automobile. He was afraid something would happen when he let go the handles, but nothing did.

Ham sprinted twenty yards, bending low, on the street side

of the row of parked cars. The men who had gotten out of the sedan stopped shooting. They were on the sidewalk, and apparently had lost sight of Doc and Ham.

Doc failed to understand why the men weren't pursuing them and shooting at them.

Ham's destination was an iron manhole in the street. Most New York manholes are located in the middle of the street, but this one wasn't. It was about six feet out from the edge of the sidewalk.

Ham wrestled with the manhole lid. "I've had this spotted for over a year," he gasped. He got the lid off the hole. He dropped into the hole.

Doc asked, "What's down there?"

"No bullets, that's a cinch," Ham said. He sounded far underground.

Dropping into the hole, Doc found himself in an orderly tangle of lead-covered cables. Their refuge was a part of the city's underground communications system.

"Close the lid," Ham urged. "Maybe they won't know where we went."

Doc did the opposite, and put his head outside. But cautiously.

From what he could see under the parked cars, he decided the two men had picked up the sad man and were placing him

in the sedan. "They've collected their friend," Doc told Ham. "I think they're as scared as we are."

"In case they're not, I think I'll stay here." Ham sounded as if he was shuddering. "What was in that bag? That's what got my goat. That bag!"

Doc said the bag was what had gotten his goat, too. He watched the sedan pull out from the curbing.

"They're leaving," he reported.

Ham mumbled that he was glad to hear it.

The sedan swung out into the middle of the street and turned from sight around the first corner at a modest twenty-five miles an hour.

Doc Savage, continuing to watch, observed an elderly yellow taxicab which pulled out of the side street adjacent to the tall building which housed their headquarters. The taxicab looked familiar. So familiar that Doc blew out his breath in relief.

"Good old Monk!" Doc said heartily. "That's the quickest thinking I've seen in a long time."

"And the quickest get-away, too." Ham was not sharing Doc's pleasure.

Doc observed that the taxicab turned the same corner that had been turned by the sedan carrying the sad man and his two rescuers.

Ham added, "The way Monk ran was something else that helped scare me."

Doc climbed out of the manhole. "You know what Monk is doing? He's trying to grab our fat out of the fire."

"Huh?" There was a falling sound. A splash. "Damn the luck!" Ham wailed. "There's mud in the bottom of this thing!"

Doc said, "Monk ran around the corner to our garage. Monk jumped in that old taxicab we keep in the garage. He got it out in time to follow our friends. I just saw him drive off their trail."

Ham's wail came up from the depths. "My ninety-dollar suit, mud clear up to here," he cried. He was a man who had met a major tragedy.

IV

Spring-of-the-year clouds, peaceful as lambs, filled the evening sky. The late sunlight touched the clouds with gentle salmon tints, made the western heavens warmly palladium red, and, slanting through the eighty-sixth floor windows of the tall building, made a pleasant place of the reception room. The placidity which pervaded the outdoors also filled the reception room, except for the sound of splashing water in the shower in a corner of the laboratory.

The rushing noise of the shower stopped suddenly, breathlessly, as Ham Brooks turned it off. Ham called, "Has Monk phoned in yet?"

Doc said, "No." He was watching the telephone hopefully.

"You think he will?" Ham demanded anxiously.

"Why not?"

"I guess there's nothing else he can do," Ham admitted. "But you never can tell about Monk. When everybody else is walking on their feet, that's the time Monk picks to walk on his hands."

Ham came in, naked, toweling himself. He was astonishingly muscular. He added, "I hope he has sense enough not to get shot."

Doc said, "You can put on one of my suits. Try the second locker."

"Thanks." Ham went back into the laboratory. "Have you opened that diaper satchel?" he called.

"No."

"Maybe there's a bomb in it," Ham said nervously. "A time bomb, maybe."

"There's a bottle in it," Doc said.

"A what?"

"A bottle. A half-gallon bottle."

"How do you know if you haven't opened it?"

"I peeked."

"Why don't you open it and see what's in the bottle?" Ham suggested.

Doc explained, "I'm waiting for you to do that."

"Not me," Ham said hastily. "I don't open any strange bottles, no thanks."

"I think it's just a half-gallon of diphenylchlorasine," Doc explained.

"Come again?" Ham suggested.

"A sensory irritant in the form of a fine powder which mixes with the air and will render a man helpless because of sneezing, coughing, and eye irritation, in a few moments," Doc said.

"Oh. Tear gas?"

"One form of it."

"No wonder the sad-faced guy wanted to break the bottle!" Ham exclaimed. "By golly, he would have laid us out if he had." Ham seemed to be amazed at the resourcefulness of the sad man. "We had a narrow escape, didn't we?" he added.

Doc said, "Want to hear a guess? I think they planned to gas us if they had to, and search us for the stork statuette. But the scheme didn't quite hatch out."

Alarm seized Ham's voice. "Where's that stork now?" he demanded.

"Still in my pocket."

Ham was silent for a while, thinking. "I'll bet we'll wish they'd got it before this is done," he said.

Silence came into the place again. Doc Savage leaned over and lifted the receiver off the telephone and listened to make sure that it was in working order. It was. He replaced the receiver. After that he sat in morose silence, wondering what had happened to Monk, whether Monk had managed to keep on the trail of the sad man and his two helpers.

In the laboratory, Ham exclaimed, "Goshamighty!" He had looked into a mirror.

"How does my suit fit you?" Doc asked.

"It would fit two of me just fine," Ham said. He entered the reception room, fully dressed.

Doc examined him. "You'll be all right if you don't have to make any quick jumps," Doc decided. "If you do jump out of it, don't run off and leave that suit. It happens to be my Sunday one." Doc indicated the bottle. "You want to open that?"

"Not me," Ham said hastily. "I'll take your word it contains diff—die—whatever you said it was." He backed away from the bottle in alarm.

Doc Savage uncorked the bottle, noticing that this made Ham turn white. "See." Doc passed the bottle neck under his nose. "Diphenylchlorasine," he added. He hastily corked the bottle, sneezing. "One of the tear gases." Tears began to flow from his eyes. He wished he hadn't shown off by opening the bottle. He had been fairly sure it was diphenylchlorasine in the bottle, but he could have been wrong. Good Lord, suppose it had been poison gas in the bottle, he thought.

Ham eyed the steel stork statuette. "I wish there was something we could do while waiting for Monk to call," he said. "I'm getting nervous." The stork was sitting on the inlaid desk.

Doc closed his eyes for a moment. Then he jumped.

"What a dope!" Doc said. He was disgusted with himself. He added, "Ham, look up the telephone number of the Copeland Auction Galleries."

Billy Copeland, proprietor of the auction concern, had a hearty bull-fiddle voice developed by a great deal of bellowing at customers.

Doc Savage listened to the unhappy noises Copeland made over the telephone. "Oh, we'll return it to you if it proves to have real value," Doc said. "We weren't trying to steal it from you. . . . No, I know you didn't say that." He listened to more excited talk from Copeland, said, "Yes, I realize they were

bidding thousands of dollars for it, and I can assure that I will consider the statuette to be still your property." He frowned at the telephone. He added, "Providing, of course, you can give me some information. I want to know whom you were selling that statuette for."

Doc listened thoughtfully for at least a minute while Copeland talked.

"When did he die?" Doc asked.

Copeland talked some more.

"Any surviving relatives?" Doc asked. To be certain, he asked again, "None? Are you sure?" Finally he said, "Goodbye, Copeland. No, I want to keep the statuette a while yet. Yes, I know you do. Goodbye."

After Doc hung up, Ham said, "Thinks we're trying to steal the gimmick, does he?"

"He conveyed that impression, but politely," Doc admitted.

Ham snorted. "If he had it, all them strange guys would have been shooting at him instead of us. I wonder how he'd like that. Personally, I would like it fine."

"We'll mention it to him," Doc said, "if he insists on having the statuette back right away."

Ham nodded. "Okay. Whom was he selling the statuette for?"

"The estate of Mason Carl Wentz," Doc said. "Ever hear of him?"

"No."

"Here either," Doc said.

* * *

Doc Savage leaned back. "Billy Copeland seemed to think we should have heard of Mason Carl Wentz," he said. He contemplated the ceiling thoughtfully. "This Wentz died about sixty days ago. He died at his home in Arizona." The ceiling needed re-painting. "Wentz had some art objects and antique furniture which went with his estate. The stuff was placed in the hands of Copeland's auction gallery to sell. That's all there is to it. The statuette of the stork was part of Copeland's stuff, of course."

Ham said, "Arizona?" He sounded suspicious. "What would make them bring an estate all the way from Arizona to New York to sell it?" Ham sounded like a lawyer who had caught the defense witness in an important lie.

"Copeland explained that," Doc told him. "New York is a sucker market for antiques and paintings and furniture, so such stuff is shipped here from all over the country to be sold." He shook his head. "Nothing suspicious there."

"Didn't Copeland know anything special about the stork?" Ham asked, disappointed.

"No." Doc went back to watching the telephone hopefully.

"He feels that the burglars last night were after the stork, though." He wished Monk would call.

Ham nodded. "It wouldn't take Einstein to figure that out," he remarked. He went over and inspected his reflection in one of the windows. "I wonder if I've got time to go to my club and get a suit that will fit me?" he asked.

"No." Doc stood up suddenly. "I've got a job for you." Doc glanced at his watch, added, "I'm going to leave for a few minutes. While I'm gone, find out what you can about Mason Carl Wentz."

Ham grimaced at his reflection in the window. "Find out about Wentz? Where the heck would I start?"

"Copeland said Wentz was a banker," Doc said. "Start on bankers." Doc put on a hat, a lightweight topcoat. "Use the listed telephone," he added. He pointed at their private instrument, the one with an unlisted number. "Keep that one open for Monk's call."

Doc put the shiny stork statuette in his coat pocket and went to the door.

"You better be careful somebody doesn't waylay you," Ham warned.

Doc said, "I will," and went out.

Doc Savage did not leave the building. Nor did he use the elevator. He took the stairs, walked down four flights, and walked down the corridor examining the legends on office

doors. The door he selected was lettered: J. B. FOWLER, PATENT ATTORNEY, and also said, TOLLIVER JONAS, WORKING MODELS.

Doc went in, asked a middle-aged woman, "Is Jonas here?" The woman said, "Who is calling?" Then she recognized Doc and became excited. "I'll tell him," she exclaimed.

Tolliver Jonas was a young man who walked with a slight jumping movement due to a wooden leg. He was one of the most skilled model makers in the city. His chief business was making working models for inventors.

"Hello, there, Mr. Savage," said Jonas heartily. He had done work for Doc before. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

Doc asked, "You have facilities for casting metal forms, haven't you, Jonas?"

"Small stuff only," Jonas said. "How big would you want?"

Doc drew the steel stork from his pocket. He said, "I want some duplicates made of this."

"That's small enough," Jonas said. He picked up the statuette and examined it. "You want this duplicated? You want it of steel, like this?"

Doc shook his head quickly. "That's what I don't want. Not steel. But use something that might look or feel about the same. Not lead or aluminum, because they would be too soft. Use a reasonable duplicate, but not steel."

"Can do," Tolliver Jonas said.

"Make me about six copies," Doc said.

"Okay. I take it you want them enough like this to fool somebody who didn't know metals?" Jonas was not prying. He was just making sure what Doc wanted.

Doc nodded. "That's the idea. Several people seem to want that thing, and I thought I would keep them happy."

Jonas grinned. "Happiness is wonderful," he said. "How soon do you want the duplicates?"

"Pronto," Doc said. "How soon can I get them? An hour?"

"Oh, hell!" Jonas looked discouraged. "I was just about to knock off for the day." He hesitated, asked, "You want me to stay and do them?"

"I would certainly appreciate that," Doc told him.

"Oh, all right," Jonas agreed. "But don't squawk when you get my bill."

Leaving, Doc paused with his hand on the door knob. "You better keep your door locked while you've got that stork around," he advised.

Jonas was startled. "Sure," he said uneasily. "Sure, I will."

Ham Brooks' hair was mussed. On the desk in front of him was a New York telephone directory, a Los Angeles telephone directory, a New York and a Los Angeles city directory, a copy of Who's Who, and a directory of banking institutions and their credit ratings.

Doc Savage asked anxiously, "Has Monk telephoned in yet?"

"Not yet, damn him," Ham said in a worried voice. "I'm getting scared." There was perspiration on his upper lip.

Doc asked, "What about Mason Carl Wentz, the ex-owner of the stork?"

A telephone rang. "Monk!" Ham gasped. Then he swore, for it was the listed phone. He grabbed up the instrument anyway, said, "Brooks speaking. . . . Oh, I see. When was that? Two years ago. Okay, thanks."

He hung up. "Mason Carl Wentz retired from business two years ago," he reported. "Wentz was a private banker, one of the vanishing Americans. An investment banker. He operated in Los Angeles and New York, head office in Los Angeles. An honest, upstanding and fairly rich man, as far as I can learn."

"What about the Arizona end?" Doc asked.

"Fear's End," Ham said. He sounded as if he wanted to surprise Doc with something.

"Eh?"

"That's the name of the ranch, Fear's End," explained Ham. "Sort of symbolic, don't you think? Here is this old banker, bewildered by the bloody, confused state the world has come to, so he retires and goes off to a ranch in the Grand Canyon country to live the rest of his days unmolested. What better name could he give the place than Fear's End?"

Doc was not impressed by the symbolism. "In the Grand Canyon?" he said. "The Grand Canyon is a national park."

"Not where the ranch is," Ham said. "Or so the banker told me who had been out there. The banker said it was a hell of a place, a million miles from nowhere, and with the kind of scenery around it that would scare the pants off you."

Doc was disgusted.

"Just what," he asked, "did you find out about a steel stork?"

"Nothing," Ham said sourly. "Everyone I asked was perfectly normal about it. They thought I was crazy."

Stillness settled in the room. The ringing of the telephone, and Monk's voice, were the only sounds that could dispel it.

Ham Brooks, crouched anxiously on the edge of a chair, was made ridiculous by the outsize of his clothes. He looked miserable. He looked as if he would like to scream, or shed tears. Ham thought a lot of Monk Mayfair. He never spoke a civil word to Monk if he could help it, but he had a very affectionate regard for Monk. Monk understood this and felt

the same way about Ham. He never said anything nice to Ham either. They enjoyed insulting each other and practicing practical jokes on each other. Their comradeship was perfect.

When the telephone rang, Ham automatically picked up the wrong instrument, the listed one. He saw his error. "Monk!" he yelled. He was so excited he couldn't pick up the other phone. Doc got it. "Yes?" Doc said.

Monk's voice said, "I've got myself into a little trouble." Emotion, excitement probably, made Monk sound squeaky.

"Don't keep it a secret," Doc suggested. "Did you follow those fellows?"

Monk said, "You know me—bloodhound Mayfair. I didn't call in before because there didn't seem to be a telephone handy. I'm still on their trail. I'm on Long Island, in a graveyard to be exact. I finally discovered that there was a telephone in the caretaker's shack, and it's the one I'm talking on. The caretaker seems to have gone home for the day."

"What," Doc asked patiently, "are you doing in a cemetery?"

"I followed my game to a house," Monk explained. "The graveyard seems to be the best place to watch the house from. That's very logical, don't you think?"

Doc inquired, "Would you mind telling us where the cemetery is? Or do you know?"

Monk said of course he knew, and he gave the location. Doc recollected the place faintly. Automatically he began to think

of the roads to take to get out there most quickly. This train of thought was wrecked when Monk added, "I got me a prisoner."

"Prisoner!" Doc exclaimed. "You've caught one of them?"

"I caught somebody," Monk said. "I haven't decided just who she is."

Doc swallowed with difficulty. "Who *she* is?" he said.

From the pleased sound of Monk, she was evidently good-looking. He verified this. "She is not too hard on the eyes," Monk advised. "But she has a very sharp way with words."

"Who is she?" demanded Doc Savage.

"I'm trying to get acquainted," Monk explained. "I have told her who I am, thinking that would—ouch!" He gasped in pain, added, "She kicked my shin!"

Doc said, "We'll be right out there." He dropped the receiver on its hook. He told Ham, "Monk has caught a girl."

Relief made Ham gasp. "He's running in form," Ham said. "The old roué," he added.

V

The night had a clammy quality, faintly warm, like a sick

man's breath. The sun, vanishing in the west, had taken with it the warmth and pleasantness of the day; the air had become different, lifeless and moist. There was some ground fog through which the car charged bearing Doc Savage and Ham Brooks.

Doc, kicking out the clutch, said, "It's along here somewhere." He didn't sound too sure.

"You couldn't prove it by me," Ham confessed.

Doc stopped the car. "We'll walk," he said. The car headlights made two long oyster-colored ghosts in the fog. He added, "No need to ask for trouble." He switched off the lights and the ghosts vanished. "The place has big, brick gate posts."

Their feet made squishy sounds in the grass beside the pavement. It was no better when they walked on the concrete, because the scuffing was like bones rubbing together. "Nice scary preamble to a graveyard," Ham commented.

"You're not afraid of graveyards?" Doc asked.

"Certainly not," Ham said. "It's the ghosts that inhabit them that scare me." A pair of huge brick pillars loomed. "Isn't that the gate?" Ham asked.

Doc said it must be. He said he had no idea where the caretaker's shack would be, but it would probably be near the gate. "I hope the gates aren't locked," he said. He tried one of the gates, added, "They're not."

The gates, massive, and of rusting iron, made an ungodly

moaning sound when Doc opened them. Ham muttered, "If there are any spooks around, that should bring them out."

Doc discovered a building. He approached it warily, said, "Monk?" There was no answer, so he called, "Monk? You there?"

He pushed open the door of the building. The room inside was less than ten feet square, roughly furnished with a stove, a chair, a desk and a telephone.

"This must be where Monk called from," Doc said. He was using a flashlight, holding a palm over the lens to cut down the amount of light. He added, "Monk was here, all right." He had found a note.

The note said, *Gone to watch house—Monk.*

Ham was disgusted. "What house?" he said. "Boy that Monk is a mental giant." His endeavor to sound angry didn't overcome his pleasure at finding Monk had really been here and that nothing drastic had removed him from the premises. "What do we do now, look around?" he asked.

"Might as well," Doc said. He changed the position of the note, wrote, *Hunting you, you dope*, on it, and signed Ham's name. He said, "Let's see if we can find Monk."

Then he observed that the bit of paper the note was written on had a ragged torn edge at the top and also at the bottom. Doc pointed out this peculiarity to Ham.

Ham didn't think two torn edges on the paper was peculiar.

"Monk just tore it out of that notebook he uses instead of a memory," Ham said.

"But *two* ragged edges." Doc was not convinced.

"Oh, he'd previously torn a piece off the bottom of the page," Ham said.

They went outdoors. The cemetery was still, black, awesome around them. They had not realized it was quite so dark. The tombstones, the white ones, were faint shapes like frozen wraiths.

They moved forward, wondering when they were going to fall over a marker. "Good God, of all the places he could pick to make us hunt for him," Ham complained. "How big is this city of the dead, anyway?"

"Not large, about forty acres, as I recall," Doc told him.

"Forty acres of tombstones is a lot of tombstones," Ham grumbled.

Doc Savage was wondering if they weren't doing the wrong thing in prowling the cemetery in search of Monk. He was not entirely satisfied about the note. It was not like Monk to fail to say, in the note, where he had gone and be specific about it. Monk was not dumb. Ham didn't think he was, either, although he was continually saying so.

Doc whispered, "Ham." This caused Ham Brooks to start

violently. Doc continued, "I'm wondering if Monk couldn't have put more to that note."

"Eh?"

"A map," Doc said. "It would be more like Monk to draw a rough map of where we could find him."

"There wasn't any."

"There might have been," Doc said, "on the bottom of the note."

"Why'd he tear it off, then?" Ham demanded.

"Maybe he didn't," Doc said. "Maybe someone else did."

Ham stopped breathing for a while. Finally he asked, "You trying to scare me?" Uneasiness made his whisper hoarse. He added, "I don't see what on earth makes you think that."

"Well," Doc said, "there's nothing we can do about it now. Let's proceed."

A step at a time, they advanced. Their task was almost hopeless, and they both knew it. As Ham had said, forty acres of cemetery was a lot of cemetery. Especially when it was this dark.

Suddenly Doc heard Ham gasp. "Whoosh!" Ham gasped. Ham sounded some distance away, so they must have become separated. Abruptly Ham said, "Ooo-o-o-o!" He followed this with a gagging sound. He added, "I've found a body!"

"Monk?" Doc demanded.

There was a moment of horrifying silence, while Ham explored in the darkness with his hands. "Not hairy enough," Ham said. "I guess it's—ugh! Ouch!" A blow, a grunt, movements, was almost one sound. Ham cried, "Hell, it's alive!"

Doc Savage jumped toward the sound of Ham's voice. He encountered something large and hard. A human-shaped figure. He was about to smash it with his fist when he realized it was a stone or metal statue, probably of an angel, marking a grave.

A gun emitted noise, a sheet of flame.

Ham's voice grated, "Shoot me, will you!" From the way he sounded, it was impossible to tell whether or not he had been shot.

There was a blow, a struggle.

There was a man running off in the darkness, running fast, falling over tombstones and getting up and running again.

The gun sounded three times. The flashes made pale red lightning wink over the graveyard.

Then silence.

Doc Savage, crouching beside the angel, tried to reduce his breathing to soundlessness. The angel seemed to be made of bronze. A dark metal, anyway. Doc began to crawl toward

where the gun had exploded.

Finally he distinguished a man's figure. The man was poised. One hand, evidently holding the gun, was upraised.

Doc prepared to spring upon the figure. But the figure called, "Doc?" anxiously.

"Ham!" Doc explained. "In another second, I'd have jumped you!"

Ham said, "Yes, and got yourself shot." He sounded badly shaken. "Boy, that guy was tough. I got his gun by accident, or he would've fixed me good. He felt as hard as nails."

"Could he have been Monk?"

"Not a chance." Ham was positive. "He was lying here hoping we wouldn't notice him, and I stepped on him by accident. He didn't move even then, so I thought he was dead."

Now on the far side of the cemetery, a fight started. It consisted of blows, running, cries of pain, yells, and a bellowing like a bull. The latter belonged to Monk Mayfair.

"That's Monk," Doc said. "Come on!" He ran toward the sound. He demanded, "Any shells left in that gun?"

"Should be two," Ham said.

"Save them." Doc had his hands out in front, feeling for grave markers. "You may need them." He wished they could find a road through the cemetery.

"Listen!" Ham gasped.

There was a new voice. A woman's. It cried, "That man is Monk Mayfair! They have the stork!" She sounded terrified.

Doc wondered why she was yelling that. He found a road. "Here's a lane," he told Monk.

They made more speed now.

The fighting noises had subsided. They had lasted a dozen seconds, probably. It had seemed longer.

But the girl was still crying out. She was saying the same thing: "That's Monk Mayfair. They have the stork!"

The road was black-topped. By running on tiptoes, which they were doing, they made almost no noise. If there had been more fight noises, they would have heard them. There wasn't. There was only the pounding, rather lightly, of a woman's fast-traveling feet.

She was coming toward them. She cried, "It's Monk Mayfair, Doc Savage's aide. They have the stork!"

Doc said, "Pss-s-t! Ham, I'll get her."

They stopped. "You're welcome to her," Ham whispered nervously. "She may have a gun."

The woman was yelling, "Monk Mayfair!" again when Doc caught her. It was no trick catching her. She ran into his arms. He had a hair-raising moment wondering if she had a gun.

Apparently she hadn't.

She kicked, clawed, scratched, pulled hair, bit him. He began to wish she had a gun.

With a stroke of brilliance, Ham said loudly, "Doc Savage, whom have you caught?"

The young woman became still. "Are you Doc Savage?" she demanded. She had hold of Doc's hair with both fists.

"Would it make any difference?" Doc asked painfully. "Yes. The answer is yes."

She released her grip. "They've caught your friend, Monk," she said. "If you expect to help him, you'd better get busy."

Doc thought that the girl didn't sound half as scared as they were. He said, "Ham, stay here with her. And hang on to her. I'll try to help Monk."

* * *

Moving with great care, Doc Savage went forward. There was a small hill, then a sharp slope downward, and he encountered a high iron fence which seemed to encircle the cemetery. He reached up, and found the fence could be climbed quite easily. But he did not think that Monk could have been gotten over the fence, conscious or unconscious, so readily.

He heard a car start. It was not far away, about a block distant. He saw the car headlights, saw the light move rapidly,

appear and disappear behind houses, and finally vanish down a road.

Listening for two or three minutes, he heard nothing more, saw nothing but some lights come on in some houses, probably lights being turned on by people who had heard the uproar and become alarmed.

Doc went back.

The girl was whispering to Ham Brooks. She was saying, "I kept yelling that way so they would be sure it was Monk Mayfair. I did it to save Monk's life."

"How'd you figure that'd save Monk?" Ham was amazed.

"Because you have that stork. They want it. They'll keep Mr. Mayfair alive and try to trade him to you for the stork." She sounded positive.

"What makes you so sure?" Ham demanded.

"I'm not sure. But it was an idea. I think it was a good one."

Doc called cautiously, "Easy with the gun, Ham." Having identified himself, he joined them. He asked the girl, "Was Monk inside or outside the cemetery when they jumped him?"

"Outside," the girl said.

"On the other side of the fence?"

"Yes."

The men hadn't had to hoist Monk over the fence, then. "How many were there?" Doc asked.

"I don't know. Four at least," the girl said. Fright was beginning to displace the confidence in her voice. "He left me inside the fence. Mr. Mayfair, I mean. He was going to scout the house, he said. He thought it was dark enough for that."

Doc said gloomily, "I think they got away with Monk." He wished he could see what the girl looked like. "What house was it? We'll investigate," he added.

Suddenly the girl began to sob. She said, "I'll sh-show you." She choked on the words. "I'm skuk-scared," she explained. She resumed sobbing. "I'm skuk-scared of graveyards, too," she added.

"Who isn't," Ham told her. "Here, take my arm. You'll be all right."

They made their way to the fence, and climbed over it. Ham helped the girl over from the inside, and Doc helped her down from the outside. He became somewhat embarrassed.

Doc said, "I don't see how you were so sure they would kidnap Monk, instead of murdering him."

"They're kuk-kidnapers by nature," the girl told him. "They did it to my uncle."

"Your uncle?"

"They kidnaped my uncle, Harrison Nobel," she explained.

"They did that in Arizona."

VI

A large gray moth, frightened by what was going on, flew frantically around the living-room, traveling in erratic swoops and darts, twists and turns. Moth-like, it became fascinated by the electric light fixture, made a few scouting turns, then power dived and hit the bulb. A little puff of dust flew off its body, and it flew away drunkenly and landed on the old-fashioned piano. It settled there, looking aged, ill, frightened, dazed.

A little old lady, like the moth, looked aged, frightened, dazed, as she sat in a rocking chair in front of the piano.

She was Mrs. Ivan Merrillee, and this was her house. She was a widow who lived alone.

"H. I. has always been bad," she said. She was discussing her stepson. "Bad, bad, bad," she said miserably. H. I. Merrillee was her husband's son by his first wife, they had learned. She added, "H. I. was in the reform school before he was fifteen."

Doc Savage nodded sympathetically. He was alone, listening to the old lady's story.

Ham Brooks and the girl they had found in the cemetery

were outdoors. They were checking on the little old lady's reputation with her neighbors. The name of the girl from the cemetery was Ada Nobel. She was lovely. She was so lovely that Doc was still startled.

"An awful boy," continued little old Mrs. Ivan Merrillee. There was shamed dampness in her eyes. "I know it's awful to talk about my poor, dead husband's son by his first marriage the way I'm talking about H. I. But I can't help it. The boy has shamed me so."

"He was staying here in this house?" Doc asked.

"Only for the last three days, off and on," Mrs. Merrillee answered. "Three days ago was the day he came in from the west, from Arizona, I think."

"What had he been doing in Arizona?"

"I don't know. I hadn't heard of him in five years." Mrs. Merrillee twisted her hands together. "I didn't know but what he might be in jail again." The hands were dry, crinkled, the veins darkly blue-black through the parchment skin. "He had those men with him. I didn't like them either."

"How many men?" Doc asked.

"Four."

Doc asked, "Can you describe them?"

"Oh, yes," said the old lady eagerly.

She proceeded to demonstrate that she couldn't describe them at all. Not so that they could be recognized in a crowd. The way she described them, they were just men. But she was sincerely trying.

Doc asked, "Know what H. I. Merrillee and these four friends of his were up to?"

Mrs. Merrillee shuddered. "Something awful. I think it concerned the sick man."

"What sick man?"

"They had a sixth man along. That is, there was H. I., his four friends, and this sixth man, who was sick." The old lady shook her head sadly. "He was so sick he couldn't get around or talk at all. They told me he was suffering from paralysis, but somehow I'm not so sure about that now."

Doc asked her to describe the sick man. She did.

The sick man was a benevolent, rather mild looking man, about sixty years old. It was evident that the widow had taken an interest in him because he was about her own age. The sick man had white hair, a good complexion, gray eyes, and false teeth. That was all she knew about him, except his first name, which had been Harky. Or at least the men had referred to him as Harky.

H. I. and his friends had taken Harky with them when they fled in great haste a few minutes ago.

Doc described Monk Mayfair, asked Mrs. Merrillee if she

had seen him. She hadn't.

Doc asked, "Have you got a photograph of H. I. around anywhere?"

"Yes, I have. A snapshot," said Mrs. Merrillee. She went into her bedroom, came back with a photograph of her stepson. "This is H. I., as he looked several years ago," she said. "He hasn't changed much."

Doc examined the picture. "So this is H. I.!" he said interestedly.

H. I. was the slightly fat man with the cherubic smile, the man who had bid on the steel stork at the auction, then taken a shot at the bell-voiced young man who was the other bidder.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Merrillee," Doc said. "This is quite a help." Then, because the little old lady looked so frightened, he added, "H. I. may not be in serious trouble."

Mrs. Merrillee shook her head wearily. "He's always been a bad one."

Doc Savage found Ham Brooks and Ada Nobel waiting outside. Doc asked, "What did the neighbors know?"

"The old lady seems to be okay," Ham reported. "She owns the house, has lived there about ten years, and her husband has been dead three years. She belongs to the Methodist church, the Red Cross and a couple of bridge clubs. She has a rascal of

a stepson, the son of her husband by his first wife, but he hasn't been seen around for years, until the last day or two."

Doc told Ham who the stepson was. "The fat cupid who bid on the stork," Doc explained.

"Did he grab Monk?"

"Apparently," Doc agreed. "Yes, I think we can charge that up to him."

"Damn him!" Ham was bitter. "He'll probably try to trade Monk to us for the stork."

Doc said, "We might as well go back to the car." He began walking. Ham and the girl walked with him. They passed under a street light and Doc noted that the girl was slender, carried herself well. Not like a showgirl or a trained model. But a nice carriage. Natural.

She hadn't told her story. There hadn't been time. She had said her name was Ada Nobel. She hadn't said how she had met Monk.

Doc spoke to her. "You have a story to tell us?" he asked her.

"Why not?" she said instantly. "I've told you my name. Ada Nobel. I was born—"

"Hold it," Doc said. "Not right now."

He wanted to watch her face while she was telling whatever

she had to tell them. It was hard enough for him to tell whether women were lying, even watching their faces.

They crossed over to a sidewalk which followed the edge of the cemetery. It was dark. Sand particles on the concrete walk gritted under their feet.

They came to the cemetery gate. Doc explained, "I think I'll pick up that note Monk wrote. We left it in the caretaker's place."

He went to the shack. It was not far, so Ham and the girl followed him. The night was as dark as a cave, smelled like a cave. It seemed to be getting darker.

Doc started into the shack. His hand, out in front of him, encountered the door, which was closed. He had left it open. He said, "Someone has been here!"

A new voice addressed them. It said, "He's still here." There was a moment of silence. The voice added, "You better stand still, all of you."

A flashlight came on, blazing into their eyes and blinding them. Doc noted that Ham had seized the opportunity to put an arm around the girl. However, Ham's hand, concealed from the man with the flashlight because it was behind the girl, held the revolver he had captured from the assailant in the cemetery.

The man with the flashlight was tall. His face looked dark, greasy. He had a cap pulled down to his ears, and a muffler

tied around his throat.

The man demanded, "Who're you?"

Doc Savage frowned at him. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

The man said, "I wouldn't know." In addition to the flashlight, he held a large shiny six-shooter. "I'm the watchman here. I go to get me a cup of coffee, come back and find all kinds of hell being raised." He scowled at them. "Now what's going on?"

Doc was puzzled. "You seem familiar to me," he said. "Maybe you should know me."

"Hell, I know lots of people." The man sounded somewhat scared. "What's your name?"

"This is Miss Nobel and Ham Brooks. I am Doc Savage," Doc explained.

"Okay. What're you doing here?"

"Looking for a friend," Doc said.

The man sneered. "Visiting hours are nine to five," he said. "Or did you have an appointment with your friend? Maybe he was gonna get out of his grave and meet you, huh?"

Ham Brooks entered the discussion. "Wise guy," Ham said.

"I wanta know what's going on," the man said.

Doc Savage said, "Are you sure I haven't met you somewhere?"

"Wise guy wouldn't know who he's met," Ham said. "Wise guy doesn't like us. Let's get out of here, Doc."

The man with the flashlight and gun said, "I oughta call the cops."

"Call them," Doc told him. "Go ahead."

The man thought this over. He sneered again. "Go on, beat it," he said. "You ain't got no business in here."

Ham said, "Buddy, if you would stay on the job, you wouldn't have trouble around here."

"Beat it," the man said.

Doc turned. "Come on, Ham," he said. He moved over so that Ham could get his revolver back in his pocket without the man seeing the weapon.

They left the cemetery and walked toward their car.

Ada Nobel asked, "What did you want with that note Monk wrote?"

"I wanted to show it to you," Doc explained. "I wanted to ask you about the map on the bottom of it."

"What about the map?" The girl was puzzled. "Wasn't it clear enough? I saw Monk draw it, and it showed the location

of the house, and where Monk and I would be watching."

"That's what I wanted to know," Doc told her. "There was no map on the bottom of the note. It had been torn off."

Ham made an astonished noise. "It looks like they were all fixed for us!" he exclaimed. "We walked right into it."

They reached their car. Ham walked around the machine cautiously, then announced that everything seemed to be clear. Doc had the door open. He was standing there holding the door open.

Suddenly Doc jumped back. He said, "I knew I'd seen that fellow somewhere!" He ordered Ham and the girl, "Stay here! Wait for me! I'm going after that phony watchman!"

"Phony?" Ham gasped.

"The watchman was a fake!" Doc was excited, angry with himself. "He changed his voice enough to fool me. He had grease or something on his face, too."

"Who the devil was he?" Ham demanded.

Doc said, "The other bidder on that stork!" He ran back toward the cemetery gate.

Approaching the gate, Doc made as little noise as he could. The gate was still open. He stood outside and listened for some time. There was no sign of his quarry.

Cautiously, mindful that the fake watchman had had a gun, Doc slid through the gate. When he was inside, he heard an automobile start in the distance. It departed into the night.

Doc looked into the watchman's shack. Monk's note was still there. Doc took it.

Ham Brooks and Ada Nobel were waiting in the car.

Doc told them, "That is about as big a fool trick as I have pulled recently." He got into the car, told Ham, "You drive. The way my luck is going, I would probably run through a stop light and get us all arrested."

VII

Ada Nobel was impressed by Doc Savage's headquarters. She kept looking around with an expression of breathless wonder. She said, "This is an amazing place. I've heard of it." She looked out of the windows. "What a wonderful view!" she exclaimed. "You have the whole city spread out before you, haven't you. I've never been to New York before." She sounded excited, really thrilled.

Doc Savage and Ham Brooks were impressed by Ada Nobel. Ham was obviously delighted that he was impressed. Doc Savage wasn't, because he was faced with the job of deciding whether the girl was going to lie to them. The prettier

she was, the more trouble he would have, he felt sure. He'd had experience.

Doc explained why they might as well stay here for the time being. "If they intend to trade Monk to us for the stork, they will probably phone us here," he said. "So we had better stay here."

"They will want to trade," Ada Nobel said. "I am sure they will."

Doc maneuvered her to a chair where she would be in bright light. He suggested, "Suppose you tell us why you think so."

"Don't you want my whole story?" she asked wonderingly.

"It wouldn't hurt," Doc admitted.

She nodded. She explained that she had been born in Quincy, Illinois. She had lost her parents when she was eighteen. She was twenty now. Her only father was an uncle, Harrison Nobel. She had been, until a week ago, a stenographer for the Central Packing Company in Chicago, Illinois. The job paid her twenty-eight dollars a week, and her record was good. They could check on this, she explained, by calling a Mr. Givenman, manager of her department at the packing company.

"Now I'll tell you about my Uncle Harky," she said.

Doc Savage nodded. "Please do," he said. He was carefully keeping expression off his face.

"Harky is what everyone calls Uncle Harrison Nobel," she explained.

Harrison Nobel, she continued, had for fifteen years been the private secretary of a banker named Mason Carl Wentz. A fine old man, was Uncle Harky. Mr. Wentz evidently thought so, too, because recently when Mr. Wentz had died of pneumonia, his will had disclosed that his faithful secretary, Harrison Nobel, was a beneficiary.

"Mr. Wentz's will gave Uncle Harky the Arizona ranch," she explained. "There was also a trust fund, the income from which would maintain the ranch and keep Uncle Harky in comfort the rest of his life." She smiled at them gently. "Wasn't that a fine thing for Mr. Wentz to do?"

Doc Savage agreed that it was a fine thing to do.

Ham Brooks was about to split with excitement. Doc caught Ham's eye, shook his head slightly, hoping Ham would understand that he was to keep still. Doc felt they were learning a great deal. How much of it was true, he wasn't sure. He wished he knew.

"Uncle Harky," continued Ada Monk, "wrote me the nicest letter. He said that he was an old man now, and lonesome. He said that he would like one of his own kin around him to keep him company, and that if I would come and live at the ranch, he would pay me fifty dollars a week and my expenses wouldn't cost me anything. It would be like a job, and if I didn't like it, I could quit anytime. Wasn't that nice? I grabbed the offer in a minute."

"You went to Arizona?" Doc asked.

"Yes." The pleasure left her face suddenly. "And the most awful things began happening."

Doc leaned forward. "What were they?"

"Some terrible men were at Fear's End," she said. She shivered. "Isn't that an awful name for a ranch—Fear's End? It's such a scary place, too. Right in the canyon, such incredible walls all around. You feel so small. Like something was sure to fall on you any minute. I tell you, I never dreamed of such a place."

"What about the terrible men?" Doc urged.

"They were holding Uncle Harky a prisoner in his own ranch," Ada Nobel said. She sounded angry. "There was an awful fat man named Merrillee. H. I. Merrillee. He had four friends as bad."

She was busy remembering for a moment. She shivered. "At first, they tried to make me think nothing was wrong," she continued. "But I saw something was. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to call the sheriff, but there was no telephone."

She clenched her hands. Her nails were neat, and the polish on them was the color of a robin's breast.

"They left with Uncle Harky before I could do anything," she added. "I followed them. I followed them all the way to New York. I knew they were coming to New York after something they called a stork, and that they had taken Uncle

Harky along so he wouldn't make trouble for them. They drugged him. They first drugged him at the ranch, something in his coffee. I think they tried to drug me, too, but my coffee tasted bitter and I didn't drink it."

Doc asked, "How did you know a stork was involved?"

"From what I overheard at the ranch. I did a lot of snooping at the ranch, you can bet."

"What happened after you got to New York?" Doc asked.

"Why, I just kept following them. I wanted to locate Uncle Harky. Then I was going to call the police in and save him."

"Why were you in the graveyard tonight?"

"I was watching that house. I knew H. I. Merrillee was staying there. I'd trailed him there."

Doc asked, "Didn't you know your Uncle Harky was in the house?"

Ada Nobel's hands flew to her face. "No, no!" she gasped. She lost color. "Was he?" she cried. "And I didn't know!"

Doc told her that the widow, Mrs. Merrillee, had described a drugged man who answered Harrison Nobel's description as to name, Harky. He gave her the description of Harky's appearance which he had received from the widow.

"That's Uncle Harky!" the girl cried. "I couldn't have saved him!" She burst into tears.

Her sobbing, violent, grief-stricken, made Doc Savage uncomfortable. He glanced at Ham. Ham was uncomfortable, too.

The telephone rang. Ham, eager and apprehensive, clutched at the phone. "Yes?" he said. "You have? All right. . . . Yes, that's enough." He hung up, looking disappointed. He told Doc, "That was one of the men I was checking on Wentz with. A lawyer. He says that Wentz's will gave Fear's End to his secretary, Harrison Nobel, together with a trust fund to maintain the place."

Doc Savage went into the laboratory and began mixing a mild sedative which would quiet Ada Nobel.

Ham came in, closed the door, and whispered, "What do you think?"

"I don't know," Doc said. "Her story checks with what we know." He shook his head, added, "But a good job of lying would check, too."

"What the hell do you suppose they want the stork for?" Ham asked.

Doc finished mixing the sedative. He said, "I think I'll go get the stork, show it to her, and see what happens." He handed the glass to Ham. "Get her to drink this if you can. It'll quiet her."

Tolliver Jonas, the model maker, opened the door of his office for Doc Savage. "I thought you were going to be back in

an hour," Jonas complained.

"Something came up," Doc said. "Have you got the imitation storks made?"

"See what you think." Jonas led the way into his workroom. He indicated a table, said, "There they are." There were seven shiny storks sitting in a row on the table. "Which one would you say was the original?" Jonas asked.

Doc eyed the storks in amazement. "The middle one?" he ventured.

"Hah!" Jonas was pleased. "The one on the end," he said.

Doc began putting storks in his pockets. "You did a fine job," he said. He tapped a few of the storks against the table edge. "The original one makes a deeper ringing sound than the fakes," he said.

"Dammit, you didn't say you wanted them tuned up," Jonas said.

Doc assured him, "These will be fine." He added, "Send me the bill. And don't throw the hook in too deep."

Jonas grinned. "I'll hook you plenty," he said.

Ada Nobel was quieter. The sedative was having some effect. Color was back in her cheeks, she had dried her eyes, and she had made herself a new face.

She examined the stork, fascinated. "How on earth did you get it?" she asked.

Doc Savage told her about the auction. Then he asked, "Is that the stork all the shooting is about?"

"I don't know," Ada Nobel said. "I never saw it before. But of course it is. What has happened proves it is."

Doc asked, "What is it?"

"I don't know." She looked at them in surprise. "Don't you know?"

"We haven't the shade of an idea," Doc assured her.

She put down the stork suddenly, as if it might come to life.

"Isn't this all the strangest thing?" she remarked wonderingly.

"Do you feel better?" Doc asked.

She nodded. "Yes, thank you," she said gratefully. She added, "Except that I feel a little dizzy. Maybe it's just the excitement, and the fact that I have been losing sleep."

Ham Brooks became solicitous. "There is a couch in the library," he said. "Why don't you stretch out in there and get some rest? Or would you rather go to a hotel?"

"No, no, I don't want to go to a hotel," Ada Nobel said hastily. "I want to stay close to you." She blushed a little. "I

mean, in case you should find Uncle Harky," she explained.

Ham helped her into the library. The moonstruck way in which he did it made Doc want to kick him. Ham was always complaining about Monk being a pushover for anything in skirts, but in Doc's opinion Ham was a more ready victim.

"Your tongue is hanging out a foot," Doc said when Ham came back into the room. Doc was disgusted.

"She's lovely," Ham said ecstatically. "She gave us lots of very good information, too, didn't she?"

Doc gave him a sour look. "Of which you believed every word, no doubt."

"Certainly." Ham examined Doc pityingly. "You haven't the slightest ability to tell when a woman is lying and when she isn't, have you?"

"Have *you*?" Doc demanded.

"Certainly."

Doc was irritated. His ideas about women were being lambasted, and by Ham Brooks, who was notoriously gullible game for the fair sex. Ham, Doc reflected, should be taught a lesson.

On impulse, Doc said, "Ham, you go downstairs to the lobby. Keep an eye on the elevator indicators, and when you see an elevator leaving this floor, get ready to follow Miss Ada Nobel, who will be skipping out."

Ham stared. "You're nuts," he said.

"You get down in the lobby," Doc said. He was indignant, because he suspected he was making a fool out of himself. "When the girl appears, shadow her. Don't let her see you. I want to know where she goes and what she does."

Ham became suspicious. "Do you know something about her I don't know?"

"Only what my judgment of women tells me," Doc said briefly.

Ham snorted. "If you think Ada Nobel will doublecross us, your judgment of women isn't worth a dime," he said.

He left with another snort.

* * *

Doc Savage contemplated the stork statuette on the desk. He suspected he might have made a fool out of himself. It would not be the first time, so it did not particularly worry him about being ridiculous. What did bother him was the possible psychological reason for his behavior. He wondered if, subconsciously, he wasn't trying to show off around a girl.

Another thing that bothered him was why he had told Ham that Nobel Ada would flee. He didn't know exactly why he had told Ham that. A hunch. The accusation had just seemed to come from his lips. He wondered if that was the way mediums, if there was such a thing as a genuine medium, got their predictions.

He went into the library. "Feeling quieter?" he asked.

Ada Nobel smiled at him. "Much better," she said. She yawned prettily.

"I'm going to be in the laboratory for a while," he said. "I've locked the outside door. Ham won't be back for a while. The stork is on the desk, in case you shouldn't feel sleepy and want to look it over."

"Thank you, but I'm quite sleepy." She closed her eyes.

Doc went into the laboratory. The telephone had an extension bell there, so if they got a call about Monk Mayfair, he would hear it.

The storks made his pockets heavy. He took them out, and hid them in various places around the laboratory. He would carry one, he decided. He wished he had thought to give Ham one to carry around. There were now plenty of storks, so he thought it would be nice if everyone who wanted a stork should have one. It might make things more peaceful, and maybe Monk would get turned loose.

Doc hid all the storks except one. He put that one in his coat pocket. He didn't know what more to do to kill time, so he went to the door and opened it and looked into the library.

Ada Nobel wasn't on the couch in the library.

She wasn't in the reception room, either.

The stork wasn't any longer on the desk.

Doc Savage was deeply shocked. He thought: My God! I have finally learned to read the female character!

VIII

Doc Savage felt so good that he took a shower and put on his second best suit. A glance from the window appraised him of lightning winking in the sky, and remembering how intensely dark the night had been, he surmised there would be rain. It never rained for only an hour or so at this season in New York, usually it wasn't satisfied with less than a week. He laid out a raincoat and an umbrella. There was nothing better than an umbrella to hide your face on a damp day on the street.

Then Ham Brooks called on the telephone. "What're you pulling on me?" Ham demanded.

"Did you follow Miss Nobel?" Doc asked smugly.

"How the hell did you know she was going to skip out?" Ham sounded like a man whose entire code of evaluations had been torpedoed. He demanded suspiciously, "Or did she skip? You didn't send her out on an errand, did you?"

"Leaving was her own idea," Doc said. He added, "She took the stork statuette off the desk."

Ham was stunned.

"Dammit, why didn't you say so!" he cried. "I'll grab her right now and take it away from her."

Doc said hastily, "No, no, don't do that. Just follow her and see where she goes and what she does."

"But if I lose her and the steel stork—"

"Never mind the stork," Doc said. "We've got them to give away now."

"Huh?" Ham demanded, confused. "Say, you haven't gone off the beam, have you? Where'd we get more storks?"

"I had them made," Doc said. "We've got half a dozen." He listened to Ham's snort of surprise, then added, "If we need more, we can get them. We can order them by the gross, I imagine."

"You sound too damned pleased," Ham said.

"I was right about the girl," Doc reminded him.

"Sure, for the first time in your life you were right," Ham retorted. Ham was discomfited. "Where's the genuine stork?"

"In the laboratory, hidden in a bottle marked 'poisonous lizard preserved in alcohol,'" Doc explained.

"You want me to keep track of the girl?"

"On second thought," Doc said. "I'll help you. Where is she now?"

"Having a good attack of jitters, and a sandwich in the Penn Station restaurant," Ham explained. "The one on the north side, downstairs. I'm in the telephone booths out in the hall, east."

"Be there in a minute," Doc said.

"What about if they call in to trade Monk?" asked Ham uneasily.

"I think this is probably hotter," Doc said.

The eighty-sixth floor of the building was exclusively Doc Savage's premises, but this did not mean he had all the space in the building at that level. The normal layout of the building had not been disturbed to accommodate him. The hall, for instance, was like the halls on the other floors, except that only one door had a name on it.

There was quite a battery of elevator shafts. The eighty-sixth floor was called the top floor, but actually it was only figuratively the top. Above it was located a roof restaurant and night club, an observation tower, and a shop which sold gimcracks to sightseers. There was also the machinery, enough to fill a young factory, of the elevators, and a water tank and the other stuff found on top of buildings.

At any rate the eighty-sixth floor was not isolated. Anyone who wished could reach it, either by the elevators or the stairs.

Leaving his door, Doc observed a man standing by the elevators, facing the other direction. Doc kept an eye on him.

He was not alarmed, but he was cautious. Drunks sometimes strayed down to this floor from the night club, particularly at this hour of the morning.

Doc approached the elevator and the man. The man was long. Suddenly realizing there was something familiar about him, Doc dropped a hand in his coat pocket, grasped the stork, and held it so it would look like a gun in the pocket.

The man turned around. He said, "I think I've made some mistake."

"Somebody has," Doc agreed.

The man was the fake watchman at the graveyard. The bell-voiced bidder on the stork at the auction.

"I came up here to talk to you," the man said. He spoke in his normal high, bell-like voice. "I got cold feet and changed my mind. I was about to leave," he added.

Doc watched the man closely. He said, "You had better change your mind again."

"I think I will," the man said.

Doc said, "Put up your hands."

Obedying, the bell-voiced man said, "My gun is in a holster under my right armpit."

Doc felt for the gun. "Left-handed, eh?" he remarked. He got the gun, a large single-action six-shooter of the Buffalo Bill

variety. "Have a license for this?" Doc asked.

"A license good in California," the man said. "Look in my billfold. If they reciprocate on those licenses, it's good here. If they don't, it's not."

The man's billfold was a limp affair of sweat-stained brown leather. It contained about eleven hundred and twenty or thirty dollars, or at any rate eleven one-hundred-dollar bills. There was a driver's license, an old 1A-H draft card, credit cards for the Hotel Ambassador in Los Angeles, the Muehlbach in Kansas City, the New Yorker and the Waldorf in New York City, and a private detective's license entitling the bearer to practice in California. The description of bearer on these documents, where there was a description, fitted the tall bell-voiced man, gave his age as 42 (he looked much younger than 42), and his name as Theodore La France.

"Theodore La France, private detective," Doc remarked.

The other nodded. "And sucker, you might add," he said.

Doc Savage rang for an elevator. "Any objections to talking while we move?" he asked.

"None at all," La France said. "Do I get my gun back?"

Doc shook his head. "Not right now." He noted that the man had wiped the dark grease off his face, and no longer wore the cap and muffler. Doc added, "You did quite a job of fooling us at the cemetery."

"You mad about that?" La France asked.

"Should I be?"

La France shrugged. "Some people don't like to be fooled, is all."

An elevator was stopping. "No one does," Doc said. He put the six-shooter under his belt, where his coat would hide it. It was too large to go in his pocket. "Let's not talk now," Doc added.

The elevator contained four men and four women, all a little high. Doc and La France got aboard. One of the women, a brunette, squealed, "It's Doc Savage! How are you, honey?" She tried to kiss Doc. He had never seen her before. She cried, "I wanna kiss!" She smelled of bourbon and gardenias. Her escort, a small fat man, said, "Stop acting a fool, Rose." Rose, belligerent, said, "Who's a fool?" The fat man said, "By God, I get you home, I'll show you." Doc Savage's face was getting a darkly cooked lobster color. He was very glad when the elevator got to the lobby.

Doc and La France hurried away across the lobby. "Your public?" La France asked.

"There's a night club on the roof," Doc told him uncomfortably.

Darkness filled the streets. The streetlights looked hotly white, dispelled the blackness at the corners, in the middle of the blocks. There was not a pedestrian in sight, and only two taxicabs. Rather than have an argument with a cab driver over

such a short haul, Doc decided to walk to Penn Station. It wasn't far.

Doc was careful not to get ahead of La France as they walked. The man looked lithe, tough. He could probably hit a nasty blow from behind.

Lightning crawled across the sky, jaggedly, redly. There was no thunder.

"Let's have some words," Doc said.

Quickly, eagerly, Theodore La France said, "You know my name. Ted La France. Private detective. Los Angeles. My identification proves that. Here's something else you can check on: I was employed by Mason Carl Wentz's investment and banking firm for several years, before he dissolved his banking business and retired to his ranch in Arizona."

Doc said nothing.

La France added, "You can check on that by calling Wentz's former banking associates in Los Angeles."

Thunder went rumbling boisterously across the heavens, although there had been no visible lightning. "You bet I'll check on it," Doc said. The lightning bolt that had made the thunder must have been above the thick clouds. "Go ahead with more words," Doc added.

Rapidly, La France said, "Here's something I can't prove: Mason Carl Wentz paid me five thousand dollars a year ago, in return for which I was to investigate his death, no matter when

and how he died."

Pennsylvania Station looked enormous ahead of them. It looked like a cathedral. Doc remarked, "So you are investigating the banker's death?"

La France nodded. "A little more than that," he added. "You might say I'm doing something for my country, I hope. You saw my draft card. Over age. As a matter of fact, I didn't try to enlist, either, and since then I've become a little ashamed of that."

"What does patriotism have to do with a banker's natural death?"

"You'll see."

"Was his death natural?"

"Sure. Pneumonia. Type three, and a serum would have saved him, or sulfa. He couldn't get it. You couldn't get a buzz-bomb into that ranch in the wintertime, if the Lord wasn't kind with his weather."

Doc Savage decided to be cautious and not use the main entrance to Penn Station. He said, "All right, you were hired by Wentz before he died to investigate his death if he did die. Then what?" He pushed open a swinging door.

"I investigated," La France said. He went ahead of Doc into the station.

Stale air, smelling of rain and railway station, hit them. "Keep talking," Doc suggested.

La France nodded. "Well, his death was natural. I found that out. But I turned up something else, something I had long suspected." La France kept abreast or a little ahead of Doc with long, rangy steps. He added, "Wentz had too many alien friends."

"Alien friends?" Doc pretended to be puzzled.

"Enemy aliens. Japs. Germans. Austrians." La France sounded dramatic. "People who were citizens of countries we were fighting."

They were walking in a low-ceilinged corridor. "What does the fact that Wentz had alien friends mean?" Doc asked. They passed a door that smelled strongly of washroom antiseptic.

"It means they tried to kill me when they knew I had found it out," La France said.

"Who?"

"Who what?"

"Who tried to kill you?"

"Oh. A fat guy named H. I. Merrillee and some friends of his."

Doc pretended surprise. "Let's not talk for a minute," he said. They were coming near the restaurant. Doc's eyes

searched for Ham Brooks.

There was a drunk sprawled on a shoe shiner's chair in a little alcove. The drunk seemed to be asleep, head twisted around, hat over his eyes, hands drooping. The pretending drunk was Ham Brooks. Evidently he saw Doc Savage, because one of his drooping hands made some gestures, which Doc decided meant Ada Nobel was still in the restaurant.

Looking about, Doc Savage decided the best place from which to watch Ham Brooks and the lunchroom door was the interior of an all-night newsstand-bookstore-fountain opening off the passage. Doc said, "Let's go in here. Can you drink a malt?"

La France jerked his head at the restaurant. "They probably make better malts in there."

"I like the malts in here," Doc assured him. They entered the place. "Two malts," Doc told the attendant. By sitting on the stools, they could see Ham. Ham made an airman's okay signal, a circle with thumb and forefinger, to tell Doc he was okay where he was.

Doc said to La France, "Let's hear more."

La France scowled at the clerk. He lowered his voice, resumed his story, saying, "Here is where I got confused. H. I. Merrillee and some friends were at the ranch, which was inherited by Harrison Nobel, old Wentz's secretary. Some of H. I. Merrillee's men must have been watching me and found out I

was nosing around the alien friends angle, because one of them took a shot at me, and ruined the hell out of my five-dollar hat."

Doc remarked, "I don't see anything confusing about that."

La France grimaced.

"The stork statuette," he said. "That's what confused me. H. I. Merrillee was after it. He was scaring the hell out of old Harrison Nobel trying to make Nobel tell him where it was. Nobel didn't seem to know."

Doc interrupted. "How did you learn this?" he asked.

"By gumshoeing around the ranch after dark," explained Theodore La France. "I wore my ears out flattening them against keyholes."

"I see."

"I don't. I don't see for nothing," said the detective. "Here's the rest of the story. H. I. Merrillee suddenly discovered the stork statuette had been shipped off to New York to be sold in an auction gallery with Wentz's other pictures and books and furniture and stuff. So H. I. Merrillee and his men grabbed old Nobel, and came hell-bent for New York, with me right on their tails. There's a girl in the picture, too. I don't know who the hell she is. She followed them to New York, too."

Doc asked, "Did H. I. Merrillee know you were doing all this following?"

"Not until I bid against him at that auction, I don't figure he did," said the detective.

"Why did you bid at the auction?"

"I wanted to see what would happen."

"You bid fifteen thousand dollars."

La France grinned. "I would have bid a million. I didn't have that, either."

The clerk put their malts in front of them. "Then what happened?" Doc asked.

"After the whirlygig in the auction room, I got back on H. I. Merrilee's trail," the detective explained. "He was staying at his stepmother's on Long Island, so I went back there to watch him. That graveyard was a good place to watch from, so I was watching from there when you showed up."

Doc tasted his malt. "And then you played caretaker," he said. The malt was terrible.

Ted La France nodded. "I was in a dither to know what the hell was happening," he explained. He sipped his own malt. "I didn't know it was you when I stopped you. Finding out who you were gave me a jolt, I can tell you." He glared at the malt. "Cripes, is this what you call good?"

"Their malts are very economical here," Doc said. He asked, "Why did you come to see me?"

"Because I don't know my eye from a hole in the ground about this mess," said Theodore La France. "I think there's something damned big and mysterious afoot. I think some foreign, alien angle is involved, and I think it's our duty as patriotic Americans to find out what the hell it's about."

"You want me to help you?" Doc inquired.

"No, the other way around. I want to help you," said La France. He attacked his malt again, took two swallows and gave up. "Economical, you say! They're twenty-five cents! Cripes!"

Doc said, "It seems to me we could work together." He added, "One swallow of these malts, and you don't want any more malts for a month. That's where the economical comes in."

At this point, Ham's hand made an alert gesture. Doc moved hastily until he could peep at the restaurant door.

Theodore La France became alarmed. "What's going on?" he wanted to know.

"Detective business," Doc said.

"Huh?"

"We're following the mysterious girl, Ada Nobel," Doc said.

"Why?"

"She's got a statuette of a stork," Doc explained.

"Godamighty!" exclaimed the detective.

Ada Nobel came out of the restaurant. She carried a small newspaper bundle, evidently the stork. She walked away without seeming to notice Ham Brooks.

Doc told La France, "The race is on. Let's go."

IX

Hot, zig-zagging, awe-inspiring lightning raked the sky above the mouse-gray stone front of the hotel in the Forties between Fifth Avenue and Sixth Avenue. Thunder belched out of the stormy sky the moment the lightning bolt collapsed, and with a whoop and a rumble dived into the canyon-like street, rebounding in violent echoes, pouring into the hotel lobby in a cascade of violent noise, further frightening the already alarmed hotel clerk.

Ham Brooks emphatically repeated the lie he had just told the clerk.

"We're police detectives," Ham said. He used the belligerent manner police detectives use. "I want to sit in on your telephone switchboard, and I don't want any argument about it. I haven't got time to argue." He glared at the terrified clerk. "Or would you rather have Clancy here"—Ham jerked his head at Theodore La France—"take your pants to jail?"

"Go ahead and listen," the clerk said. He stood by and wrung his hands.

"Get a natural look on your face," Ham told him. "Nothing is going to happen to you or the hotel."

Doc Savage came down from upstairs. He told Ham Brooks, "I listened at the keyhole. Apparently she is alone in her room. I could not hear any voices. She seemed to be walking the floor."

"Maybe she was packing," said Ham. "She would do a lot of walking back and forth if she was doing that."

Doc dismissed this. "She did not pause as if she was picking up things. She kept going."

Ham nodded. He frowned at La France. He didn't know who La France was. "Where do you come into this?" Ham demanded.

Doc asked the hotel clerk, "What's your name?"

"Mr. Davis," said the clerk nervously.

Doc suggested, "Mr. Davis, will you go over to that chair yonder and sit there, so you can't overhear our conversation."

The clerk hastily complied with the suggestion. Doc asked Ham, "What did you do to the clerk to scare him like that?"

"Nothing," Ham said innocently. "He must have a nervous nature." Ham indicated La France, asked, "What about this

fellow?"

Doc told Ham the story Theodore La France had told him, Ham listening with rapt expression. Doc had nearly ended the story when the PBX switchboard began buzzing. "You had better get on the job, telephone girl," Doc said.

"Holy cats!" Ham was staring at the telephone board. "It's her! It's her calling!" he gasped. He grabbed at the keyboard.

"Disguise your voice!" Doc exclaimed. "Don't forget that."

In a very prissy voice, Ham said, "Number please?" He listened, then turned his head to demand wildly, "How the hell do you work one of these switchboards?" He grabbed a fistful of plugs. "What do I stick where?" he demanded.

Doc showed him what to do, and they listened to Miss Ada Nobel's call.

Miss Ada Nobel called a number, Circle double naught five three. The instrument rang for some time, then a voice answered. "Yeah?" the voice said. "Whatcha want?"

"Get hold of H. I. Merrillee," Ada Nobel ordered. "And give him a message."

"Huh?" The voice sounded frightened. "Whatcha say? Whoosis?"

"Ada Nobel," she said.

"Don't know no Ada Nobel," the voice complained. "Whatcha wakin' people up this timea night?" He didn't sound in the least sleepy.

Ada Nobel became angry. "Listen, you!" she snapped. "You get hold of your pal Merrillee and tell him that Ada Nobel has the stork, and she's willing to do business."

The man pretended to be bewildered.

"Don't know whatcha talkin' about," the man said.

Ada Nobel said, "Brother, you pass the word along if you know what's good for you."

The man hesitated. "Where you at?" he asked.

Ada Nobel gave the telephone number of the hotel. "Call me there," she said. "Tell Merrillee that."

The man said defiantly, "Don't know no Merrillee." He hung up.

Ham Brooks was amazed. "By jove, she's doublecrossing us. You *can* read the female mind, Doc."

Pleased, Doc said, "Ham, grab a taxi and get over to the nearest newspaper office, which will have a cross-numbered telephone directory. Find out the address of Circle double naught five three. Then go up there and get on the trail of this person she called, if you can."

Ham reached for his hat. "What'll I do when I find him?" he

asked.

Doc snorted and said, "What'll he do, he asks. Dress him up in a Santa Claus suit and take him to the North Pole. I'll bring the Christmas tree." Doc grimaced. "What'll you do with him!"

Ham departed, grinning.

Doc Savage summoned the hotel clerk. He explained that he wanted to be called immediately, in order to listen in on any telephone calls from Miss Ada Nobel's room. Would the clerk summon him? The clerk would.

Doc Savage beckoned Detective Theodore La France, and retired with him to a small dining room adjoining the lobby. Through the glass doors of the dining room, they could watch the hotel clerk.

Detective La France chuckled. "This reminds me of old home week," he said.

"What did you expect?" Doc asked.

"Miracles," La France admitted. "I've heard about you. You've got more reputation, in certain quarters, than the emperor of hell. The way I heard it, you just snapped your fingers and all evildoers were consumed by a flash of fire." He laughed softly. "Here you are acting like any other detective. Imagine!"

"Stick around," Doc told him. "Maybe we can produce a fiery flash for you."

The hotel clerk was confused. He lowered the hand with which he had beckoned, said, "I—uh—incoming calls to Miss Nobel. I didn't know—do you—"

"Let's have it," Doc said. He completed the connection. He listened to H. I. Merrillee's fat-man voice address Miss Nobel. "Okay, toots," said Merrillee. "What you got on your mind?"

Miss Ada Nobel spoke with much dislike in her voice. She said, "What I've got isn't on my mind, it's in my hand. The stork statuette."

H. I. Merrillee hesitated. "Sounds very dreamlike to me, toots."

"I snitched it from Doc Savage."

"Nice work if you got it," said H. I. Merrillee.

Ada Nobel said, "You've got my uncle, Harrison Nobel, and Monk Mayfair."

H. I. Merrillee spoke hastily. "Now you're in the woods, sister. About those parties you mention, I know nothing. A flat nothing." He hesitated, then ventured, "What was that about a trade?"

"I'll swap you," said the girl. "The stork for Harrison Nobel and Monk Mayfair."

Merrillee, surprised, asked, "What's Monk Mayfair to you?"

He added, with considerable feeling, "I wouldn't give ten cents for that guy. He's made us more trouble than a barrel of alligators."

Miss Nobel explained her stand. "I stole that stork from Doc Savage, who intended to trade it to you for Monk Mayfair if he could. I'm just adding Uncle Harky to the jackpot. But I feel I owe it to Mr. Savage to get Monk Mayfair free. Mr. Savage isn't going to be too pleased with me as it is."

Merrillee was silent a while. "Some very beautiful sentiments," he said. After being silent some more, he said, "Listen, toots. It's a deal. A quickie, see. You give us the stork. We give you Harky and Mayfair."

"Good," Miss Nobel said. "But there is a catch: I don't trust you."

"Sure, sure, you're a cautious chick. That's okay." H. I. Merrillee lowered his voice confidentially. "Here's the act: give us half an hour. Be at that coffee doughnut place on Broadway. Sit at the window. Put the stork on the table, so one of us, walking past outside, can see that you got it. Then we'll walk Harrison Nobel and Mayfair past to show you we got them. Then we'll make a quick deal. How's it sound?"

"It sounds good," said Ada Nobel.

"It is good, toots," said H. I. Merrillee.

This ended the negotiations.

Ham Brooks had some perspiration on his forehead. He wiped the sweat off while saying, "There was nobody home at Circle double naught five three. The bird had flown the coop. I guess he had gone to tell H. I. Merrillee the news." Ham put his handkerchief away. "Has Merrillee called yet?"

Doc gave the gist of the deal he had heard consummated over the telephone.

Ham expressed suspicions. "That quick, eh?" he remarked dubiously. "No preparations at all, you might say. And at that place on Broadway." He shook his head. "Broadway is crowded, even at this time of night. How does Merrillee know that the sidewalk won't be jammed with cops?"

"He doesn't," Doc said. "Which means, if you ask me, that the thing will never get that far."

"How far will it get, do you think?"

"Probably as far as the first dark alley, where Miss Nobel will be rapped over the head, then the statuette taken from her," Doc surmised.

Ham thought so, too. He asked, "What do we do about it?"

It was decided that Doc and Detective La France would take up a position in the street in a taxicab. Ham would wait farther down the street, in a darkened doorway. Fearing Miss Nobel would leave any moment, they took up their positions at once.

Detective La France lit a cigarette, after Doc had declined one. La France asked, "What do you suppose this cockeyed

thing is all about?"

Doc countered by asking, "What do you know about this H. I. Merrillee?"

The driver of their cab cocked an ear toward their voices. Doc leaned forward and slid shut the glass partition with a bang. The driver snorted.

La France said, "Merrillee? I checked that baby's record. He's no good. His nose never has been clean."

"Did you ever obtain information concerning his recent activities?" Doc asked. He believed the driver could hear what they were saying even with the glass partition closed.

La France evidently was aware of the driver, too. Lowering his voice, he said, "The feds tried to glue an espionage rap on him about a year after the war began. It didn't stick. But the sandpapering they gave him scared him out to Flagstaff, Arizona, where he bought a beer joint." Suddenly opening the glass slide, La France said to the driver, "Buddy, ain't you afraid you'll split an eardrum?" The driver scowled at him, said, "If you don't like it, get the hell out." La France said, "I'll get the hell right down your throat, that's what I'll do!" The driver said, "Any time you're ready, snooks."

Doc Savage was saying, "Here, here, stop it!" when La France reached through the opening and got the driver's neck. La France called the driver a dirty name. "You tend to your damned business," he said. "Or you'll rot it out in a federal jail."

The driver was frightened. "Hell, why didn't you say you were feds," he complained.

After that, they had peace. Detective La France did not resume talking. Doc did not ask him any more questions. Doc wondered if he had started the row with the driver in order to stop conversation about the case.

* * *

Half an hour passed.

Forty-five minutes passed.

They were alarmed.

Doc Savage took his eyes off his watch, said, "The girl was to meet them in half an hour. She hasn't come out of the hotel."

Theodore La France said, not too flatteringly, "You guys are hot detectives, aren't you?" He opened the cab door. "Me, I'm going to see if that hotel has a back door."

Doc was startled. He was flabbergasted. "She might have been afraid they would waylay her, and used the back door," he said. He jumped out of the cab. "We'd better see."

"We've been outslicked," said La France positively.

The cab driver now didn't think much of them.

"Wise guys," he said. "Feds!" He snorted.

Ham met them at the hotel entrance, and they went in together. Detective La France became excited, pointing. "Look at that!" he cried.

The hotel clerk was sitting at the switchboard. He was bent over, his face resting among and mashing over the plugs and cords. His nose was in a pool of blood. His hair was nearly parted on the back of his head, where split and bruised scalp showed.

"Look for a back door," Doc told Ham. Doc felt the clerk's wrist, located a pulse. "He's not dead," Doc said.

Ham was back. "There's a back way out. It leads into an all-night restaurant on the next street."

"See if our party went through the restaurant," Doc ordered. He added sharply, "Why didn't you do that before you came back?" He picked the clerk up and carried him to a divan.

Detective La France said, "I'll go up and see if the girl is in her room."

"How do you know what her room number is?" Doc demanded.

La France scowled. "I don't," he said. He added, "You trust me about as far as you could throw a bull by the tail, don't you?"

"Just about that far," Doc admitted. He decided the clerk couldn't be revived immediately. "We'll both see about the girl." He made for the stairs, keeping a wary eye on La France.

Ham appeared. "The girl didn't go through the restaurant," he reported. "But three men did." He shrugged, added, "One of them could have been H. I. Merrillee."

"Upstairs for us," Doc said. He told Ham, "I didn't mean anything barking at you a minute ago."

A strip of adhesive tape, two inches wide, the color of a scraped bone, ran exactly across Ada Nobel's eyes. Another one like it crossed her mouth. She was tied like a package with two sheets, two blankets, tightly knotted.

Doc told her, "This may hurt," and picked the adhesive tape off her mouth. She said, "They got the stork!" He said, "Yell if this hurts," and loosened a corner of the other adhesive tape, pulled. The loosening tape made a sandy tearing sound. When it reached the girl's eye lashes, she screamed.

"We'll have to soak it off," Doc said. He didn't pull any more at the tape. "Who were they?" he asked.

"Merrillee and two others," she replied. "They outsmarted me."

"You weren't the only one," Doc told her. He wasn't pleased with himself.

A red light was glowing at intervals on the switchboard. When it glowed, a buzzer whirred simultaneously. This had

been going on for some time, and now it stopped, and the board was still for perhaps a minute. The board was still, but the roaring of the rain falling in the street filled the hotel lobby. A guest came dashing in, holding a newspaper over his head, and stopped in astonishment when he saw the bloody-faced clerk lying on the divan. The guest hesitated, frightened, uncertain, then finally he tiptoed across the lobby and went up the stairs, intent on having nothing to do with whatever had happened. Now the switchboard light began to glow red and buzz again.

Thunder ran rumbling through the sky, rain roared freshly down. Doc Savage came down the stairs. Ham Brooks, Ada Nobel and Theodore La France were with Doc. The tape was still over the girl's eyes, and Ham was helping her.

The whirring board caught Doc's notice. He hesitated, undecided whether to pass it up, then went over and plugged in and pushed a jack handle.

Doc said, "Number, please."

H. I. Merrillee's voice laughed in his ear.

"You smart so-and-so," said H. I. Merrillee. "I spit in your ear, see." He made a spitting noise. "I spit in your ear, bub. How do you like it?"

"I don't like it," Doc admitted. "And you won't either, when the marbles are all counted."

"I saw you guys go into the hotel a while ago," H. I. Merrillee said. "You know, you scared the hell out of me. I

didn't dream you had a trap set for me. We just went in the back way of the hotel to give the girl a little crossing up." He laughed the shaky laugh of a man who had just heard ice crack under him. "When I saw you and Ham Brooks and that stinker, La France, go into the hotel, you could have wiped my eyes off with a stick."

Doc said coldly. "Keep talking. We want to trace this call." He knew Merrillee was telephoning from one of the railway stations or from a subway station somewhere. He could hear the station noises in the background. He could hear a loudspeaker, faint, shrilly female.

The threat scared Merrillee into business.

"I got a little promise to make you," Merrillee said. "You leave me alone if you want to see that bull ape of yours again."

He hung up.

Doc took off the phone headset. His movements were slow, worried. Ham was staring questioningly. Doc told Ham, "That was H. I. Merrillee. He threatens bodily damage to Monk if we continue our activities."

Detective Theodore La France shoved out his lower lip sarcastically. "Scared you out, eh?" he said.

Doc Savage shook his head slowly. He closed his eyes. He was thinking, examining his memory closely.

His thinking was about the background of sounds which had come over the telephone while H. I. Merrillee was talking. He

remembered the tinny voice in the background, shrilly female.

He said thoughtfully, "Railroads are masculine, aren't they?"

"Huh?" Ham Brooks stared at him. "What say?" Ham was startled.

"They announce trains in depots and they announce planes at airports," Doc said. He became excited. "This was a woman announcer. I don't think they have lady announcers in the railway stations yet. But they have them at the airport."

He wheeled on Ham Brooks. "Ham, get out to La Guardia Field as fast as you can. I have a strange feeling that our friends have lit out for Arizona by plane."

X

At Tulsa they were telling the customers that westbound flights would probably be cancelled. At Amarillo, they were getting ready for a stackup of westbound ships. At Tucumcari, CAA airways radio station, one of the operators was on vacation, and they were snowed under. It was a madhouse. At Albuquerque, private fliers were running around like scared ostriches trying to find hangarage for their planes, and those who discovered they were going to have to take their ships out and take what was coming, screamed like eagles.

Old man weather was about to pop. At Salt Lake, Tulsa, Denver, Fort Worth, Albuquerque, the meteorology boys were bending over their maps and connecting points of like barometric pressure with isobar lines. They looked alarmed at what they saw.

West of Kingman on Airway Green 4, it was clear as a crystal. From Kingman east to Winslow, it was instrument. But at three o'clock in the afternoon, Winslow CAA teletype tacked an X on its sequence. X meant take-offs and landing suspended. Closed. The old man was there.

"Oh, boy!" Ham Brooks said.

Doc Savage contemplated the instrument panel of his plane with no enthusiasm at all. The instrument panel had a full blind flight group, and the instruments were as good as they come. But he was not happy. No pilot who has ever flown into a stinker wants to fly into another one. Doc had been in a couple.

He had been riding the Winslow beam, in the N quadrant, but close enough to get the twilight A. The Winslow call was dot dash dash then three dashes. WO. The range N went off, and the Winslow operator gave the weather. It made Doc much less happy.

"Oh, boy!" Ham Brooks repeated. "If we set down at Winslow, they'll never let us off again."

"The remedy for that is simple," Doc explained. "We will not set down at Winslow."

Detective Theodore La France jeered at them. "Scared, ain't

you?" he said. "What the hell are you scared of?"

"I hope you'll never find out," Ham said sincerely. "Indeed, I do."

"Hah. I'm not afraid," said Mr. La France.

Ham nodded pityingly. "You have never met our approaching friend which we scientific boys refer to as cAw."

"As which?"

Ham waved generally westward. "A continental arctic air mass, or cAw as he's called," he explained. "Nobody knows why he came down here at this time of year. Nobody invited him. God knows, nobody wants him. He's a wild harum-scarum from the Arctic, and he's out to whoop and roar among the gentle warm air masses."

"What is this, a kiddie story?" asked Detective La France.

Ham looked through the skylight. There was high cirrus, like strips of shed snake hide. Cirrus like that was composed of frozen ice particles.

In the west, gleaming silver and ebony castles stood in the sky. These were what the weather man called cumulo nimbus clouds. Inside them, you could find winds so violent no man had ever measured them. There were reliable reports of five-hundred-mile-an-hour winds in such clouds.

Ham shivered.

Ada Nobel moved to Ham's side. She demonstrated how much she knew about meteorological signs of the devil.

"Aren't the clouds pretty," she said.

The police report came over the other radio, the multiband. It was from Kansas City. Ham was manning that set, and he copied the message with a pencil.

He said, "I guess they pulled out of Kansas City, all right." He handed Doc what he had copied.

The message read:

No individuals your description used airlines. But hospital plane chartered by two men claiming be doctors taking two patients answering your description Monk Mayfair and Harrison Nobel destination given Los Angeles. Hospital plane is Beechcraft NC 23875 painted white. Full instruments. Left Kansas City contact flight rules hour 22:10. Shall we check itinerant private plans for more men your description of H. I. Merrillee and others.

MORGAN, Kansas City Police.

"What's that?" Detective La France wanted to know. Ham let him read it. La France said, "Dammit, they didn't take an airliner." He scowled. "What does that mean, hour twenty-two-ten?" he added.

"Hour twenty-two-ten would be ten minutes after ten last night," Ham said.

"Why do you flying guys change everything all around?" La France demanded. "Hell, they're way ahead of us, aren't they? Beechcraft, is that a fast ship?"

"It's a pretty hot job for a private ship," Ham told him. "Yes, they're a long way ahead of us."

"Why the hell didn't it occur to you they might charter private planes?" demanded the detective. "Some detectives, I must say."

Ham scowled at him. "It did occur to us, Sherlock," Ham said. He didn't like La France. "But what they did was rent the plane ahead of time. More than one plane, no doubt. That hospital ship wouldn't carry all of them."

"Couldn't you guys have had them stopped at some airport?"

Ham became enraged. "You've got more back sight than a horse has flies. Why don't you spout those bright ideas early enough to do some good?" He poked the detective's chest with a finger. "If you want my opinion, we could take the good you've been to us and put it in a gnat's eye, with some room left!" he added.

"Quit punching me in the chest!" La France said.

Ham examined the sleuth's ample nose. He was tempted to see if it would flatten. But Doc Savage said, "Sit down, Ham." The bronze man was impatient. "See if you can find an airport

that has seen that hospital plane."

Forty minutes later, Ham released the microphone button and yelled.

"Montrose! Montrose, Colorado!" he yelled. "Nine o'clock this morning, they loaded fuel there!"

"Sure it was this hospital plane?" Doc asked.

"Positive. The lineman at the field got the NC number on the gas ticket. Same ship." Ham was elated. "You know what that means," he said.

Doc Savage nodded. "They're heading for the ranch, Fear's End," he said. "They're coming in from the north, probably across the Uncompahgre plateau."

Doc clipped a Grand Canyon sectional aeronautical chart on the mapboard.

"We'll try to make the ranch," he said.

The plane gave a jump like a spanked mule. One wing went up, and there was the stomach pulling sensation of a furious sideslip. Disturbed air pounded fuselage and wing surfaces.

"There's what I mean," said Ada Nobel.

The detective, Theodore La France, looked out dubiously at the troubled world. "What if a guy gets airsick?" he asked.

Ham dismissed this airily. "You don't. You just tell yourself

you won't, and you don't."

"Why don't you?"

"Airsickness is all imagination," said Ham, emphatically.

The plane hit a downcurrent. For ten seconds the bottom was out. It was worse than out. They lifted up as if ghosts had hold of them, only the safety belts holding them in their seats. Ada Nobel shrieked, "What's that?" Ham said, "Only a downcurrent." La France said, "Jeepers!"

The ceiling was about fifteen hundred. The trouble was that the fifteen hundred feet was measured above the floors of the canyons around them.

Ahead there was a front. Doc had concluded it wasn't too bad just now, had decided to go through. There was a sort of hole. Flying into a hole in a cold front wasn't the wisest thing to do, but it was that or go back to Albuquerque or some place like that and sit it out. Possibly for days.

Slinking, coiling, uncoiling, black and gray like Siamese cats, the cumulo-nimbus clouds were all about them. There was lightning. They could see it spurt and flash, hear it wanging the heavens, its thunder like sixty-gun salvos. Each lightning flash illuminated the red fuel tank caps on the wings, one labeled two hundred fifty gallons, the other three hundred gallons. Hundred-octane gas, about as explosive as dynamite, if one wanted to think about that.

Wind, invisible, terrific, suddenly got them. It sucked them upward. Doc tilted the plane on its nose, and his jaw muscles

made walnuts in front of his ears. A cumulo-nimbus cloud was sucking them up into its internal workings. Doc watched the airspeed, giving the plane all the dive he thought the wings would take, or a little more.

Ham went white, then green. They went up into the cloud. The wind was certainly more than four hundred miles an hour. Into the cloud. It was as black as the inside of a goat. And several times as unpleasant.

They spun out of the cloud a few moments later. Ham knew they were spinning. He could tell it by the way forces were tearing at him, wrenching him against the belt. But, when he saw the naked rocky earth gyrating in front of him, he had the absurd feeling that he was going to have to reach up and put his hair back on his head.

Doc got the plane levelled out.

Ham grabbed for a paper sack. He was violently airsick.

Detective La France leered at him. "Imagination, huh?" La France said.

Sunlight, peace, quiet, placidity, enveloped them the moment they were out ahead of the front. Ham went back to the lavatory with his paper sack, sheepishly. He returned shortly without the sack.

"It's beautiful!" exclaimed Ada Nobel, meaning the weather.

"Lovely," Ham agreed, wondering why the hell he had to be the only one who got airsick. He looked down, added, "The Grand Canyon from the air." He didn't think it was so lovely. He thought it was something to scare the roar out of a lion.

Doc had climbed the ship. It was about four thousand feet up and the air, while not smooth, was crystal clear. The sun, piling its glory against the clouds behind them, made an awe-inspiring backdrop for the greatest spectacle of nature that the world offers. The Grand Canyon.

Westward and southward was Grand Canyon the town, with its fancy tourist lodges, and Bright Angel trail snaking down to the bottom of the canyon. Two days' trip by donkey. To the right was Cameron, the painted desert beyond, a waste as bald as a skull.

Ada Nobel stared at the canyon country. "You don't get the feeling of frightening smallness that you get on the ground," she said.

"Wait until we get down in it," Ham said. He saw Doc beckoning. "Doc wants you."

Doc Savage wanted to re-check about the ranch landing strip. How long was it? What direction did it lie?

"It's nearly half a mile," Ada Nobel explained. "It's smooth. I walked over it one day. It runs roughly north and south. It's on the top of a kind of shelf on which Fear's End is situated." She examined the chart. "Here," she said. "Right here."

Doc nodded. He switched on the radio transmitter, his idea

being to get a CAA radio station, either Winslow or El Morro or Milford, and tell where he was landing, then ask that planes with armed men to be sent in after him if he didn't report himself safe tomorrow. But there was too much static. He couldn't raise anything. He switched to code, tried that. No better luck. Static, blasting and continuous. He put the microphone back in its clip.

He told Ham, "We're on our own. But don't advertise it."

Ada Nobel looked back at the storm front. "I'm glad we're out of that," she said.

"We're not," Doc told her. "We're just ahead of it. It's coming this way. And from the way the weather reports read, it's going to center over the canyon area."

She looked worried. "There is no hangar at Fear's End."

Fear's End was astonishingly near the bottom of the canyon. They had flown only a few minutes, but they had covered terrain that no man had ever traversed afoot, and probably never would.

Ages ago, the river had cut its way down to hard, level, rock strata, and for a while, a few centuries probably, it had squirmed across the rock, cutting a fairly wide and flat valley. Then it had found a soft place, and eaten its way downward another thousand feet to the place where it now raced, a swollen, muddy, frightening snake of water.

The result was a shelf of fairly level ground not quite a mile long, and nowhere more than three hundred yards wide. Soil had settled here, enough to support a growth of coarse desert grass and scraggly pinon trees.

Doc Savage looked it over, thought: It sounds large, when you speak of the dimensions.

But the shelf was small against the titanic immensity of the canyon walls. Two minutes ago, he hadn't been able to pick it out at all.

He told Ham, "We'll drag the area, but good. Stand by for landing procedure check-off."

Ham nodded. "Looks like enough room from here."

The landing strip had been cleared among the gnarled pinon trees. It was not wide, not more than a hundred and fifty feet. But it seemed smooth. And it was with the prevailing wind.

Doc said, "There's no white plane there." His face was tight with disappointment.

"I don't see where they could hide it, either," Ham agreed.

The ranch buildings were prominent. They were of native stone, but the rooftops were gay, brilliant. The place looked peaceful.

Doc dragged the landing strip. The third time he went over, he did so in a hair-raising sideslip, so that he got a good view.

Ada Nobel said excitedly, "I see someone at the ranch house! More than one man!"

Doc nodded. He let down the gear, adjusted the throttles, hit a glide, set the flaps, did the two dozen other things that had to be done simultaneously. There was an interval when he was aware of nothing except the runway, the feel of the plane.

Detective La France said, "Hot dog!" He was relieved. "We made it, didn't we?" he added. He started for the door.

"Stay in your seat," Doc told him. "We'll taxi back to the other end of the runway."

"Why?"

"In case we have to get off again in a hurry," Doc said.

Doc locked a wheel brake, fed the opposite motor throttle, got around, and taxied downwind, guiding the heavy ship with the brakes. At the far end of the runway, he came into the wind, locked the brakes. He sat for a while, letting the motors run cooler, watching the surroundings. Everything seemed all right. He cut the switches.

"All right," he said. "But let's not be in a hurry."

His jacket had been hanging over the back of his seat. He gathered it up, somewhat clumsily, and an object fell out of the jacket pocket, skipped along the cabin aisle.

"Hell's bells!" Detective La France ogled the object which had dropped. "For the love of Heaven!" he added. The object was a metal stork statuette.

Ham pretended astonishment. "Where'd that come from?" he demanded.

Doc picked up the stork. "It fell out of my pocket," he said. He put it back in his jacket pocket. "Let's look around."

La France blurted, "But I thought they had the stork!"

"Oh, they have one, too," Doc told him. "Would you like one, too?" Doc opened a handbag. He took out three more storks. "You might as well have one," he said, and handed a stork to La France, a stork to the girl, a stork to Ham. "Everyone might as well have one," he added.

No one seemed to be able to think of anything to say.

Doc got out of the plane. He walked out on the runway, studying the ground. From the tire prints he found, he decided that one plane had landed recently and taken off. From the distance between the tire tracks, he thought the plane could have been the Beech, the hospital ship.

Ham grew excited about the tire tracks. "The Beech," he said. "I'll bet it was the Beech!"

Doc nodded. "In that case, you'd better keep your eye peeled," he warned.

Ham said, "I got a better idea." He climbed back into the

plane and got a machine pistol, and his coat. He put his coat over his arm, covering his hand which held the small rapid-firer. "They better not start anything," he said bloodthirstily.

XI

The man had gentle, sheep-like eyes. He was not a large man, and his shoulders were stooped from years of work at a desk and over a stenographer's notebook. Recent suffering had not been able to erase the gentleness from his face.

He opened his arms when Ada Nobel cried, "Uncle Harky! Oh, Uncle Harky!" He received the girl into his arms, saying, "Ada, my little niece." He patted her shoulder tenderly. "I'm so glad to see you," he told her.

In front of the ranch house stood three other men, all of whom Doc Savage had met previously. There was the small sad man who had carried the diaper satchel in New York, when Ham and Doc had been so scared in front of their headquarters' building. The other two men had also been present on that occasion, one being the fellow with the blond wig, Doc was sure. The other man had been in the car with him at the time.

These three gentlemen were smiling, but it was obvious they had been told to smile. Otherwise they showed signs of uneasiness.

Doc decided he had nothing to say. He was astonished.

Detective La France, amazed, demanded, "What the hell is this? What *is* this, anyway?" He seemed frightened, too.

Ham Brooks had the three onlookers covered with the submachine gun under his coat. "Where's Merrillee?" Ham demanded. "Where's old cupid-face, eh?"

Harrison Nobel patted his niece's shoulder again. "You poor darling," he said. Ada began crying.

Ham stalked over to the sad man. He demanded, "You got any more diaper satchels around?"

The man grinned thinly over fear.

"Come on, you so-and-so!" Ham told the sad man violently. "Speak a piece for me. Let's see what you've got to say. Where's Monk Mayfair?"

The sad man began to tremble. "I ain't got nothin'," he said.

Ham suddenly hit the man in the stomach with his left fist. "You've got something now," Ham told him. The sad man fell down.

Harrison Nobel cried, "Wait! Oh, please wait!" He fluttered toward them. "Please, gentlemen, please." He sounded as if he was about to sob. "There's been a terrible mixup. Please let me explain," he pleaded.

The sad man lay on his back and made gagging sounds. "I've

got a notion to kick a kidney out of you," Ham told him.
"Where's Monk Mayfair?"

Detective La France looked at Ham in amazement. He was impressed by Ham's ferocity.

"Let me talk to you," Harrison Nobel urged. "Come inside, please, and let me talk."

Doc Savage said, "Take it easy, Ham. Let's hear their story."

His two friends helped the sad man to his feet. They didn't have a natural color, and they were sweating.

In the southwest, clouds were like a herd of grazing dark sheep in the sky. They looked deceitfully peaceful, harmless. One cloud was standing up higher than the others. It looked like a herder taking care of the nice peaceful sheep.

The living room of the ranch house was beamed in stained wood. The walls, which were about three feet thick, were unfinished naked native stone, the floor was a mosaic of flagstones. The fireplace was enormous, pleasant, and there was a magnificent elk head above the mantel. The elk horns had sixteen points and a button.

Harrison Nobel twisted his hands together and said, "I'm so glad you will listen. I know how—"

"Hold it a while," Doc said. "Wait until Ham gets back." Ham was prowling the ranch, searching for Monk Mayfair.

Detective Theodore La France was staring at one of the

three men. Not the sad man, but the one whom Doc suspected of wearing the blond wig in New York. Suddenly the detective said, "I think you're the blankety-blank who took a shot at me!"

The man recoiled. "You're crazy!"

The detective bristled. "You ruined a five-dollar hat for me, you rat!"

The man's jaw fell. "Oh, cripes!" he exclaimed. "Was it about a week ago?"

"By God, I thought you were the one!" La France shouted. He started toward the man.

"No, no, wait," the man cried, retreating. "I thought it was one of them Navajo Indians prowling around the place. They come down here and steal stuff. We have to scare 'em off, and that's why I took a shot at the prowler."

"What a lie!" the detective said.

Discouraged, Ham came into the room. He said, "I didn't find Monk." He suddenly removed his coat from his arm and hand, exposing the submachine gun. "But I'm going to, you bet!" he added angrily.

Doc ordered, "Hold it!" He nodded to Harrison Nobel, said, "What've you got to say?"

Eagerly, wildly, Harrison Nobel said, "A banker named Wentz built this ranch, and I was his secretary." He poured out words as if there wasn't much time. "I inherited the place when

—"

"We know how you inherited it," Doc said.

Thrown off stride, Nobel faltered, mumbled, "I—that is—I guess Ada, here, has told you I sent for her? She was working in Chicago, and I offered her a job."

"Why?" Doc asked.

A breath, relieved, rushed between Nobel's teeth. "That's what I want to tell you!" he exclaimed. "A companion. You see, I need a companion very much because—because—" He floundered like a ham actor portraying a confession scene. "I'm mentally unstable!" he blurted. "I—my nerves—a nervous breakdown. I'm afraid that—well not insanity exactly, but delusions. Awful delusions."

Doc examined him curiously.

"What kind of delusions?" Doc asked.

"The last one was about a little statuette of a stork," said Harrison Nobel.

A wind, a small vagrant wind, whirled under the eaves of the ranch house, sighing softly. It was as full of promise as a tiger's breath.

"This," said Doc Savage politely, "is very interesting. Continue."

Harrison Nobel twisted his hands together.

He said, "I had a crazy spell recently. For some reason, or rather no reason at all except a desire that existed in my demented mind, I had to get my hands on the stork statuette." He nodded at the three men. "These are my friends, who were visiting me." He started in surprise, added, "Oh, I haven't introduced you gentlemen, have I?"

He introduced the trio. Sad man was named Jonas McBride, of Los Angeles. The other two were Mr. Horn and Mr. Giesing.

Doc Savage was watching Nobel. He did not think he was watching a crazy man, or one who had ever had a crazy spell, with or without delusions. Doc did feel sure he was watching a thoroughly scared, greedy and desperate man.

"My friends," explained Harrison Nobel, "didn't know what to do to humor me. They decided I would be all right if I could get the stork. So we went to New York after it." He paused uncomfortably. "I'm afraid my friends were overzealous in their efforts to get it."

Nobel lifted his head, gazed at them levelly.

"You see, that explains all that happened in New York," he said.

Silence came into the room and took hold of everyone for a while.

"Nuts!" Detective La France said skeptically.

Doc Savage voted a silent agreement.

Ham Brooks slapped his submachine gun. The sound caused everyone to jump.

"Where's Monk Mayfair?" Ham demanded.

Nobel dropped his eyes. "I'm awfully sorry we put you to so much trouble, and worried you so about your friend," he said. "Mr. Mayfair is in New York, I suppose. He was having a good drunk, the last we saw of him."

Ham's face got wooden. "Monk doesn't drink."

"I'm sorry." Nobel was not looking up from the floor. "He said, after we told him the whole story, that he was disgusted that so much hell could arise over something so inconsequential, and what he needed was a good toot. We had some liquor, which we gave him. He was rather inebriated when we last saw him."

Ham said, "Monk doesn't drink." He moved the machine gun a little, as if he was going to use it on them.

Nobel watched the rapid-firer. Terror made him pale, ill-looking.

Doc asked, "What became of Merrilee?"

"Oh, my friend Merrilee? Oh, him." Nobel shrugged. "He didn't come back to the ranch with us. He has his business to take care of, and his vacation was over." Nobel lifted his head, looked at them. "I'm so sorry this thing has created such an

uproar. So very sorry. I wish I could recompense you in some measure. Will you, perhaps, stay here at the ranch and rest?"

He didn't sound as if he wanted them to stay at the ranch.

"We certainly will," Doc Savage said. "That's very fine of you," Doc added. "We may pay you quite a visit."

They were put, Doc and Ham and La France, in a guest cottage off by itself. It was a fine pleasant cottage which had been built by the banker to make his millionaire clients feel at home. There were big Navajo rugs on the floors, and the furniture was made of such native materials as cactus wood, pinon wood, cowhide, deerskin.

Ham was indignant. "Why the hell," he demanded, "did he tell us a string of lies like that?"

La France looked doubtful. "You think he was lying?"

"Don't you?"

"I don't know." La France scratched his head. "It did sound fishy."

"Sure he was lying." Ham slapped his submachine gun. "If I was half a man, I would go back to the house, give them a chance to tell the truth, and shoot their heads off if they didn't."

Doc looked at Ham uneasily. Ham sounded as if he might do what he was threatening to do.

Far away, faintly, there was a rumbling. It began softly and gathered volume, but did not become particularly loud. It was just a strange, frightening sound, a popping and crackling and rumbling. It was thunder.

Doc said, "That storm is going to pile in here before we know it." He turned to Ham, suggested, "You and La France had better find ropes and sledge hammers and stakes and stake down the plane, so it won't be blown off the shelf into the canyon."

Ham agreed. He said, "All right, but I'd rather shoot some sense into somebody around here." He cradled the gun over his arm, and he and La France went out.

Doc Savage made a quick search of the guest house. They had gone over it before, but they made sure there wasn't an ambush. Now he hunted for something else, anything. He didn't know what he would find. His nervous excitement merely urged him to hunt, and he hunted. There was nothing.

Discouraged, he went outside. He walked to a spot from which he could see Ham and the detective. They were cutting and driving stakes. Their sledge and axe blows rang out, echoes making each sound come back twenty-fold from the canyon walls.

Ham and La France stopped pounding. They were fascinated by the echoes. They could not resist a shout or two, to see what would come back.

"Liar!" Ham shouted. And cascading back from the echo chambers came, "Liar-liar-liar." About twenty of them.

In the southwest, the cloud banks were taller, darker, more nodular. Now and then a tongue of lightning would lick out of one.

Ham and the detective came back. They were excited. Ham's mouth was down at the corners, his jaw out.

"Doc," Ham said. "Doc, somebody got to the fuel line. Our gasoline is all out on the ground."

"You mean the plane tanks are empty?" Doc demanded.

Ham nodded. "Somebody who knew how to use a crowbar used it."

"They don't want us to get away," La France said. The detective was hoarse. His fingers were twitching.

Doc said, "Harrison Nobel and his three friends didn't do it." His eyes swept the surroundings nervously. "They couldn't have done it. They haven't been out of our sight long enough."

"We're isolated here!" La France wailed. "Can't we use the radio and get help, or something?"

Ham scowled. "That's right. Harrison and his three friends couldn't have opened that gas line. So someone else did."

"Merrillee, perhaps," Doc said. He sounded grimly satisfied with the situation.

XII

Harrison Nobel put the palm of his right hand against his cheek. "Your gasoline—gone! Gone?" he said. He was like a startled girl. "You must have sprung a leak when you landed." He lifted his binoculars, turned around, tilted his head back and scanned the heights of canyon wall above the ranch.

"Must have," Doc said without emotion.

The storm was fighting a war in the distance, southward toward Bright Angel. It sounded exactly like a war, too. A little more of it, perhaps. The thunder, cascading through the canyon in volleys of echoes, was the cannon fire.

"Storms here always terrify me," Nobel said. He twisted the focusing screw of the binoculars nervously. "The concussion of thunder sometimes dislodges great boulders which roll down." He shuddered, added, "Big as houses! Bigger!"

Detective Theodore La France ran around the corner of the ranch house. "The horses!" he cried breathlessly. "Where are the horses?"

"Horses?" Nobel didn't lower his glasses. "We don't use horses here. We use donkeys."

"Well, donkeys!" the detective yelled. "Where the hell are the donkeys?" Terror made his voice ugly.

"They broke out of the corral last night and wandered off,"

Nobel said.

"My God!" the detective cried. "How do we get out of here then?"

Nobel shrugged. "Walk, I imagine." He lowered the binoculars. "It takes about a week to climb to on foot. Too bad, isn't it?"

Lightning struck a forked red tongue out of the storm. The tongue must have been five miles long. And the storm gave a terrific gobble of thunder.

The sad man, who had been introduced as Jonas McBride of Los Angeles, came to the ranch house door. "Dinner is served," he said.

"Dinner?" Detective La France was startled.

"I thought we might as well eat," said Nobel.

The sad man repeated, "Dinner is served." He was looking at Ham Brooks. It was a hateful look. The look said that he hated Ham because he remembered how Ham had hit him in the belly. I've put arsenic in your soup, the look said.

Doc Savage went inside. He found Ada Nobel. She jumped up eagerly, glad to see him. He knew, by the tight way she held his arm, that she was frightened.

He whispered, "What do you think?"

"There's something horrible going on here," she whispered

back. "Uncle Harky isn't himself. He isn't himself at all. He's—different—like—as if—"

"As if he were acting?" Doc suggested.

She began to tremble. "I'm afraid Uncle Harky has joined up with them," she said.

Doc looked at her intently. "How do you feel?"

"Feel?" She was puzzled.

He nodded. "Feel, yes."

She thought about that for a moment. "As if—as if I had hold of a sack, and there was a wildcat in the sack." She shuddered. "Not a wildcat, because they're little. A tiger. A man-eating tiger," she added.

Surprise made Doc release a rush of breath. That was exactly how he felt, too. He released another deep breath. He decided he had enough of it.

"Let's open the sack," Doc said.

"Can we?" Her eyes were wide with wonder.

"I think so."

She clutched his arm eagerly. "Let's do. Oh, let's!" she said. "I'm tired of this stalking around, nothing happening, nothing that seems to make sense."

"All right," Doc said. "Hold your hat."

The dinner table was long. The linen was expensive, if not exactly spotless. The silver was costly. Ham scowled at it, said, "The setting is a little elaborate for a can of beans."

The sad man said coldly, "Beans is what we've got."

Doc Savage prepared to start the fireworks. He drew out a chair and sat down.

"McBride," he said.

The sad man's name was evidently really McBride, from the way he looked around. He said, "Huh?"

Doc became very friendly.

"Mack, old boy," Doc said, "don't you think we might as well stop fooling them?"

McBride batted both eyes. He said, "Huh?" again.

"I mean, old boy, what's the object of going on with it?" Doc asked. He was even more friendly. "After all, we might as well wind it up now."

McBride began to look sick. "I don't know whatcha talkin' about," he said.

"Sure you do. Storks." Doc laughed with resounding

comradeship. "I know this isn't the way you figured it, Mack. But why don't we cut it short?"

Stiffly, mouth working, McBride got to his feet. "Damn you, I don't know what you're talking about!" he said.

Doc laughed again. He reached in his coat pocket, brought out a stork, planted the stork on the table. He said, "Here's the stork. We sucked them in with the phony we gave them, didn't we, Mack?" Doc laughed some more. "Really took them in, didn't we?"

McBride looked at his two friends. They were watching him with animal-like intentness. "Oh hell, guys!" McBride appealed to them. "You don't think I'd—here, here, now! Dammit, this is a rib!" He sneered at Doc Savage. "You liar," he said.

McBride's two friends looked at the stork Doc had put on the table. The animal air about them grew. One said, "A phony stork!" He thought for a moment, added, "By God, no wonder we got it so easy."

Harrison Nobel was now looking quite ill. "Gentlemen," he ventured weakly. "Gentlemen." He didn't seem to know what more to say.

One of McBride's two friends stood up. "We got a phony stork," he said, unbelievably. "A fake stork."

He backed away from the table. He told his friend, "This splits it, Goose."

The other, Mr. Giesing, was confused. He had been holding a fork, which he now put down. He reached inside his coat.

Alarmed, Ham yelled, "Keeperhandoffthatgun!" At the same time, he grabbed the handiest missile, the pot of beans, and hurled it in Mr. Giesing's face, pot and all.

On the floor in a shower of beans, Mr. Giesing used his head. He scooted under the table. He made quite a noise.

His friend used the confusion to produce a flat, dark pistol. With it, he shot the sad man, McBride, in the head.

Harrison Nobel shrieked and ran out through the door.

Ham Brooks grabbed frantically for his submachine gun, which he had placed on the floor beside his chair. In his haste to get it, he fell from his chair to the floor.

Ada Nobel stood up. Then she threw up her arms, waved them, tottered, screamed, fell to the floor, disappeared under the table as if she had been swallowed.

Doc Savage had a feeling the man with the gun, whose name was Mr. Horn, was going to shoot at him next. Doc seized the table edge, lifted it, heaved it up on its side. This put the table between himself and Horn.

Upping the table to its edge disclosed that Mr. Giesing had seized Ada Nobel, was going to use her for a shield.

Detective Theodore La France had been sitting in a chair at the end of the table. He still sat in it, although now there was

no table in front of him. He was holding his napkin.

Mr. Horn aimed at two or three points on the table top, indecisively. He couldn't see Doc or Ham. Then he didn't shoot. "Ah!" he said. He'd spied the stork. Jumping to the stork, stooping, picking it up, occupied him for a broken second.

Mr. Giesing now gained his feet. He was holding Ada Nobel to his chest with his left arm. She struggled. He said, "Be still!" Hit her over the head with his fist.

Mr. Horn was withdrawing with the statuette of the stork. "Scram, Goose!" he said. "We'll shoot ta hell outa them from outside."

A bolt of thunder crashed outside, loosening an unbelievable amount of sound outside the door. Loud as the gunshot had been, this was louder.

Doc put a shoulder against the bottom of the table, shoved and skidded the table toward Mr. Horn. This caused Mr. Horn to retreat hastily, as Doc had known it would. While Mr. Horn was withdrawing, Doc made a rush for Mr. Giesing.

Giesing didn't have his gun out yet. He saw Doc was going to try to hit him with a fist. He dodged behind the girl, ducking his head from side to side like a rooster in a fight. Doc Savage feinted with his left hand, which caused the man's head to bob into view on the other side of the girl's head. Doc hit the head as hard as he thought he could without smashing his hand.

Mr. Giesing loosened his hold on Ada Nobel and backed

away. His nose would never be the same again. He retreated as far as the wall, where he fell down. He blew a large, scarlet bubble.

Doc Savage had hold of Ada Nobel, and he ran her to the floor behind the table.

Mr. Horn fired at the table. The bullet came through the table easily. It made a small hole around which splinters stood on their ends.

Ham Brooks, sitting on the floor, had his submachine ready. He glared at the table bottom, which hid the enemy from him, and demanded, "Shall I kill them?"

Doc Savage got hold of a chair. He said, "No, just bark them like you would a squirrel." He threw the chair over the top of the table as hard as he could. "For Heaven's sake, shoot that thing," he urged Ham.

The chair Doc had thrown hit a wall, bounced back, rolled noisily over and over.

Ham aimed at the table bottom, braced himself, pulled the trigger. He got a snapping noise. He could have made a louder noise with his fingers. He looked silly, got a cartridge in the barrel, and tried again. This time the results were satisfactory. Ham fired about twenty shots, stopped. Everybody's ears rang like small bells.

There was a dragging noise. The sound was made by Mr. Horn dragging the dazed Mr. Giesing out through the door, but Ham did not know this.

"Want some more?" Ham demanded.

The dragging sounds ceased.

Ham said confidently, "Got them." He started to stand up. Doc lunged, jerked Ham down flat. Two bullets came through the table top, narrowly missing them.

Horn's voice said, "This ain't over with!"

The door slammed.

Detective La France still sat in his chair. But now his eyes were closed.

Doc Savage ran to the wall near the door, reached out swiftly and tried to yank the door open. It was locked. A shot roared on the other side. A cloud of splinters flew. But Doc had jerked his hand back.

Ham Brooks put a five-shot burst through the door. He took two jumps to the right, sent another five shots into the panels. He listened.

Mr. Horn told them, from the other side of the door, what he thought of them. He was joined, not as strongly, by Mr. Giesing. Both of them finished by inviting Doc or Ham, or both, to come through the door.

"Better save your ammunition," Doc told Ham, who was aiming at the door again.

Ham dampened his lips with his tongue. "We better get out

of here."

Doc shook his head. "Too much open space around the house. They could pick us off."

A slight sound brought them around wildly. But it was only Ada Nobel getting to her feet. Her confusion was understandable.

"Where is Uncle Harky?" she asked.

"He showed more judgment than any of us, and ran," Ham explained.

The girl looked dazed. "What happened?" she asked. Then she put a palm on each side of her head and pressed.

Suddenly Doc Savage jumped at her, grasped her, brought her to the floor. She had been standing in front of a window, an easy target for anyone outside. He pointed this out to her. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "But you must be careful."

She thanked him. She said, "Thank you." This caused Doc to look at her sharply, and wonder how soon he was going to have a hysteria case on his hands. It wasn't the time for polite thank yous. Or was it? If you had enough grip on yourself to be drawing-room polite when—

"S matter?" Ham was pointing at La France. "What's the matter with him?"

Doc looked at the detective narrowly. "La France!" he called. The man on the chair was motionless, unresponsive,

eyes tightly shut.

Turning Ada Nobel around so that she wouldn't see, Doc made a series of gestures—aiming one hand like a pistol at La France, making hammer-falling motions with the thumb of the hand, then raising his eyebrows quizzically—by which Ham understood he was to see whether Detective La France had been shot.

Having investigated, Ham said, "No holes in him." He nudged La France. "Hey, you, wake up!" Ham said. Then, hit by another thought, he gasped, "Heart trouble!" But after holding the detective's wrist, he reported, "Pulse like a fire hose."

Ada Nobel demanded, "What's happened to Mr. La France?"

"He threw a la-de-dah on us," Ham explained. He gave La France a shove, then had to catch the detective to keep him from falling out of the chair. "Fainted," Ham explained.

The girl giggled. "I was going to faint," she said. "I don't think I will, now. It—it would be sort of an anticlimax, don't you think?"

"That's the attitude," Doc told her. "That's exactly the attitude."

Doc Savage was not watching her. He was gazing intently at Detective Theodore La France. Certain ideas which he had held about Mr. La France began to crystallize into rock-solid certainty. The most solid idea was that La France had not fainted. He was faking.

The major part of Doc's early training had been in medicine and surgery. He still practiced, of late years having specialized in brain operative procedure. He was not egotistic in considering himself an authority on fainting.

Fainting, which a layman usually thought was a snap to imitate, was almost impossible to feign. Shutting the eyes and becoming limp wouldn't fool many doctors.

The detective was faking.

XIII

Somber, sooty, alive, the gloom of the storm came into the room. Noisy, too. Thunder and lightning played continually, the echoes making it a deafening conglomeration of sound.

Ham Brooks made a cautious survey from the window, blinking his eyes when the lightning flashed. Impressed, he muttered, "Kind of noisy. We couldn't hear them if they did shoot at us, probably." He looked about uneasily, and his eye lit on the enormous fireplace. "I wonder what a man could see from up there," he said. He went over and put his head in the fireplace.

Doc Savage went over to Theodore La France. He held the detective's wrist, finding, as Ham had said, that the pulse was as strong as the pulse of a pump in a fire hose.

"A very impressive faint," Doc remarked.

"Isn't he silly?" Ada Nobel said. "After all his big talk."

Ham, his head in the fireplace, said, "There's a kind of a roof over the top of the chimney." He sounded as if he was in a hole. "Say, I bet we could see something from the top without being seen." He touched the side of the fireplace and got his fingers very sooty. He withdrew and suggested, "Doc, why don't you climb up and have a look?"

"Why don't you?" Doc asked.

"I don't think I could make it." Ham put his sooty fingers behind him.

"You're afraid of getting a little dirty," Doc said.

Then Doc got up and made an elaborate business of looking around the room. "Where's the stork?" he demanded. "They got it, didn't they?"

Ham suddenly forgot about the fireplace. "My God, was it the real stork?" he demanded.

"No, they got another fake," Doc said. He made sure his voice was loud enough for Detective La France to hear. "Here's another stork in my other coat pocket," he added. He produced the stork.

Amazed, Ham demanded, "How many of those things are you carrying on you?"

"This is the last one."

"Is it the real one?"

"Yes."

"All they've got to do now is take it away from you," Ham said.

Doc agreed with this. He added, "They might do it, at that." He pretended to think about this, added, "I shouldn't be carrying it on my person."

"Hide it," Ham said.

"That's a good idea," Doc agreed. He went over to La France. "Everybody will think La France is carrying a fake, too. If it was the real one, it would probably fool them."

"I don't think so much of that idea," Ham said hastily.

Doc bent over La France. He got La France's stork out of the man's clothing, went through some motions, and put a stork back in La France's pocket. It was the same stork. The stork Doc put in his own pocket was the same one he had been carrying, the genuine one.

Ham got the mistaken impression that La France was now possessor of the genuine stork.

"I don't think that's so hot, letting him carry the stork," he complained.

"Are you going to climb the chimney?" Doc asked.

"No." Ham was displeased. "Climb it yourself."

Doc Savage decided he would go up the chimney, which was constructed of rough stone, and easily mounted. He told Ham Brooks, "Watch that door. I don't want to be caught up in there." He suggested to Ada Nobel, "You better watch the windows."

Theodore La France now opened his eyes, showed signs of life. He asked, "Where am I?" He grabbed his forehead, added, "I feel awful!"

Doc said, "You fainted."

"Oh." La France groaned. "I guess I'm a lily." He stood up, essayed a step or two. "Will walking around hurt me?" he wanted to know.

"Walking should be good for you," Doc said. "Do not overdo it, is all."

Doc entered the fireplace. The chimney was amply wide and deep for climbing, but the layer of soot was extraordinarily thick. Doc climbed a few feet.

"La France," Doc called.

The detective put his head in the fireplace. Doc immediately slipped, lost his grip, and fell. He did not injure himself, but he

brought down a cloud of soot and ashes.

Soot and ashes splattered over the hearth.

Doc dusted himself off. "What I wanted to ask—does that chimney top give a good view of the neighborhood?" he said.

"A fine view," La France admitted.

Doc nodded. "I'll tackle it again, then." He entered the fireplace once more. "Give me a lift up," he said.

La France, standing in the soot and ashes, gave Doc a lift up, groaning impressively as he did so. Doc climbed.

The chimney top did give a fine view of the surroundings. The only trouble was that there was enough brush to hide an army, and the howling violence of the storm, sweeping down on Fear's End, would soon wrap everything in blinding curtains of rain.

Doc climbed down again.

He looked about in surprise.

"Where," he demanded, "did La France go?"

Ham Brooks had one eye to the bullet holes in the door, trying to see whether there was an ambush outside. Ada Nobel was watching through the window. They both whirled, stared, showed unbelieving amazement.

The detective assuredly wasn't in the room.

"Didn't he go up the chimney?" Ham demanded.

"No."

Ham exclaimed, "Ada, why did you let him leave through the window?"

"I didn't," the girl cried. "I didn't! I never—where *did* he go?"

The mystery of what had become of La France held them speechless. There seemed to be no other way out of the room except the door, the chimney, the window.

Suddenly the storm pounced upon Fear's End. The lightning laid down a dozen ear-splitting bolts outside the door, rain followed this barrage, rain and hail together, so that the outer world became white and sobbing and terrible. In different parts of the house, the rain began breaking windowlights.

Doc Savage said, "I hope I didn't get La France to step into that soot for nothing." Doc began inspecting the floor.

The deposit of soot and ashes which Detective La France had gotten on his shoes when he stepped into the huge fireplace opening to aid Doc Savage made his footprints easily discernible.

Ham said admiringly, "So that's why you got him into the fireplace!" He shook his head in wonder. "How the blazes did you know he was going to skip?"

Doc looked wise. He hadn't known.

La France's tracks progressed to the east side of the room, where they stopped. Ended. Disappeared.

"What the devil!" Ham exploded.

Ada Nobel was also confused. "Where did he go?" she wanted to know. "Through the wall?"

Ham snorted. "What do you think he is, supernatural?"

Doc was scrutinizing the wall. "La France had soot on his hands, too," Doc pointed out. He hunted and finally found an oval black smear on an entirely normal looking section of the log wall.

There was nothing whatever to indicate that the thumb had been pressed there for any good reason. But Doc put his own thumb in the same spot. Nothing happened. He pushed. Then he understood. The log, from the other side, must be shaved to a thin shell; pressing on it closed some sort of closely adjusted contact on the other side.

With a flourish, without noise, a secret door opened.

"Good God!" Ham was amazed. "A secret door!" He began to think it was funny. "Sort of like Aladdin and the lamp. Maybe there's a genie, too."

Doc said, "Keep your eyes open." He wasn't feeling funny.

The opening was quite ample in width, although they had to

stoop to enter. Inside it was dark. It was as dark as it had been in that cloud which had sucked them into its innards for a few moments. There were also steps, stone steps.

Doc made sure he could get the door open again, then closed it, increasing the darkness. He whispered, "Take off your shoes, so we'll make less noise." The shoe-removing occupied a while. "All right, stick together," Doc whispered.

He went down the steps, very slowly, feeling his way. The stone steps were rough. They hurt his feet.

Ham Brooks seemed to think the secret door and dark passage were funnier and funnier, because he giggled. Doc, aggravated, rammed an elbow into his ribs. "Ouch!" Ham gasped. Ada Nobel whispered, "Sh-h-h." Then she added, "There's a fork in the passageway. Right here, I think."

Doc investigated. There was indeed a fork. He whispered, "Wait here." He followed the branch about forty feet, around two turns, reached a door, opened it cautiously, discovered he was looking into the living-room of one of the guest cottages.

The thunder was making a great deal of noise outdoors. Rain was coming down in oyster-colored ropes.

Doc went back to Ham and the girl. Ham whispered, "I can hear voices. Listen!"

The door, big, heavy, was of steel. It was about a foot thick, and was a regulation vault door. It was, in fact, the door to a

vault.

The vault itself was as large as a room, apparently excavated in the solid stone, and lined with steel. The ceiling did not seem to be more than seven feet, the width about twelve, the length eighteen or so. Entirely around the walls, except for the space where the door opened, there were steel filing cases, shelves, cabinets. There was no dampness.

Monk Mayfair, tied hand and foot, considerably battered, lay on the floor. His mouth was taped shut.

H. I. Merrillee was there with a gun. He was saying, "It's time we wound this thing up, and I'm going to do it." The cupid smile on his face was gently evil.

With Merrillee—and being menaced by his gun—was Harrison Nobel and Detective Theodore La France.

There was no one else.

Harrison Nobel said, "Finish and be damned. You are not living up to your part, so I'm not going to deliver on mine." He sounded weary, scared beyond any capacity to scare more.

Merrillee said, "The boys just lost their heads."

"Maybe," Nobel agreed. "Yes, I guess they did."

"Then what are you kicking about?"

"Look," Nobel said. He was stubborn. "You said that if I was to help you, nothing would be done to my niece. That's the

only reason I gave in."

"Well, hell, we—"

"Hell, nothing!" Nobel interrupted Merrillee. "You said for me to tell that goofy story about me being crazy, and maybe Doc Savage, Ada and Ham Brooks would go away hunting Monk Mayfair. So I told the story. So what did you do while I was telling it? You opened the gas line on Savage's plane so they *couldn't* leave."

"They didn't believe the story," Merrillee said hastily. "They wouldn't have gone."

"You never gave them a chance." Harrison Nobel looked intently at Merrillee. He called Merrillee six or seven nasty names. "The hell with you!" Nobel finished. "The deal is off."

Merrillee's cherubic smile slipped somewhat. "I'll put it on again," he said.

Detective Theodore La France cleared his throat nervously. "Don't forget to count me in on any deals," he said.

They whirled on him. Merrillee said, "Damn you, you had to stick your nose in!"

Detective La France snorted. "Nobel knows the spot. I've got the stork." He sneered at Merrillee. "What have you got, except two bits' worth of talk?" He scowled at Merrillee, added, "Maybe we'll make a deal with *you*, not you make one with us."

The detective was selling a bill of goods. "Who d'you think you are?" he demanded. "Who d'you think you are, huh?"

He pushed out his jaw and answered his own question. "You're a lug who did some business with some aliens, and found out old Mason Carl Wentz was holding a lot of property for aliens, property they knew damned well the United States government would confiscate, if the United States government found out about it." He paused, sneered at Merrillee. "You're a chiseling traitor against your own country," he added.

Merrillee wasn't impressed. "Go ahead, you thin-witted Sherlock. Get your say." Merrillee's tone implied that later he would have plenty to say.

Detective La France sneered at Merrillee some more, demanded, "Brother, you're not the only one who knew Wentz was keeping a lot of property for aliens. Did you think so? Well, you weren't." The sleuth tapped his own chest. "Me. I knew it. And I was out to find it. And I would have found it, too. I did get the stork."

Merrillee was interested.

"You sure," he asked, "it's the real stork?"

"Certainly I'm sure."

"You better prove it."

"I'll prove it, all right," said La France indignantly. "Just get old Nobel, here, to show you the place. I'll prove it's the stork."

Merrillee swung on Harrison Nobel. "All right, where's the spot?"

The old man retreated. He shook his head. "I won't tell you. Not until Doc Savage and my niece are away from here."

Merrillee cursed. "Damn it, we're trying to get them away from here! Trying to drive them off."

"You're trying to kill them," said Nobel. His voice was heavy.

Suddenly, in the passage behind Doc Savage, there was noise. Footsteps. Hurried ones.

Detective La France heard them, yelled, "What's that?"

"Horn, that you?" Merrillee shouted loudly.

Mr. Giesing's voice answered him. "It's me," Mr. Giesing said. "Hey, you better help. Savage, Brooks and the girl are outa the house. They musta got away in the storm—"

He came down the passage slopping rainwater off his clothes. Behind him came another man. Their breathing was quick, rushing.

"Hell!" Mr. Giesing had bumped into Doc Savage.

Doc surmised Giesing would have a gun in his hand. He was correct in this. Doc got hold of the weapon. But he lost it

immediately, because the weapon was slick with mud. Giesing must have fallen down in the storm and landed in the mud.

Throwing his weight against Giesing, Doc drove the man's head into contact with the tunnel wall. Stunned, Giesing lost his gun.

Ham had hold of the other man.

Merrillee, yelling, "What's going on here?" lifted his own gun and started for the vault door.

Ada Nobel screamed, "Uncle Harky!"

Electrified by her voice, Harrison Nobel sprang upon Merrillee. He tried to grab Merrillee's gun, didn't get it, got the wrist instead. They wrested one another about. Merrillee's gun spoke once, *blam-m-m!* deafeningly. About a yard of fire seemed to come out of its muzzle.

Detective La France yelped and fell to the floor. He had been hit in the body by the bullet.

Merrillee and Nobel, struggling, making spitting sounds, so great was their effort, fell to the floor, writhed.

Monk Mayfair, his small eyes protruding with excitement, rolled over, doubled his legs, and kicked H. I. Merrillee in the head. Merrillee, stunned, released Nobel, but still fought for possession of the gun.

Nobel, not realizing Monk Mayfair had managed to get into the fight although tied and gagged, did what he thought was

necessary for his life. He turned the gun against Merrillee. He shot Merrillee in the stomach and chest until the gun was empty.

By now, Doc had finished battering the senses out of Giesing.

It was suddenly still.

"Ham?" Doc asked.

"O. K.," Ham said. "Is this all of them!"

"Miss Nobel?"

"I'm all right," she said.

Doc went into the vault. He pulled the tape off Monk's lips, ignoring Monk's squalls of pain. Doc asked, "How many more are there?"

Monk yelled, "Ouch! My face!" His little eyes snapped with indignation. "You mighta left some hide on my face!" he shouted.

"Is this all—"

"How many'd you get in the tunnel?" Monk demanded.

"Two."

"That's all," Monk said. "There were just Merrillee, McBride, Horn, Giesing, and that accounts for them."

"They had more men than that in New York," Doc said.

"They just used some local talent temporarily," Monk explained. "What about turning me loose, huh?"

Ham came into the vault. He stumbled over Detective Theodore La France. Looking down at La France, Ham remarked, "Fainted again."

But Detective La France was dead.

XIV

Vibrating below A above middle C, the tuning fork sounded unpleasant. It was unpleasant because listening to it was becoming monotonous.

The tuning fork—which was actually the genuine stork—made a fairly loud note. Loud enough that it could compete with the storm sounds, now that the storm was about over. The storm, the violent cold front of it, had gone whooping and flashing and thundering up the canyon.

Monk gave the fork another rap against the vault wall. "I wish you knew the right spot," he told Harrison Nobel.

"I do, too," Harrison Nobel agreed. "But it's just that wall, around where you are somewhere."

"Didn't you see Wentz open the secret part of the vault with it, ever?"

Harrison Nobel shook his head. "Only once. And just a glimpse. He was using the stork right where you are, just about."

"Okay." Monk rapped the stork legs against the steel vault wall, held them a fraction of an inch from the vault, and moved them around.

Ham Brooks demanded, "How is that going to work?"

"Vibration," Monk told him. "You take two tuning forks of the same frequency, start one vibrating, hold it close to the other, and that one will start vibrating, too. It's something you call synchronism, or something."

Doc Savage addressed old Harrison Nobel. Doc asked, "If you knew about this secret vault opened by the tuning fork, why didn't you open it before all this trouble started?"

"Oh, I didn't know about it," Nobel explained. "The first I knew was when Merrilee and his gang showed up and began trying to get the stork. I'd forgotten all about the stork, and had put it in with the other stuff that was shipped to New York to be sold at auction."

Monk turned his head, asked suspiciously, "How about the time you saw Wentz using it in here? Didn't you remember that?"

Nobel shook his head.

He explained, "I just thought, that time, that Mr. Wentz was playing with the stork, just listening to it vibrate."

"But Merrilee told you different?"

"Oh, yes." Nobel looked uncomfortable. "He explained there was a secret vault, full of property of aliens which Mr. Wentz was holding, in an effort to persuade me to join up with him."

Doc Savage asked, "Was Theodore La France actually what he said he was, a detective, who had an agreement to investigate Wentz's death regardless of whether the death was natural or not?"

"Yes." Nobel nodded. "Mr. Wentz, because of his connections with so many aliens, probably feared his death might not be a natural one."

Monk Mayfair said, "I bet there isn't any secret vault."

There came a loud, very loud report. With it, a blinding flash. A whistling sound. A great quantity of blinding vapor suddenly poured out of vents in the walls. It hit their eyes and lungs like fire.

"Gas!" Monk dropped the tuning-fork-stork. "My God, gas!" He dived for the door. "Run, everybody! We're in a death trap!" he yelled.

The door of the secret vault had opened.

The secret vault—it was only about six feet square—contained a good deal of currency. About twenty suitcases full, although not all of the greenbacks were of large denomination. Ham Brooks fingered some of the greenbacks admiringly. "The kind you can spend, tens and twenties," he remarked.

Doc Savage was looking through metal drawers. He was impressed by what he was finding. Jewelry, unset jewels, some bonds and stocks, several bars of platinum, about a double handful of sparkling diamonds.

"No gold?" Monk Mayfair asked. He seemed discouraged by not finding gold.

"Did you ever try to buy any gold the last few years, lame-brain?" Ham Brooks asked him. "An American citizen can hardly get his hands on any, much less an alien."

Doc Savage noted that each lot of the valuables had a name attached. He indicated one of the names. "Fritz Gaephart," Doc said. "I remember that fellow. They tried him on an espionage charge about six months ago."

Ham said, "I've recognized some more of the names, too."

Harrison Nobel nodded. He said, "All of these people are either aliens who were going to be put in isolation camps and knew it, or spies and saboteurs who were afraid they might get caught."

Doc Savage asked, "Wentz, the banker. How did he get into this business?"

"I imagine it was profitable," said Nobel. "I imagine he charged them plenty. And also, Mr. Wentz was a German by birth."

"That might explain it," Doc admitted.

Monk Mayfair went over and examined the mechanism which had caused all the rumpus when the door opened.

"Tear gas," he remarked. "Darned lucky for us it was tear gas." He investigated further. "Hey, we should have shut off the light in the vault. Then the tear gas wouldn't have been fired. There's an arrangement of magnets that make it go off."

"I wish," said Ham Brooks, "that you had such an arrangement of magnets." Ham had been contemplating Ada Nobel. Evidently he felt Monk was going to be some competition. "To make you go off, I mean," he told Monk additionally.

Monk winked at him. "Miss Nobel and I are going off on a mule-back ride around the canyon this afternoon," Monk told him.

Astonished, angry, Ham demanded, "How the hell'd you manage to make a date?"

Monk admired a package of fifty-dollar bills. "I must have magnets," he said.

[The end of *Doc Savage: The Terrible Stork* by Lester Dent
(as Kenneth Robeson)]