

THE MYSTERY ON THE SNOW

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Global Grey ebooks

THE MYSTERY ON THE SNOW

BY
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A DOC SAVAGE ADVENTURE

1934

The Mystery on the Snow by Lester Dent.

This edition was created and published by Global Grey

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CHAPTER 1. THE BEGINNING

New York is a city where many people have unusual occupations. There are, for example, individuals who make their living snipping at newspapers with a pair of scissors.

These persons operate news-clipping agencies. Pay them a fee, and they will deliver to you clippings concerning yourself from all over the world—providing you are important enough to have had your name appear in all those newspapers. Clippings can be had concerning others, as well.

Celebrities who like to keep scrapbooks patronize these clipping agencies. Another type of gentry, not so wholesome, also do business with them.

Mahal was a sample of the latter.

Mahal was an oily specimen. He had a head like an almond, and many fine white teeth. He claimed to be an Oriental and, probably, he was. He also claimed to be a mystic. On that point, he was, beyond doubt, a liar. But he had made a little money out of the gullible with his fakery.

The police had a time or two considered putting a detective to watching him. It was too bad they did not do this. A sharp-eyed sleuth on Mahal's trail might have made some interesting observations.

Mahal was careful to pick a clipping agency which did not inquire too carefully into the motives of its customers.

"I am Mahal," he announced. "Yesterday I telephoned you for clippings concerning a certain individual. You have them, *sahib*?"

Mahal spoke excellent English, but he affected occasionally a word of his mother tongue of the Orient. It lent color to him.

He was handed an envelope, stuffed full with paper.

Mahal seemed surprised by the number of clippings the envelope obviously held. But he thrust the container in the outside pocket of his immaculate brown topcoat, paid the rather exorbitant fee requested, and walked out.

The clipping agency was on the seventeenth floor of an office building. Mahal took an elevator down.

In the elevator, a strange thing happened. There were numerous passengers aboard the car. Among these was a stooped gentleman with a flowing white beard. His clothing was extremely well-cut. He seemed rather feeble, for he leaned heavily on a plain black cane. He looked benign, peaceful.

The white-bearded gentleman's cane slipped on the smooth floor of the elevator, and he stumbled heavily against Mahal.

"*Burha bakra!*" growled Mahal, and gave the elderly-looking one a shove.

Respect for age is one of the finer qualities of Orientals. But Mahal did not have it. He had called, in his native tongue, the bearded fellow an old goat. He would have called him an old goat in English, but he did not want trouble. He thought the white-whiskered one could not understand the Oriental words.

But he would have been surprised. For the benign old chap with the snowy beard had now the envelope of clippings. He had slipped it expertly from Mahal's pocket during the collision.

* * * * *

The elevator reached the ground floor and discharged its passengers.

Mahal strode out to the street and glanced about for a taxi. He had not as yet missed the envelope.

The elderly-looking gentleman now showed surprising agility in scampering around behind a cigar stand. This concealed him from the door.

The envelope was not sealed. He opened it, drew out the clippings. There were scores of them. Headlines on the topmost read:

DOC SAVAGE SMASHES TIBETAN MENACE

Another story was captioned:

DOC SAVAGE ON MYSTERY MISSION GOES TO

ARABIA BY SUBMARINE

His white beard shook as the reader said something explosive under his breath. He worked toward the back of the clipping sheaf and studied another headline:

DOC SAVAGE, MAN OF MIRACLES, GIVES SURGERY

NEW OPERATION METHOD

By now, the whiskered one was certain all the clippings concerned Doc Savage. He replaced the contents of the envelope: then he hobbled toward the door, leaning heavily on his black cane.

At the door, he met Mahal.

Mahal had missed his property, and he was in a sweat. He saw the envelope in the elderly-looking man's hand.

"Old Goat!" he yelled, this time in English. "Where did you get that?"

"It came out of your pocket in the elevator," was the reply, delivered in a quavering voice.

And that was no lie.

Mahal snatched the envelope. Without a word of thanks, he stamped outside.

A taxi swung to the curb. Mahal got in, and gave the address of his seance room uptown.

Now the driver of the cab had some remarkable characteristics. His hands were of an almost unearthly hugeness. Each was composed of only a little less than a gallon of bone and gristle. The driver's face was a long one, and it bore an expression of great gloom, as if he were going to a funeral. The fellow hunched low in the seat, possibly to hide the fact that he was a giant who weighed all of two hundred and fifty pounds.

Had Mahal been in an observant mood, he might have noted that the taxi seemed to have an engine of unusual power and smoothness.

Mahal, however, was sulking. He smoked a perfumed cigarette, which he carelessly dropped, still burning, on the taxi cushions when they reached the address he had given.

Mahal entered the building which held his seance room. He did not glance back. Had he looked around, it was doubtful if he would have observed the big-fisted taxi driver wheel his machine around a corner, park, extinguish the cigarette Mahal had dropped, and slide stealthily from behind the wheel.

The fellow with the huge fists was very careful that Mahal did not see his actions.

In the sidewalk near by was a metal hatch. This was intended for delivering freight to the basement of the building which held Mahal's establishment. Opening the hatch, the big man with the enormous fists dropped into the basement.

Apparently, he had been there often before. He went to a stand which held many pieces of complicated-looking apparatus, and clamped a telephone headset over his ears.

* * * * *

Mahal's seance rooms were up three gloomy flights of squeaky stairs. One expected to hear rats scamper about.

The mystic's establishment consisted of two rooms. One—the reception chamber, where customers awaited Mahal's pleasure—had windows. The inner room, where Mahal conducted his mystic rites, and extorted a few dollars from gullible clients, if it was humanly possible, was perpetually dark.

Mahal's trade was not one that flourished in the light.

The sanctum of fakery was hung with impressive tapestries, which would have looked their true cheapness in full daylight. There were cushions, curtains, a raised dais—and the inevitable crystal ball glistened in the rays of a tiny concealed light.

Mahal got a harsh-voiced reception when he entered.

“No lights, my oily friend!”

The snarl came from a spot beyond the dais. Even after Mahal’s eyes became accustomed to the incense-drenched gloom, the speaker remained totally unseen. He was behind a curtain—and the voice was obviously a disguised one.

Mahal knew who was talking—knew him by name only. He had never seen the individual’s face. All of his contacts with the person had been over the telephone, or by interviews during which the other remained out of sight.

The unseen speaker’s mouselike, squeaking tones were such an excellent disguise that Mahal was not even sure whether the other was a man or not.

The mysterious one used the name of Stroam.

“You are being unnecessarily cautious, Stroam,” Mahal suggested.

“Possibly,” Stroam squeaked in agreement. “But it is best that I keep completely under cover. What information concerning Doc Savage have you secured for me to-day, my friend?”

Mahal seemed to be well entrenched in the confidences of this enigmatic person whose countenance he had never seen. To a certain extent, he knew what it was all about. But he desired to know more.

“You think Ben Lane may be here in New York, hunting you?” he asked, instead of answering Stroam’s query.

“Ben Lane is in the Canadian wilderness,” replied the hidden one. His squeak sounded impatient.

“Then why fear him?”

“It is not a question of fear!” the other retorted sharply. “It is a matter of caution. Ben Lane is not a dumb man. He may be having me watched.”

Mahal was a born showman. He habitually assumed a trance-like attitude when in conversation. He now seated himself beside the crystal ball and looked as if he were communing with a higher plane. As a matter of truth,

he was slyly pumping his mysterious employer. Any information he gained, he might later use to his own profit—he hoped.

“But where could Ben Lane have put watchers on your trail?” he asked.

“I had trouble with Ben Lane,” replied Stroam. “That was in the Canadian wilderness, far north in the snow country. But all that, I have told you before. I will dispose of Ben Lane. And there must be no outside interference.”

“Such as Doc Savage entering the affair, eh, *sahib*?”

“Doc Savage must never hear a word of Ben Lane!” shrilled Stroam. “And I am here to prevent it!”

* * * * *

That Stroam was in New York to prevent Doc Savage from going to the assistance of Ben Lane, Mahal had known. But there were many other things he did not know. Thus he continued his angling for information.

“You think Ben Lane may have had someone follow you to New York?”

“Lane is not a fool!” squeaked Stroam. “Now, about the information concerning Doc Savage which you have been gathering——”

“Who are you, actually?” Mahal interrupted. “I like to know something about the people I work for.”

“That need not concern you too greatly, my friend. I am powerful, and mysterious. I have a knowledge of things occult, a learning beyond that of other men.”

“That sounds as if you might have come from the Orient, like myself.”

“I have studied for a time in the Orient. But this is no ordinary fakery, my friend. This is big business. I will tell you this much: I control the destiny of one of the greatest business syndicates in Asia and Europe.”

“And Ben Lane has something which you want?” queried Mahal.

“Something I must have! Something which, if I do not get it, will bring financial ruin to my syndicate.”

“What is it?”

“Your nose is getting too long, my friend!”

Mahal ignored this warning that he was becoming too inquisitive. “I might be of much assistance, if you would tell me——”

“No! You have merely been hired to secure information concerning Doc Savage, that I may know how best to combat him. What have you learned today?”

“If you will tell me——” Mahal parried.

“No more questions, fool! What of Doc Savage?”

Mahal felt like heaving a disappointed sigh, but refrained from doing so.

“What you told me about your being powerful reminds me of Doc Savage,” he grumbled.

“Make your meaning clearer!”

“Doc Savage, from what I’ve been able to learn by asking questions, has developed one of the most remarkable brains ever owned by a man. I heard, Stroam, that Savage is a mental wizard. I heard, too, that he has unbelievable strength. *Sach bat!* Indeed! I believe it, too, after having seen him.”

“You saw Doc Savage?”

“*Han, sahib.* Yes, sir. I have been trailing him, observing him.”

“That was reckless!”

“You underestimate my cleverness. There is not a possibility that Doc Savage knew I was watching him.”

Stroam, behind the curtain, was silent a bit, as if doubtful.

“You got the newspaper clippings, Mahal?”

“*Han, sahib*. Here they are.”

Mahal drew the envelope of clippings from his pocket and tossed it to the individual behind the curtain.

A tiny light appeared—but did not illuminate Stroam’s face, much to Mahal’s disgust. Stroam riffled through the clippings.

“The fool newspapers seem to think Doc Savage is a miracle man!” came a disgusted squeak.

“Savage is what these Yankees call a big shot,” said Mahal.

“What is his profession?”

“Punishing evildoers all over the world.”

* * * * *

“What?” Stroam seemed startled.

“I know it sounds strange,” Mahal grunted. “But that is straight. He goes around helping people out of trouble, and handing those outside the law what he believes they deserve.”

This information did not seem to set well with Stroam. Squeaking sounds of rage came from behind the curtain.

“If you are what Savage considers a wrongdoer, you’ll have trouble with the bronze man,” Mahal declared. “Doc Savage looks like a giant made out of bronze. And, *sahib*, you never saw such muscles!”

Stroam studied the contents of the envelope.

“There is a clipping here which says Doc Savage has some mysterious source of fabulous wealth.”

“He must have. He has built free hospitals which cost millions, and seems always to have plenty of money.”

“That is bad. Ben Lane may want financial aid from Doc Savage, as well as help in combating me.”

“Savage is a tough customer,” Mahal put forth.

“I like worthy foes!”

While Stroam continued reading, there was to be heard only the crinkling of the clippings and an occasional blare of an automobile horn from the street outside.

Stroam spoke finally, and his squeaking voice sounded slightly uneasy. “You are sure Doc Savage did not learn you were observing him?”

“Positive, *sahib*,” insisted Mahal.

“It is well. I do not want Savage put on his guard.”

Mahal detected a hidden meaning in this. “What do you mean?”

“I have already taken measures to dispose of this Doc Savage.”

“But how did you know where to locate him?”

“From your previous reports, my friend.”

Mahal shivered slightly. “I hope there is no slip, *sahib*. What are these measures you have taken?”

“That,” said Stroam sharply, “is my own affair.”

CHAPTER 2. THE BRONZE MAN

Mahal would have been somewhat less certain of himself could he have stood at a designated spot on the Hudson River water front at that moment. What occurred there would have been a shock to the wily fakir.

The Hudson's banks here were lined with piers and warehouses. Passenger liners and freight steamers were tied up at some of the wharves. Others had apparently not been used for some time.

The extremely large pier-warehouse with "Hidalgo Trading Company" emblazoned on its front seemed to belong to the latter category. The pier on which the edifice stood was of somewhat unusual construction. The warehouse walls extended down into the water. These walls were of concrete, not beautiful, but substantial in appearance.

Had anyone been offered an opportunity to measure those walls, they would have been found to be several feet thick, and reinforced with a mesh of stout steel beams. They were virtually bomb-proof. There were no windows in the building. The innocent-looking roof was as substantial as the walls.

This Hidalgo Trading Company warehouse was little less than a gigantic vault.

A roadster drove up and stopped before the huge steel doors at the shoreward end of the building. The big engine of the roadster was almost noiseless under its long, somber-colored hood.

The driver was the white-bearded gentleman who had temporarily relieved Mahal of his envelope of newspaper clippings.

Apparently, he was expected, for the ponderous metal warehouse doors slid open, and an instant after the roadster rumbled inside, they closed again.

The warehouse interior presented a remarkable spectacle. It held almost a dozen airplanes. These ranged from a gigantic tri-motored speed ship, which could carry a score of passengers at almost three hundred miles an hour, to a pair of true gyros, or helicopters, which could rise vertically.

In their line, each of these planes showed the handiwork of a master designer—someone whose ability as an aeronautical engineer was little short of wizardry.

The white-bearded fellow vaulted out of the roadster, black cane in hand. He was greeted with a hooting roar of laughter. The mirth echoed and whooped through all of the vast, vault-like hangar.

“What a sweet grandpa you make!” gulped the author of the laughter.

* * * * *

A wrathful expression showing above the snowy whiskers, the elderly-looking gentleman spun quickly around.

The individual doing the laughing had apparently opened and closed the hangar doors. The fellow presented a startling appearance. A stranger, seeing him on a moderately gloomy street, would have sworn he had met a two-hundred-and-sixty-pound ape.

The fellow was incredibly homely. His mouth was entirely too big, and his ears were tufts of gristle. His hands dangled well below his knees and were covered with reddish hairs almost as large as rusted nails.

This personage was Andrew Blodgett Mayfair. He rarely heard that name. His associates called him “Monk.” He ranked among the three or four greatest chemists in the world.

The irate, white-haired gentleman manipulated his black stick, and it was suddenly evident that this was a sword cane with a blade of fine steel.

“Some of these days I’m going to whittle that hair off you and stuff a mattress,” he predicted fiercely.

The homely Monk doubled over in a fresh spasm of mirth.

“You’re sure a panic behind that snow bank,” he gulped.

The tormented one now snatched off his ample white beard. It was false. The face which emerged was long and sharp. The features were far from being those of an old man.

This was Brigadier General Theodore Marley “Ham” Brooks. Up at Harvard, they considered Ham one of the most astute lawyers ever to be graduated from that institution.

With a gesture of distaste, Ham flung the white whiskers into the roadster.

“You’d better make out a will,” he snapped.

Monk stopped laughing. “Why?”

“Because, if you keep on riding me, you’re going to come to a sudden end,” Ham promised.

Monk began laughing again.

Ham scowled blackly, then asked, “Where’s Doc?”

“At the other end, installing some contraption in the big plane,” Monk said, without interrupting his mirth.

Ham stamped away. Judging from his ferocious expression, it apparently would give him the greatest pleasure to slaughter Monk. It was always thus. When they were together, bloodshed seemed imminent.

As a matter of fact, each had, on numerous occasions, risked his life to help the other. Their never-ending quarrel was good-natured, violent though it might seem to an onlooker.

* * * * *

Huge and apelike, Monk trailed along behind Ham. Great cables of muscle curled and uncurled under the simian fellow’s coat with each movement of his arms. Monk was tremendously strong. He had an impressive trick of taking silver dollars between a thumb and forefinger and folding them neatly.

Came a rattling noise at the front door.

“Who in blazes is that?” Monk grunted. “Can’t be one of our outfit. They all know the location of the secret catch which opens the door from the outside.”

A fresh banging drifted to them.

“They sound impatient,” Ham said, and started for the door, sword cane tucked under an arm. Monk trailed along behind.

Inset in the front of the warehouse was a periscope device. Unnoticeable from without, this permitted a view of the warehouse front to those within.

A truck had rolled up to the building. Several men had alighted from this and were clustered about the doors. They were tanned fellows; all wore greasy coveralls.

Monk counted. “Six of ’em,” he grunted.

Monk and Ham now noticed that the side of the truck bore the name of a prominent concern manufacturing aircraft engines.

“Doc must’ve ordered somethin’ we don’t know anything about,” Monk said, and manipulated a lever which opened the doors.

“This Doc Savage’s place?” asked the spokesman of the crowd with the truck. “Zis address was give us, m’sieu’.”

“If you have anything for Doc, we’ll see that he gets it,” Monk grunted.

“We ’ave ze engine for M’sieu’ Savage.” The man tugged papers from his pocket. “You weel sign for it, *non*?”

He came forward.

Monk reached for the document. He was ordinarily a canny fellow, hard to take unawares. But this incident, which seemed an ordinary business transaction, fooled him.

The papers suddenly fluttered from the man’s hand. They had concealed a small revolver. The ugly blue snout centered on Monk’s midriff.

“Get zem up!”

Undecided, Monk bounced up and down like an angry gorilla. But good sense triumphed, and he hoisted furry arms.

The other overalled men had drawn guns; they menaced Ham. The lawyer lifted his arms rigidly above his head; there was nothing else to do. But the canny barrister retained a clutch on his sword cane.

The overalled men crowded into the hangar. They were a wolf-faced crew.

“Zat airplane engine story is smart trick, *non?*” queried one.

Monk and Ham knew accents. They marked this fellow as a native of northern Canada, a breed of French descent. The others seemed to be of the same nationality.

“You lookin’ for a compliment?” Monk growled.

“We look for Doc Savage,” said the other. “Where is he, m’sieu?”

“No savvy,” said Monk. “Splickee English.”

“Doc Savage,” snarled the other. “Where he is? Quick!”

“What in blazes is this all about?” Monk countered.

The man with the gun opened his mouth to make some answer—then closed it. He peered about. His hand which did not hold the gun drifted up vaguely and touched his ears. It was as if he thought something had happened to his organs of hearing.

His behavior was caused by a strange sound which had come into being.

* * * * *

The sound almost defied description. It had an uncanny quality. Of a trilling nature, it ran up and down the musical scale, yet adhered to no tune. It might have been the note of an exotic jungle bird, or the filtering of a wind through a denuded forest.

Perhaps the thing which befuddled the man was the way the fantastic trilling seemed to fill all the vast hangar, yet no particular spot could be designated as its source.

Monk and Ham exchanged glances. It was obvious that the eerie note conveyed a meaning to them.

“What is zat noise?” hissed the gun wielder.

Neither Monk nor Ham answered. Instead, their chests swelled. They were drawing in full breaths—breaths of relief.

Monk shifted slightly. Ham did likewise.

“Quiet, m’sieu’s!” they were ordered harshly.

Their captors watched them intently. This was the very thing Monk and Ham wished. They did not want the visitors to glance upward.

A crisscross maze of great steel girders supported the heavy roof. Through these girders a great bronze figure was swinging.

At one place, the girders were many feet apart. The bronze man spanned this space with a leap which showed an almost fabulous strength and agility. Tendons cabling his hands and neck resembled bundled piano wires, bronze-coated.

Making scarcely more noise than drifting smoke, he neared a point above the overalled men. He crouched there like a gigantic cat. The bronze of his hair was slightly darker than that of his skin, and was like a metallic skullcap.

Many features, about this giant man of metal, were arresting. His eyes, for instance, were strange. They were like pools of flake-gold—a dust-fine gold which was whirled continuously about by tiny winds.

The giant launched outward and down. He landed beside the spokesman of the gang. Simultaneously, he struck.

The recipient of the blow made not a sound. He spun away, eyes glazed, arms limp as strings. When he went down, it was to land in a slack pile.

Long before he fell, however, two more of the group began screaming. Bronze hands had gripped them, hands which possessed an almost unearthly strength. Muscles ground under the thewed fingers, skin burst and oozed crimson droplets.

Monk and Ham went into action.

They had held the attention of their captors to permit the bronze man to attack unobserved.

They had expected the bronze man to make such a move, for the strange trilling sound they had heard belonged to the bronze giant. It was part of him, a small unconscious thing he did when contemplating some course of action, or in moments of stress.

Monk dived at a foe, avoided getting shot by a ducking, weaving process. Monk's victim fired once, missing. Monk clipped him alongside the head; then, using him as a shield, rushed the others.

Ham unsheathed his sword cane. The blade leaped, twanged, and seemed to lose itself in the air, so swiftly did it dart.

A man squawked, grasping a tiny cut in one cheek which the blade had opened. Then the fellow sank down on his knees. He seemed to go to sleep, and toppled forward on his face.

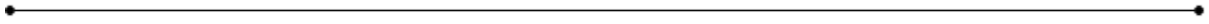
The tip of Ham's sword cane was coated with a drug which brought instant unconsciousness.

An overalled raider stumbled clear of the melee. He took deliberate aim at Ham. He was gripping a double-action revolver. The hammer started its backward march.

The Herculean man of bronze seemed to materialize beside the gunman. His palm clamped over the gun, stopping the falling hammer. He twisted, got the weapon in his own grasp.

Then he laid a hand alongside the man's face. He seemed to put forth no particular effort, yet the blow was loud, and the man was knocked out instantly.

That terminated the affair.



CHAPTER 3. RADIO ORDERS

Moving rapidly, the bronze man disarmed the unlucky raiders. Cartridges for the guns came to light. There were three blackjacks in their possession.

Objects which received particular attention, however, were time-tables and stubs of railway tickets. These proved that the gang had recently come from the far northern portion of Canada.

One fellow, weaving dizzily on his feet, stared at the giant of metal.

"Who is yo'?" he demanded vacantly.

The big man of bronze did not answer. He propelled the captives into a corner. The terrible quality of his strength was shown by the way in which the men were pitched about by his apparently effortless gestures.

A striking phenomenon occurred. Each time the man of metal came near one of the others, he appeared to grow in stature. This was due to the fact that, although he was a giant in size, his sinews were developed with such general thoroughness that his proportions were entirely symmetrical. His build was such that, at a distance, he seemed no larger than other men.

The prisoners peered at him as though they were having a bad dream.

Monk, enjoying their discomfiture, grinned from ear to ear.

"Know who this big fellow is?" he demanded.

"Non," muttered a man.

Monk paused to get the proper spectacular effect; then: "Doc Savage!" he called. "He's the man you wanted to meet."

Doc Savage, man of bronze, eyed the assortment of captives.

"What did you want with me?" he queried.

Doc Savage's voice was remarkable for its qualities of tone. Neither loud, nor distinctly emphatic, the voice conveyed an impression of restrained power.

"Non," muttered the other, lying, "We not want yo'."

"Your words carried to me, at the rear of the hangar," Doc told him. "You asked for me."

The reply was a stubborn, "Non."

Doc turned upon the lawyer, Ham. "What did you learn to-day?" he asked.

Ham sheathed his sword cane. "This fellow, Mahal, is getting information about you, Doc."

Doc Savage commented nothing. His unusually regular bronze features did not change expression.

"Mahal went to a newspaper clipping agency," Ham continued. "He got an envelope of clippings. I managed to lift it from his pocket, inspect them, then return them. All of the items were about you, Doc."

"This is the fifth day he has been snooping around," said Doc Savage.

Had he heard these words, Mahal would have been shocked. He had been investigating Doc Savage for exactly five days—thinking all the while that his doings were unobserved.

Mahal's mistake was one made by other men in the past. He had underestimated Doc Savage's ability and power of observation. Little escaped his weirdly golden eyes.

Mahal had not been shadowing Doc Savage an hour, before the bronze man was aware of it.

"Any idea why Mahal is securing information about us?" queried Doc.

"No," Ham replied. "It's probably for no good reason, though. I investigated this Mahal. He's a shady character, a fake mystic. You know the kind of a racket they pull. They get hold of some sap and persuade him to make an

offering to the spirits to bring good luck. The fake mystics pocket the offerings.”

“Renny is still on his trail?” Doc questioned.

Ham nodded. “He sure is. Mahal got in a taxi that Renny was driving. I got a glimpse of Renny’s big hands as the machine pulled away from the clipping agency.”

Doc Savage had not seemed to be watching the captives during this conversation. That he had been scrutinizing them, however, was evident from his next words.

“These fellows are connected with this Mahal affair,” he said.

Ham was puzzled. “How do you figure that?”

“They looked uneasy when his name was mentioned,” Doc replied.

* * * * *

Doc Savage had many enemies. By the very nature of the strange purpose to which he had dedicated his life, it could not be otherwise. Any individual outside the law, in the remotest corners of the world, was a potential foe. For Doc Savage traveled to the ends of the earth in his work of punishing evildoers, righting wrongs, and helping those in trouble.

Doc Savage had five associates—five men who aided him in his work. Each of these was a master of some profession. Monk, the homely chemist, was one; Ham, probably the most astute lawyer Harvard had ever turned out, was another. “Renny,” the man with the enormous fists, was one of the five. Renny was an engineer whose name was known in many lands.

Love of adventure bound these men to Doc Savage—that and an admiration for the bronze man’s abilities which never ceased to grow.

Monk indicated the prisoners. “What’ll we do with these beauties?”

“Make them talk,” Doc replied.

There was something about the bronze man's words—perhaps it was the absolute absence of any emphasis—which sent a shiver over the little group in the corner.

The huge tri-motored speed plane stood well back in the warehouse hangar. From its cabin a shrill, whining note came.

Doc Savage glided to the plane. There was a leonine ease, a flashing speed in his movements.

The speed ship's cabin held many instruments. The whining note was coming from a radio receiver. Doc clicked switches which set a radio telephone transmitter into operation.

"All right," he said into the microphone.

The voice which came out of the loud-speaker sounded not unlike a lion's roaring.

"Renny reporting, Doc," it said. "I'm talking from the radio apparatus in the cab."

"What have you learned?" Doc asked.

"I installed a dictograph in Mahal's joint," Renny explained over the radio.

"Ran the wires to receivers in the basement. I was just down there listening. I heard plenty."

"Mahal talked to someone?"

"Yep. To somebody with a squeaky voice, called Stroam. They're framing up on us, Doc."

The bronze man's features did not alter expression at this. He was not particularly surprised. When strange men began to dog his footsteps, it usually meant trouble.

It was that fact which had moved him to set his men to watching Mahal. The sinister activities of Mahal had been an omen of danger to come.

The career of Doc Savage would have ended long ago, had the bronze man not formed a habit of keeping a jump ahead of the most wily foes.

“Keep an eye open, Doc,” Renny warned, over the radio. “From what I overheard, Mahal has sent men to get you.”

“They’re here,” Doc said into the microphone. “We’ve got them.”

“Holy cow!” ejaculated Renny.

* * * * *

“What did you hear, Renny?” Doc queried.

“A fairly complete story.” Renny summarized briefly. “It seems that a man named Ben Lane, now in the Canadian wilderness, has something which a sinister individual, who calls himself Stroam, wants. Stroam is afraid Ben Lane will appeal to you for help, Doc. He came to New York to prevent your aiding the man. Mahal was hired to check up on you.”

“The fellows who just attacked us here at the hangar, seem to be natives of northern Canada,” Doc stated. “That checks with what you have heard. They’re Stroam’s men, all right.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Bring Mahal and Stroam here.”

“You bet!” Renny’s roar sounded delighted.

“Do not tackle it alone. I’ll send Johnny and Long Tom to aid you.”

“I can manage it alone.”

“Wait for Johnny and Long Tom.”

“O. K.,” Renny grumbled.

Doc Savage had radio apparatus installed at numerous points. All of the sets operated on the same wave-length. Thus it was possible to carry on conversation with the facility of a party telephone line.

“Long Tom—Johnny!” Doc called into the microphone.

“Johnny speaking,” answered a rather scholastic voice from the loud-speaker.

Doc gave the address of Mahal's establishment. "You fellows had better drop up there and help Renny," he directed. "Are you at the office?"

"No," said "Johnny." "I'm in my car, driving up lower Broadway."

"Long Tom," Doc called. "Long Tom! Long Tom!" He was seeking to raise the other member of his group of five aides.

There was no response.

"Long Tom is possibly working in the laboratory in your office, Doc," Johnny said. "If he's there, he'll be so interested in what he's doing that he couldn't hear thunder."

"That's right," Doc agreed. "Drop by the office and get him, will you, Johnny?"

"With an abundance of pleasure, but there will be a delay of a few minutes while I get up there."

"I'll wait until you birds get here," Renny chimed in to the manifold aerial conversation.

The radio sets were now switched off.

CHAPTER 4. MIDNAT

Renny, in flicking off the master switch of his taxi radio outfit, employed the extreme tip of a thumb and forefinger. This was so that his huge hand would not disturb other switches and dials on the apparatus.

The radio installation was very compact, being entirely concealed under the dashboard of the taxicab. Mahal, when riding in the cab, had not dreamed of its presence.

As he slid out of the parked taxi, the expression on Renny's long face was more funereal than usual. This signified that Renny was enjoying himself. The prospect of trouble always made Renny look gloomy. He loved trouble.

He dropped through the sidewalk hatch into the basement where he had concealed the terminus of the dictograph. He fitted the receivers over his ears, intending to listen in while he awaited the arrival of "Long Tom" and Johnny.

The first words he overheard changed his whole plan.

"We will leave here at once," the squeaky-voiced Stroam was saying. "You are going to work for me in the future, Mahal, so you will abandon this place."

Mahal began, "But my things here are——"

"Worthless stuff. Leave it. Come, we will go."

Renny wrenched the ear phones off. There was no time to await Johnny and Long Tom—he would have to seize Mahal and Stroam himself.

Renny crept for the stairs. Like black cotton, darkness crammed these. Renny progressed slowly, gingerly. The old wooden steps were inclined to squeal like pigs under his two hundred and fifty pounds of solid flesh.

On the first-floor landing, he heard the footsteps. They were light steps—and they were descending the stairs.

Renny found an angle in the wall, and positioned himself there. He blew a warm, soft breath into either capacious palm. He would grab the plotters. Then Doc would make them talk.

Renny was not in the least skeptical about Doc's ability to extract information. The bronze man did not use strong-arm methods. His ways were more subtle. He used hypnotism, or truth serums which functioned with startling efficiency.

The individual on the stairs came closer.

It was simple. Renny merely reached out and clutched. A gigantic steel trap could not have taken the prize more efficiently.

Renny clamped a palm over the captive's mouth, so there would be no outcry. It was then that he got a shock.

Renny had a pet ejaculation to fit occasions when he was amazed.

"Holy cow!" he breathed.

The big-fisted engineer managed to produce a tiny pocket flashlight, still maintaining a grip on his captive. The flash protruded a rod of white luminance. This raked up and down the prisoner.

Renny had snared a girl!

* * * * *

She was a pint-sized edition of femininity. In the huge engineer's clutch, she was almost birdlike. Indeed, she seemed so small that he hastily released her, fearing his monster hands would do injury.

In his perturbation, Renny removed his palm from her lips. Surprisingly enough, she did not cry out.

Renny planted the flashbeam on her face. His jaw sagged. The girl's rose-petal lips, her smoky eyes, her entrancingly dark hair, left nothing to be desired. She was a knockout.

"Holy cow!" Renny breathed again.

The girl promptly hit him in the eye with a small fist. The blow gave Renny another considerable shock—she was unexpectedly strong. It was as if he had been hit with a hammer.

Renny dropped his flash—and the girl darted away, with the speed of a scared rabbit. Renny lunged, flung out a huge hand and recaptured her.

“You big hooligan!” she hissed, and tried to pummel him again.

Evading her blows, Renny weaved and ducked in a fashion a trained boxer would have envied. He trapped her tiny fists in his huge ones.

Thought creases came into his sombre brow. The girl’s voice was pitched rather high. The tones would have to be altered very little to resemble the squeaky voice of Stroam, as it had come over the dictograph.

“You’re Stroam,” Renny voiced a half-formed suspicion.

The small, dark-eyed girl stopped struggling suddenly.

“What, m’sieu?”

“Your voice—you are Stroam.”

“You are crazy!” cried the girl.

“I heard the voice which spoke to Mahal,” Renny insisted stubbornly. “It sounded mighty like yours.”

The girl was silent. Renny picked up his flashlight and put its beam on her face. He saw then that she seemed vastly puzzled.

“Do you mean to tell me you were eavesdropping on the conversation of Stroam and Mahal?” she asked.

“You said it.”

“*C’est trop fort!*” she ejaculated. “It is too bad!”

Renny eyed her unwinkingly. The exclamation and its accent had marked her as being a French Canadian.

“Yeah,” Renny agreed. “It’s too bad you got caught.”

“My name is Midnat D’Avis,” the girl said rapidly. “I, too, was eavesdropping on that conversation.”

A harsh voice, coming from the darkness to their left, rasped, “*Sacre!* It is good of you tell us zat!”

* * * * *

Renny, in his associations with Doc Savage, had walked much in the shadow of danger. This had made him wary. Rarely was he caught napping.

But his unexpected capture of the girl, his suspicion that she was Stroam, her insistence to the contrary, had him slightly befuddled. He had been totally unaware that men were lurking behind a door near by. It was possible the skulkers had made no sound to betray their presence—until one of them spoke. This would help explain Renny’s bad luck.

“Grab zem!” yelled the man who had spoken.

The door had been open a crack. It whipped open wider and spouted a flood of men.

“Wait!” yelled one. “A few bullets will nicely——”

“Non!” ejaculated the other. “Shots would draw police. With knives is a bettair way.”

If Renny held any delusion about the intent of the attackers, the words enlightened him.

“Beat it!” he rumbled at the girl. “Vamoose!”

He switched the flash beam over the charging men. They were wiry fellows, swarthy. They had the look of men who had spent much of their lives in the open. Two or three wore beaded belts.

Several knives were in evidence, the blades reflecting the flash beam back in chill glitters.

With an expression of profound gloom, Renny snapped a huge hand out and grabbed a knife wielder. What happened next was a little too sudden for the assailants to comprehend.

Their companions came flying back at them. A cannon ball of comparative size would hardly have wrought more damage. Five men were bowled over.

“Sacre bleu!” gasped a survivor.

Renny saw the girl had not fled as directed. She was at his side, belligerent as a small pup.

“Hold this!” he commanded, and gave her his flash. “Keep the light in their eyes, and out of mine.”

“Bon!” said the girl, and took the flash.

The stairway to Mahal’s quarters sloped up behind them. Unexpectedly, a voice came from above.

“Take them alive!” it yelled. “Stroam wants to question them.”

Diminutive Midnat D’Avis turned the flashbeam up the stairs.

The speaker was the slender, almond-faced Mahal.

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Mahal was holding something in one hand—an egg-sized object of metal. He hurled this at Renny and the girl.

“Grenade——” Renny began, then saw that he was mistaken.

He leaped, tried to catch the thing, but he was a trifle tardy. The metallic container hit the wall over their heads. The lid was jarred off.

It was nothing more mysterious or dangerous than an ordinary box of pepper, but it played havoc with their defense. The pepper flakes brought smarting agony to their eyes.

Renny emitted a bellow which shook the walls. He started a blind charge.

The dark-haired girl gripped his arm, hung on.

“Wait!” she gasped. “You will make them excited, and they will put a knife in you, m’sieu’.”

“Yeah,” Renny rumbled, and came to a stop.

They were quickly seized. Rough hands slapped over Renny’s person in search of weapons.

“The big boeuf is not armed,” said one.

“Bring him upstairs, *sahibs*,” Mahal commanded. “One of you go to the street to see if the noise drew the police.”

Obeying the command, a swarthy man scampered away.

Many hands leeches upon them, Renny and the girl were propelled up the stairway. Their captors pushed them across Mahal’s waiting room and into the sanctum of fakery.

Renny peered about in search of Stroam. His gaze fixed on a curtain which spanned an end of the chamber.

Stroam’s voice squeaked from behind the hanging.

“Who are these two?” he demanded.

Evidently he had a peephole in the curtain which was too small to be discerned.

Mahal glared at Renny and the young woman. The other men also looked them over. Then they all exchanged blank glances.

“No one here seems to know them, *sahib*,” said Mahal.

“You, with the big fists!” Stroam gritted from his concealment. “Who are you?”

“What’s your guess?” Renny asked sarcastically.

“Yo’ smart boy, eh?” sneered a man. He took an elaborate windup and struck Renny’s middle a terrific blow with his fist.

The fellow jumped back, a pained expression on his face, and nursed his fist. His knuckles felt as if they had collided with a large rock.

Behind Stroam's curtain there were fluttering sounds. Renny decided Stroam was looking through the newspaper clippings. This surmise proved correct.

"Look at this!" A picture cut from a newspaper came flying from behind the drapery.

Renny scowled at the item. It was a picture of Doc Savage and his five aides. Renny knew his own big-fisted likeness was prominent in the foreground.

"This is one of Doc Savage's men!" Mahal yelled, indicating Renny.

"But who is the girl?" demanded Stroam.

"Probably another of Doc Savage's aides," said Mahal, making a wildly incorrect guess.

"It is fortunate that I took the precaution of having my men handy," Stroam squeaked.

Mahal nodded. "Even I did not know they were here, *sahib*."

One of Stroam's swarthy henchmen interrupted impatiently. "What we do with zis man an' woman?"

"Doc Savage is nosing into affairs which are none of his business," Stroam shrilled angrily. "We will hand him something by way of a small hint, that he had better leave us alone."

A man leveled an arm at Renny and the girl. "Yo' mean——"

"Use your knives on them," Stroam finished the man's thought.

Mahal wailed, "I don't like murder at all——"

"Who cares what you like, clumsy fool!" Stroam squealed.

"But blood makes me——"

"Go downstairs and help my man watch the front door," Stroam ordered.

Mahal departed hastily.

Balancing long, sharp blades, two dark men advanced on Renny and Midnat D'Avis.

"Wait!" gritted Stroam. "I have questions to ask. You, with the big fists. How much does Doc Savage know of me?"

"Go jump in the ocean and pull a wave over your head," Renny boomed.

"That tune will soon change," Stroam predicted ominously.

CHAPTER 5. DISASTER RAID

Few citizens of New York City knew of Doc Savage's secret hangar on the Hudson River water front.

Many individuals, however, knew that the remarkable bronze man maintained quarters on the eighty-sixth floor of the city's finest skyscraper. The newspapers had published that fact innumerable times.

Not many had seen the interior of Doc's skyscraper office. But it was vaguely known that there were three great rooms, covering the entire eighty-sixth floor. One of these held a vast laboratory, equipped with the most modern apparatus. Another chamber held a library of scientific tomes, which for completeness had few equals.

The third room was an outer office, fitted with a safe, a costly inlaid table, and comfortable furniture. It was here that Doc received those who had occasion to come to him.

Johnny arrived in this room in somewhat of a flurry.

Johnny was extremely tall, and thinner than it seemed any man could be. No tailor could fit clothing to his bony frame. As a result, all of his garments always appeared ill-fitting.

A monocle was attached to Johnny's lapel with a ribbon. It was actually a powerful magnifying glass. Johnny needed a magnifier in his profession as archeologist and geologist, so he carried it there for convenience.

William Harper Littlejohn was the name by which the world of science knew Johnny. He had few equals in his profession.

"Long Tom!" he called.

Out of the laboratory came a querulous voice. "Scat! Go 'way and lemme alone!"

Johnny ambled to the laboratory door and looked in.

Major Thomas J. "Long Tom" Roberts was a small, thin man, who looked as if he had grown up in a cellar where there was no light. He had the complexion of a mushroom. His forehead was tremendous, bulging.

He was working over a complicated mass of electrical apparatus. This device, Johnny knew, was Long Tom's mania at the moment. With it, utilizing the projection of atomic streams, there was a possibility of killing destructive insects. This would be an inestimable boon to farmers.

Long Tom was the electrical wizard of the organization. He and Johnny were the two remaining members of Doc Savage's group of five aides.

"Why is your radio not functioning?" Johnny asked with scholastic preciseness.

Long Tom frowned impatiently. "I switched the dang thing off."

"Why? May I ask?"

"You may ask. The blasted static bothers me."

"You missed something," Johnny advised.

"I missed a lot of static," Long Tom shrugged impatiently. "Listen—you ex-college professors may not need peace and quiet to look at your rocks and prehistoric relics, but a guy like me needs a lot of it. If you haven't any rushing business, clear out."

"Renny seems to have become embroiled in a predicament," Johnny remarked.

"Predicament!" Long Tom abandoned his sour attitude. "That means trouble. Why didn't you say so?"

Trouble was the one thing which would draw Long Tom away from his electrical experiments.

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The two men rushed from the office, locking the door behind them. They entered a private elevator, in which Johnny had come up. This was used only by Doc Savage and his associates.

Down, and out on the street, they entered Johnny's car—a coupe inexpensive enough to attract no attention. Johnny maneuvered the machine into traffic.

Long Tom stamped his feet on the floorboards. His shoes were shiny, new.

"I don't think a lot of these new shoes," he complained. "They're stiff."

Johnny eyed his own pedal extremities. These also were shod in new footgear.

"You should lament," he said dryly. "The foot vestments cost you exactly nothing."

"Doc furnished them," Long Tom agreed. "He had special shoes made for the whole gang, including himself."

"An enigma," Johnny commented.

"A what? Oh, you mean you don't savvy why he did that. Neither do I. But he probably had a reason."

"Sagacity usually motivates Doc's operations," Johnny agreed.

"They're good shoes." Long Tom eyed his feet. "But I like old cases for my dogs."

The car was now negotiating almost deserted streets. The district was not prosperous. Buildings, shabby and old, were of the walk-up type. Dirty, uncurtained windows advertised many vacancies.

"We are nearing the designated locale," said Johnny, who never used a small word where a larger one would do.

Long Tom squinted at house numbers, then said "It's the next block. Drive past and we'll look the joint over."

The coupe rolled slowly, swaying in sympathy with pavement irregularities. The engine was quiet. They could hear traffic sound on a near-by boulevard, and the rumbling of a more distant elevated train.

The entrance of Mahal's building was grimy. No one could be seen near it.

"Gloomy dump," Long Tom offered.

The coupe went on and swerved around a corner.

Then suddenly Johnny boomed, "There's Renny's taxi!" and levelled a bony arm.

* * * * *

They parked near the taxi, got out and inspected it.

"It's the bus Renny was driving, all right," Long Tom asserted. "But where's the pride of the engineering world?"

They were sure about the cab; it belonged to Doc. The bronze man kept the vehicle for exactly such use as Renny had been making of it.

Long Tom shook his head, and said, "No sign of Renny."

"A fact of ominous portent," added Johnny.

"I understand Renny got into the basement to install his dictograph. He may be there."

It was Johnny who located the sidewalk hatch giving admittance to the basement. They entered, and saw no trace of the engineer.

"Strange he's not around," Long Tom muttered uneasily.

Both produced small flashlights. These lights were of a type perfected by Doc Savage. They had no battery, the current for the bulbs being supplied by spring-operated generators inclosed in the cases. One winding of the spring would produce a brilliant light for several minutes.

The flashbeams found the stand which held the listening end of Renny's dictograph.

Johnny picked up the dictograph receivers and clamped them over his ears. With a forefinger like a long-jointed bone, he threw switches. Voice sound came from the ear phones as the dictograph began operation.

For a long ten seconds, Johnny listened. Then: "I'll be superamalgamated!" he gulped.

Long Tom had been prowling the basement regions. He pitched to Johnny's side. It took something potent to shock the skeleton-thin geologist into any kind of an ejaculation, even one containing a four-dollar word.

Johnny clawed off the head set.

"Renny—some girl—upstairs!" he sputtered.

Long Tom snorted. "Renny visiting some gal and you raise all——"

"They're being killed!" Johnny exploded. "Their throats are about to be cut!"

"Come on!" Long Tom snapped. "There's a stairway in the back that leads up."

Flashlights poking white beams, they rushed toward the steps. With their free hands they fumbled at a harness under their armpits.

Clipped to the harness were weapons resembling over-sized automatics. Magazines on these were curled, ram's-horn fashion, to occupy a minimum of space. The guns were machine pistols with an unbelievably rapid rate of fire. When they went into operation their sound was not unlike the croak of monster bullfrogs.

The super-firers were charged with mercy bullets—slugs which were merely a chemical-containing shell. They did not kill; they produced instant unconsciousness.

Stair steps whined under the weight of the two men. The air smelled of cobwebs, mice. They reached a half-open door; its hinges squawked as they pushed it further ajar.

Like white serpent tongues the flashbeams darted. Simultaneously, both lights picked out the prone figure of a man.

"Renny!" Long Tom moaned; then, in the same breath: "No! It's somebody else."

Johnny bent over the sprawled figure. "Face like an almond—slant eyes," he breathed. "Must be an Oriental. He's unconscious, it seems."

* * * * *

Johnny barely breathed his words, but they seemed to awaken the unconscious man. His eyelids fluttered, came wide open.

“Don’t hit me again, *sahib*,” he whined.

Long Tom sank to a knee. “We’re not the birds who hit you. Who are you?”

“The janitor,” moaned the man who had a face like an almond.

“We’re lookin’ for a fellow with big fists,” the electrical wizard rasped.

“Seen him?”

The man on the floor appeared very weak. “Upstairs,” he gasped.

Long Tom and Johnny charged for the staircase. They did not know they had been fooled. They had never seen Mahal—and the man they had just encountered was Mahal.

Mahal was a foxy soul, or he would have long ago been in jail, where he belonged. Hearing Long Tom and Johnny in the basement, he had started upstairs to warn Stroam and the others. He was lurking just inside the street door when his ears had detected their presence. He had not moved fast enough.

Cornered on the first floor landing, he had feigned unconsciousness as the best way out. Moreover, Mahal had a plan which might save the day.

The squeaky stairs piped like flutes as Long Tom and Johnny mounted. They did not try for silence. They latched the safeties of their supermachine pistols into “on” positions.

Yells and startled oaths volleyed down from the upper regions. Prominent was Stroam’s squeaky voice.

“The voice that needs greasin’ belongs to the chief,” rapped Johnny, for once forgetting his big words.

Johnny had evidently heard Stroam over the dictograph.

Below them, Mahal yelled loudly. “Stroam—retreat to my inner room.”

Long Tom jerked to a stop, pointed his super-firer in the direction of Mahal's voice.

"That rat pulled a fast one," he grated. His gun emitted a deafening, baying noise.

But Mahal had cannily side-stepped to shelter after shouting. The storm of mercy bullets missed him.

"To my inner room, Stroam!" he bellowed again.

Long Tom and Johnny continued their rush. They did not know the meaning of Mahal's command for Stroam to withdraw to the innermost sanctum of fakery. They supposed it was a chamber which might more easily be defended.

The supposition was a mistake, but due to their excitement, and their anxiety to save Renny, they learned the truth somewhat tardily.

They dived into Mahal's reception room.

From behind them came a sound like a dropped tin can. The two men whirled. The door through which they had come was now closed by sliding steel panels. They charged across the room. But before they reached the other door, there was a second metallic clang.

Sheet steel barred that door, also.

* * * * *

Mahal was indeed a cunning rascal. Many months ago he had equipped his reception room with those steel panels. This had followed a distressing incident in Mahal's life.

The wily fakir had got an elderly and particularly gullible society matron under his oriental spell. From her he had wormed a considerable sum of money. The matron's husband, upon learning the facts, had searched Mahal out in a great rage. He had given Mahal the beating of his checkered career.

Mahal had equipped his reception room to imprison any such future visitors. He had hoped that the arrangement of steel panels would prove useful in other ways, also. They had.

The steel panels could be operated by push buttons concealed in a number of spots. Nor were the panels all. In the ceiling of the reception room, unnoticeable to the casual eye, were minute holes. From these, tubes led to bottles. The bottle necks were equipped with valves which could be opened by pulling a string.

The containers held ether. While this substance was not the most efficient of anesthetics, there was an ample quantity of it in the bottles.

Mahal tugged the valve strings. A spray of ether poured from the ceiling. It covered the entire reception room.

Long Tom and Johnny attempted to open the doors, or to cut through the walls, using their rapid-firers. But they gave that up quickly. Both knew enough about ether to realize the vapor was violently explosive.

After a while, they went to sleep from the fumes.

Mahal let himself into the inner sanctum by a rear doorway. He smirked at Renny and the girl, who were being held in a corner. Renny's shirt was open. Across his huge chest were several deep cuts, evidence of torture.

"What happened?" squeaked Stroam from behind his curtain.

Mahal explained about the steel panels and the ether trap.

"I am not such a dumb one, eh, *sahib*?" he finished.

Then he started for the curtain. He intended to take advantage of his triumphant moment and get a look at Stroam.

"Back!" Stroam ordered hurriedly. "No one sees my face."

Mahal stuttered, "But I——"

"No talk! You are going to be a valuable man to me. You have brains—and brains command a high price in my organization."

Mahal grinned, no little mollified.

“The noise of their guns may have been heard,” Stroam declared.

“Moreover, Doc Savage seems to be well acquainted with this place. It will never do for the bodies to be found here.”

“No,” echoed Mahal, and shivered. “It would point suspicion at me.”

Stroam gave orders. Mahal’s reception room was opened. Johnny and Long Tom, senseless, were carried out, and, together with Renny and the girl, were dumped in the corridor.

They were on the point of being hauled outside, when there was an interruption. One of Mahal’s gang had evidently gone out to scout the vicinity for more enemies. He returned, no little excited.

“A hack! She is parked aroun’ ze corner,” he gulped. “Me, I look in him. She got funny thing under dashboard.”

Stroam had not come from behind his curtain in the inner room.

“What is this?” he called loudly.

“A taxi with something under the dashboard,” Mahal relayed.

“Go down and look at it,” Stroam directed, not showing himself.

Mahal departed.

* * * * *

Within a very few minutes, Mahal was back. He, too, was perturbed.

“There’s a radio in the cab, *sahib*,” he declared. “Parked near it is another car—a coupe. That also contains a radio.”

“Many cars have radios in this modern day,” said Stroam disgustedly.

“These machines are not only fitted with receivers,” Mahal told him. “There are transmitters, too.”

Shrill profanity came from Stroam's lurking place. "Obviously, it is with these radios that the bronze man maintains contact with his associates," he cried. "That suggests an idea!"

Mahal's slant eyes squinted. "What?" he asked.

Stroam laughed. "Have that fellow with the big fists get on the radio and tell Doc Savage he is safe, and that everything is all right."

Eying Renny, Mahal stated, "You will do as commanded."

"Yeah, watch me!" Renny rumbled.

"He refuses?" Stroam asked.

"You said it!" boomed Renny.

"Slit the girl's throat," Stroam ordered callously, abruptly. "See if he would rather watch that than talk."

A swarthy, evil-faced man flashed a knife. He advanced on Midnat D'Avis.

Renny eyed the knifer in the gloomy corridor. The big-fisted engineer had seen ruffraff before. He knew a calloused murderer by sight.

This was one.

The knife-wielder reached over, gripped the girl's hair and bent her head back.

Midnat D'Avis tried to scream. A grimy palm over her lips prevented that. Her throat muscles writhed, convulsed; her face grew noticeably whiter.

Renny's forehead became damp.

"Wait," he growled. "I'll tell Doc whatever you say."

He was conducted down to the car.

"One wrong word, any attempt to accent certain words to convey a secret message, and the girl will be killed," one of Stroam's men warned him.

Renny switched on the transmitter. "Doc!" he said. His great voice was normal enough.

"Yes," came Doc Savage's remarkable tones from the loud-speaker.

"We're O. K.," Renny stated.

"Did you get the prisoners?" Doc queried.

"Yes."

"Bring them to the hangar."

"O. K."

"Tell him," a man hissed in Renny's ear, "that it may be some time before you arrive."

Renny relayed this to Doc, as commanded.

"Make it as soon as you can," Doc suggested.

This terminated the forced radio conversation.

Renny was conducted back to the corridor outside Mahal's office.

Stroam was still behind his drapery. He cackled shrill laughter, when told that Renny had complied exactly with his orders, and the sound was hollow, muffled by the curtains.

"Take them out on Long Island!" he squeaked. "Question them thoroughly to see what that Savage knows of me. Then dispose of them in some ditch."

The knifeman leered. "Yo' mean for me to——"

"Use your blade, my friend," Stroam called from the inner sanctum.

"Murder!" Mahal gulped. "I don't want to go along."

"Then stay here with me," Stroam squeaked.

The bad news seemed to have sapped Renny's strength. He sank to a sitting position on the corridor floor. His huge hand, smeared with crimson from his

own wound, came to rest on the carpet. The hand moved slightly. It shifted again, most carefully.

No one chanced to note Renny's act.

The big-fisted engineer was kicked to his feet. He and the girl were forced to walk down the rear stairs. Men carried the still unconscious Johnny and Long Tom.

Two touring cars were parked in an alley, their curtains up. This fact would not attract attention, since it was a spring day and not too warm.

The captives were loaded into the cars, and these, in turn, rolled out into traffic. Thanks to the curtains, no pedestrians noticed the four figures huddled on the floorboards.

Stroam, the mysterious one, and Mahal, were the only ones left behind, and they soon departed on some errand of shady portent.

CHAPTER 6. BEN LANE, MYSTERY MAN

In the warehouse hangar on the Hudson River, Doc Savage moved away from the radio equipment in the big speed plane.

There had been nothing in Renny's words to warn the bronze man of trouble. The giant man of metal was a man of many capabilities, but he was no clairvoyant. Nor did he have any nebulous sixth sense. Doc had no way of knowing that Renny, Long Tom and Johnny were in deadly peril.

The prisoners still huddled in a corner of a hangar. They were a dispirited crew.

Monk and Ham guarded them. It was a simple task. Monk rocked on his heels and eyed his new shoes.

"I feel all dressed up," he said.

"You'd look all dressed up with nothing on at all," Ham offered waspishly. "All dressed up for the zoo! Mother Nature sure gave you a fur coat."

Ham was still smarting because Monk had derided his white whisker disguise.

Monk ignored the insult. "I notice you are wearing a new pair of kicks, too," he said.

"Doc's suggestion," Ham said shortly.

"Sure. I know. He gave me mine."

"I wish somebody'd give you poison," Ham said unkindly.

They interrupted their squabble to eye Doc Savage, as he approached.

"That was Renny on the radio?" Monk queried.

Doc nodded. "It was. He said they had made their capture."

"Then they're safe."

“So he said.”

The dapper Ham jabbed his sword cane in the direction of the prisoners. “How are you gonna make them talk?” he asked.

Instead of replying, Doc Savage studied the overalled men intently. His strange, flake-gold eyes rested on each with a rocklike immobility.

Monk and Ham looked on. They had often seen the bronze man do uncanny things with his eyes. Hence, while what now happened was not unexpected to them, it was highly interesting. Doc’s unusual ability never failed to fascinate them.

At first, the captives returned Doc’s gaze truculently. They sneered. Then the fearsome quality of the golden eyes began taking effect.

The sneers faded from uneasy lips. Hands began making nervous gestures. One man tried to look away. He glared at the ceiling, glowered at the floor, but his gaze returned to Doc’s flake-gold orbs as if by magnetic attraction.

“Where are you fellows from?” Doc questioned. His voice held power, a quality which compelled an answer.

“From ze Canada snow country, m’sieu’,” answered the most weak-kneed of the lot.

“Silence, cochon!” snarled one of his comrades. “Tell this bronze one nothing.”

* * * * *

Doc went nearer the overalled men. His manner in doing this was singular. His approach was so slow that motion was hardly perceptible. With an infinite sluggishness each foot lifted, came forward, and descended.

The gang watched this. Their eyes began to protrude a little.

Monk and Ham now ceased to watch Doc, for they did not want to come under the uncanny spell he was creating. Doc was using hypnotism. Since successful hypnosis is largely dependent upon fixing the attention of the subject, Doc was using exaggerated slow motion for his purpose.

The overalled men began to acquire rapt expressions. This signified that the hypnotic spell was taking hold.

One man in the group demonstrated that he knew something of hypnotism—and how to break the weird grip of the golden eyes.

“*Sacre bleu!*” he shrieked. “Zis bronze man work black magic! Do not look at him!”

Some of his fellows started violently. A few looked away from Doc. Others seemed unable to do so.

“*Cochons!*” squawled the man. “Dumb pigs! Look away from him!”

Doc came to a stop. The shouting had undone his efforts. He kept his eyes fixed on the group, and spoke to Monk and Ham.

The bronze man’s words were in a guttural, not unmusical language. The prisoners registered puzzlement. They had understood no word.

Perhaps not a dozen men in the so-called civilized world could have comprehended the tongue which Doc had spoken. The words were those of a lost race—the speech of the ancient Mayan civilization of Central America.

Doc and his men knew this prehistoric language. A strange tale backed their knowledge of it; they had learned the vernacular from survivors of the Mayan race who lived, lost to the world, in an inaccessible valley in remote Central American mountains.

Few outside Doc’s little group were aware of it, but this lost valley was the bronze man’s source of fabulous wealth. The canyon held gold. It was the treasure lode of ancient Maya. The descendants of that race, now residents in the valley, mined the wealth.

There was a powerful radio receiving set in the valley. When he needed funds, Doc had but to broadcast at a certain hour. A few days later, a gold-laden burro caravan would come out of the supposedly inaccessible spot. The cargo, usually running into the millions, was always deposited to Doc’s account in a Central American bank.

Monk blinked his little eyes when he heard the words. He walked away toward the rear of the hangar. But he was back shortly, and took a position near Doc, folded his arms and waited.

The captives squirmed uneasily, apprehensive as to what was going to happen.

All eyes suddenly fixed upon the hangar rear. Several jaws sank; astonished sighs escaped from lungs. They were seeing possibly the last thing they had expected.

* * * * *

A pig had caused the furor. The pig was unique. A homelier specimen of the porker family had probably never been created. The animal had a lean body, a razor back, and legs as long as those of a dog's. The ears were phenomenal. They looked big enough to serve as wings.

The pig ambled up with an almost comical dignity. Coming to a halt, the homely shoat eyed the captives.

The overalled men were in a highly nervous condition. What happened next gave them a tremendous shock.

The pig seemingly began to speak.

"Something you do not understand is to happen to you gentlemen," the pig apparently stated.

Under very ordinary conditions the swarthy men would have survived the shock of hearing the pig talk to them. But their mental state was already upset. The loquacious shoat was the last straw. One man gave way completely to superstitious terror.

"Zis bronze one's eyes!" he screeched. "Zey 'ave drive us crazy!"

He sank down on the floor, hands clasped, trembling.

Doc Savage lunged forward and gripped the frightened one. The fellow moaned as he felt the awful strength of the metallic hands.

"Who sent you after me?" Doc demanded.

The other almost strangled in his haste to answer.

“Stroam,” he gulped. “Stroam is sen’ us, m’sieu’.”

“Who is Stroam?”

“We ’ave never see his face, m’sieu’. We deal with him by telephone and letter only. Sometimes we is go places where he meet us an’ we talk. But we not see him. Non! Stroam is stay out of sight.”

“That sounds ridiculous,” Doc advised, grimness in his expressive voice.

“*Oui, m’sieu’*,” the other admitted. “But she is true. Stroam is ver’ sly. He not show himself.”

“You are from northern Canada?”

“*Oui*. From ze snow country.”

“How did Stroam first get in contact with you?”

“We were in jail, m’sieu’. We charge with steal ze trapper’s fur. Stroam is furnish money, pay our fines. After zat, we take his order, *oui*.”

“Why did Stroam send you to get me?” Doc demanded.

“To keep yo’ from helping a man name Ben Lane, m’sieu’.”

“And who is Ben Lane?”

“That, m’sieu’ we not know.”

This morsel seemed to be the last drop in the human information well. Doc pumped verbally for some minutes longer, but secured nothing to elaborate what he had already learned.

* * * * *

The pig, seated on the hangar floor, had been watching proceedings. Winglike ears were extended.

From time to time, Monk grinned at the shoat. These two were kindred souls. A homelier individual than Monk would be hard to find, just as a more grotesque-looking pig would be difficult to locate.

“You done a good job, Habeas Corpus,” Monk addressed the pig.

“Thanks,” said the pig—or it sounded as if he had said it.

Monk was an excellent ventriloquist. He was putting the words in the pig’s mouth. The shoat, Habeas Corpus, was Monk’s pet.

Ham twirled his sword cane and scowled at Habeas Corpus. Ham got along with Habeas about as smoothly as with Habeas’ master.

Countless times, Ham had threatened to make breakfast bacon out of Habeas.

“What yo’ do with us, m’sieu’?” asked a prisoner uneasily.

The bronze man’s answer was a swift advance. His metallic hands drifted into coat pockets, came out, and, with an eye-defying speed, touched the cheek of the nearest captive.

The fellow stared vacantly, then his eyes closed. Down to the floor he sank. He began to snore boisterously.

Doc’s finger tips touched another man. The same thing happened. He repeated the process.

Horried, some of Stroam’s hirelings sought to escape. Monk and Ham caught them and held them until Doc’s fingers made contact with them.

Soon the whole gang slept.

* * * * *

“It is fairly certain they had no more information to give us,” Doc announced.

Monk and Ham did not show amazement at the mysterious manner in which Doc’s touch had produced a profound slumber. They had seen this phenomenon before.

“Renny and the other two should be showing up with Stroam and Mahal,” Doc stated. “From Stroam, we’ll learn what is behind all this.”

“Wonder who Ben Lane is?” Monk pondered.

“I am curious about Ben Lane,” Doc replied. “And Stroam can tell us what we want to know.”

“Looks like they oughta be here by now.”

* * * * *

Doc Savage often followed methods of procedure which bordered on the unfathomable. Outstanding among these was the way in which the bronze man often left the presence of his companions without explaining whence he was bound, or what he intended to do. His goings were sudden, quiet, swift, so that he seemed literally to disappear.

Some ten minutes later, Doc Savage went back to the big tri-motored speed plane. He worked with the radio apparatus for a time, endeavoring to get in touch with Renny and the others. But he had no success.

Doc stepped from the plane and walked around the craft.

As far as Monk and Ham were concerned, he then disappeared. That was the last they saw of him. They even searched the hangar.

“He’s gone!” Monk grunted.

“Well, you missing link, you know what that means,” Ham said impolitely.

“Sure. Doc’s hatching a plot.”

CHAPTER 7. CRIMSON MAP

Renny's taxi and Johnny's coupe still stood in the side street near Mahal's establishment. In that particular thoroughfare it chanced there was a "no parking" rule. Little possibility existed of the machines being tagged by the police, however. The license numbers obviated this.

In New York City, personages of importance have small license numerals. The figures on these two machines were among the smallest. No cop was likely to stick a ticket under the windshield wipers.

Few pedestrians trod this street—none at all at the moment.

It was just as well. The striking appearance of the bronze man who suddenly showed himself in the thoroughfare would have drawn a crowd. The swiftness with which he approached the two parked vehicles would have attracted startled eyes.

A crowd would not have been to Doc Savage's liking.

The man of bronze inspected the taxi and the coupe. On the taxi radio-control knobs he discerned scarlet smears. These were still sticky.

Doc did not know it was Renny's blood. A chemical analysis would have apprised him of that fact. When subjected to high-powered microscopes and analytical compounds, various life fluids have certain characteristics. In his retentive memory, Doc carried an exact knowledge of Renny's corpuscular fluid, just as he knew the finger prints and foot prints of all his men.

The presence of the crimson verified what Doc had suspected—something was wrong.

The bronze man, failing to raise his aides by radio from the Hudson waterfront hangar, had become apprehensive. A desire to investigate had brought him to the vicinity of Mahal's lair.

The sidewalk hatch, giving access to Mahal's building, was open. Doc dropped into the basement.

As Johnny had done, he listened over the dictograph. But no sound came to his ears.

His ascent of the stairs was ghostlike in its stealth. The noisy treads did not squeak now.

From Doc's pocket came one of the spring-generator-operated flashlights. A twist of the lens widened its usually threadlike beam to a funnel. He moved through the building, switching the light about rapidly.

The sliding steel panels gave him an idea of how Long Tom and Johnny had been trapped. The almost overpowering odor of ether completed the impression.

Doc advanced to the inner sanctum. The floor was crimson stained in spots. The rug, although cheap, was rather new.

* * * * *

From inside his clothing the bronze man drew a flat case. This yielded a small container with a perforated top. Doc sprinkled the contents of the container over the rug.

The stuff was a powder which glowed like liquid fire the instant it came from the container. But, settling on the nap, the glow died—except for a few spots.

The spots which still glowed bore the shape of foot prints.

Doc Savage, with his vast knowledge of chemicals, had concocted many useful mixtures, but few were more convenient than this powder. It glowed only when jarred, for the jarring broke the particles, exposing new surfaces to the air, and these shone with phosphorescent luster because of reaction between the compound and the air.

Explanation of why the foot prints glowed was simple. The weight of the men had depressed the rug nap, and the fibers were still straightening. This microscopic motion was sufficient to jar the powder.

Behind the curtain, where the mysterious Stroam had stood, there was a circle which glowed. This, an oval perhaps eighteen inches long and half as wide, shone like a tiny race-track of phosphorus.

Doc gave close attention to that circular smear. The bronze man knew, to a fraction of an inch, the foot print size of his men. When he moved with his powder to the hall, he saw Renny's tracks.

The girl's prints supplied a surprise. The irregularity of her tracks showed she had been shoved along by force. To Doc's discerning gaze, this indicated she was a prisoner.

Two sets of dragging tracks meant men carrying burdens. Doc surmised they had borne Long Tom and Johnny. His flake-gold eyes photographed carefully, measuring the prints of the men who had seized his aides.

He made no notations on paper; yet, so retentive was his memory, that days later he could name the width and length of each shoe sole.

Doc noted two sets of prints which shone brighter than the others. Their greater sheen was due to the fact that they had been made more recently. The carpet nap was straightening more violently.

Mahal and Stroam had made these imprints in departing behind the others. Doc realized they had been the last to leave. Accordingly, he gave particular pains to a visual measurement of the foot sizes of Mahal and Stroam.

But the outstanding clue was a crimson stain on the carpet.

* * * * *

Renny had made that mark unobserved by his captors. He had used his red-stained hand.

Doc sank beside the stain. The flash beam bore steadily upon it, the white light making the mark rubescent.

In outline the stain was long and narrow. The outer end was cleft, lobster-claw fashion; at the other extremity, it tapered. To untrained eyes it was merely a bloodstain of somewhat grotesque shape. It was assuredly no letter of the alphabet. But to the man of bronze, it conveyed meaning.

It bore the shape of Long Island.

Doc Savage quitted Mahal's lair in great haste.

Big-fisted Renny had heard Stroam's order that they were to be taken to Long Island for questioning and murder. He had managed to leave the imprint of Long Island on the carpet.

Slight though the clue was, it was the best Renny could manage.

Long Island has a length of more than a hundred miles. Its width at spots is twenty miles. Renny had known very well that Doc's task of finding him in that area was one compared to which the proverbial seeking of a needle in a haystack would be simple.

But Renny held profound confidence in Doc Savage's ability to accomplish the most incredible of feats.



CHAPTER 8. THE SKY SCENT

In Doc Savage's vaultlike hangar on the Hudson River water front, Monk and Ham awaited word from Doc. They were enlivening the delay with one of their interminable squabbles.

This one began with explosive suddenness.

Ham was seated on an upended ammunition box, near the big tri-motored speed plane. On the tip of his sword cane he was daubing a fresh supply of the compound which brought unconsciousness. A slight noise drew his eye.

Squawling with rage, Ham bounded erect.

"My whiskers!" he howled.

Flourishing his sword cane, he charged Monk's pig, Habeas Corpus. He had spied Habeas, seated under a wing of the plane, apparently trying to make a meal of the snow-white beard which Ham had worn as a disguise.

Habeas showed he had experienced these attacks before. He bounded away with startling agility, still retaining the white beard in his jaws.

Monk burst into a roar of laughter.

"You missing link!" Ham bellowed at the chemist. "You hairy lunk! You awful accident of nature! That beard cost me fifty dollars!"

"What are you ridin' me for?" Monk demanded innocently.

"Blast you!" Ham yelled. "You've trained that freak hog to start chewing on anything of mine he finds. He don't chew up anybody else's stuff. It's always mine!"

"It's the way you treat him," Monk grinned. "Always wantin' to serve him for breakfast. He don't like that."

"You furry baboon," Ham gritted.

The appearance of Doc Savage put a stop to a row which possibly would have extended throughout the day.

Doc had entered the hangar through a secret door; the same one by which he had departed. He came forward swiftly.

"The big plane," he directed. "We've got to look for Renny and the others."

Monk stared, slack-jawed. "But he radioed he was coming here——"

"He must have been forced to give us that message. He has been seized—along with Long Tom and Johnny."

Monk and Ham asked no more questions. They leaped to the big speed plane.

By throwing a lever, Doc Savage caused great doors to open in the river end of the hangar. Clambering into the plane, he started the motors. The exhausts were efficiently silenced.

The pig, Habeas Corpus, came galloping up, squealing with every jump. Exhibiting an agility a dog would have envied, the homely shoat sprang into the plane.

The prisoners were left arrayed along the wall where they lay. They still slept, and would slumber on until revived by the administration of a drug, which was an antidote for the stuff that had overcome them.

The plane slid down an inclined runway into the water. The hangar doors closed automatically behind the craft.

Urged by the tremendous power in the three motors, the craft scudded across the river surface. It was an amphibian, capable of maneuvering on land or water. It picked up speed quickly, hull barely tapping wave crests.

More than one eye on shore and on boats followed the trim plane in admiration. Speed and power showed in every curve of its streamline structure.

It vaulted off the water.

* * * * *

“How’re we gonna find them?” Monk demanded.

Inside the plane cabin, conversation in normal tones was possible. Scientific sound-proofing had gone into the fashioning of the walls. The motor silencer functioned efficiently. Propeller design was calculated so as to eliminate much of the blade scream.

“They are on Long Island somewhere,” Doc announced.

“Long Island is a big place—more’n a hundred miles long,” Monk muttered.

Ham sheathed and unsheathed his sword cane. “Have you any idea of the exact spot, Doc?” he questioned.

“None.”

“How were they carried over there?”

“I have no idea.”

Ham groaned. “Then the search is almost hopeless.”

From their height, the nested skyscrapers of Manhattan might have been a bed of slightly strange cactus. Streets were not unlike even cuts administered by a gigantic knife. The gleaming spire which housed Doc’s office appeared like an upthrust, sharpened pencil. Boats on the river and the harbor resembled water bugs of varying sizes.

Doc Savage sent the speed plane toward Long Island.

“Off with your shoes,” he directed.

Puzzled, Monk and Ham eyed the new foot coverings which Doc had lately supplied them. They had wondered why Doc had ordained that each of his aides should wear special footgear. They had suspected there was a definite reason—were sure of it now.

They removed their shoes. Doc did likewise.

The man of bronze placed all of the shoes in a box. This container looked as if it were constructed of lead; the walls were thick. The lid closed tightly.

“What’s the purpose of placing our shoes in that box?” Ham queried.

Doc Savage snapped a robot pilot into operation. This mechanism took over control of the plane, and began flying it toward Long Island.

“The shoes were boxed so they would not interfere with the operation of this device,” Doc said, and moved toward the rear of the plane.

A rather bulky mechanism was swathed in a canvas cover. Doc removed the shrouds from it.

Monk and Ham studied the device which was disclosed.

Inset in the floor of the plane was a round panel of what resembled a peculiar glass. This might have been a lens, since a cluster of complicated mechanisms was knotted above it—wires, coils, vacuum tubes. Attached to the top was an ordinary radio loud-speaker.

Monk shook his bullet of a head. “You must have installed that recently, Doc. I never saw it before.”

“Yesterday,” Doc replied.

“The thing is too intricate for my savvy,” Monk grunted.

“The device has not been tested thoroughly,” Doc stated. “Let us hope it functions.”

Ham indicated the apparatus with his sword cane. “Is that something which will help us find Renny and the others?”

“It is.”

* * * * *

The bronze man disconnected the robot pilot and turned the controls over to Ham. Each of his five associates was an expert airman.

“What course shall I follow?” Ham queried.

“Take the northern side of Long Island,” Doc directed. “Keep two or three miles inland.”

In selecting the northern shore as the first scene of search, Doc Savage was not motivated by a blind guess. Queensborough Bridge was near the section where Mahal had his retreat. This bridge led to Long Island's north shore.

Two arterial highways fed the Long Island end of the bridge. It was reasonable to suppose that the captives had been taken along one of these.

The plane's course carried it over the northernmost of the highways. Ahead was a rather deserted region. During the gangster era the body of many a "ride" victim had been found in that section.

Doc Savage worked with his apparatus, throwing switches, manipulating dials. He swiveled the whole device about, as if it were a searchlight.

Monk crouched at the bronze man's side. The homely chemist did not ask questions, aware it would be useless to do so.

Doc Savage had a peculiar trait of seeming not to hear questions when he was concentrating on another task.

The plane, in its progress, made a hoarse hissing noise. Ahead, Long Island Sound was blue as cobalt. A string of clouds hanging on the horizon were fluffy, and as regularly spaced as if put there by a cake-maker's frosting gun. Afternoon sun made the western sky red and warm.

On northern hill slopes, patches of unmelted snow were discernible. Spring was not far along.

On the concrete boulevard below, cars moved like black-metal beads sliding on a gray string. A flotilla of suburban development homes were left behind. Then came woods, dotted here and there with farmhouses, and scarred occasionally by truck patches, as yet unplanted.

A little-used road cut through the woodland. Not many cars ran on this.

"Listen!" Monk yelled.

From the loud-speaker of Doc's apparatus was coming a faint wail. Barely audible at first, it loudened.

Doc swung the device to the right—and the wail decreased. He angled it left, and the sound swelled.

A new sound joined the loud-speaker wail, a note with an unearthly quality—a trilling. It traveled the musical scale, pleasantly melodious.

Doc's sound! This time it possessed a quality of elation.

Monk eyed Doc expectantly. The bronze man's trilling, which came only in moments of stress, meant something important had occurred.

"It's working," Doc said quietly.

* * * * *

Monk pointed at Doc's device. "You mean the noise from that thing indicates the presence of Renny and the others?"

"Exactly," Doc said. "Rather mysterious, eh?"

"Mysterious!" Monk gulped. "It's dog-gone magic!"

So quiet was the interior of the plane that Ham had heard the conversation. He turned in the pilot's seat.

"What is that device, Doc?"

Doc Savage made a rapid explanation.

"In order to comprehend its method of operation, it will be necessary to review some scientific facts," he stated. "First, you know that certain substances give off emanations or radiations, invisible to the unaided eye."

"Radium, for example," Monk offered.

"Radium is a good sample. You know what an electroscope is—two strips of thin tin foil of gold leaf, suspended from a conductor. When an electroscope is brought into the neighborhood of a piece of radium, the leaves fly apart."

"I remember an instance where an electroscope was used to find lost radium," Monk interjected. "It was in Philadelphia, I think. A hospital attendant accidentally washed radium down the sewer. They walked along

the street with an electroscope. When the leaves flew apart they dug up the sewer, and there was the radium.”

“Suppose you close that over-size trap of yours,” Ham suggested unkindly. “Let Doc finish explaining about this contraption.”

“You might call my device an elaboration of the electroscope-and-radium idea,” Doc went on. “Its function is too intricate for a casual description. The emanations are not detected by electroscope leaves, but through the reaction of chemicals carrying an almost infinitesimal electrical current. The current alternations are amplified, used to actuate an oscillator which in turn creates a whistle in the loud-speaker.”

“I’m getting dizzy,” said Ham, who did not claim to be scientific-minded.

“You’ve been dizzy for a long time,” grinned Monk. The homely chemist was elated at the prospect of locating the prisoners.

“The compound placed in the heels and soles of your new shoes is not radium,” Doc continued.

“You mean the shoes——” Monk exploded.

“Right. The soles and the heels of those shoes contain a material kindred to radium, especially developed, which gives off strong, invisible emanations.”

“For the love of mud!” Monk grunted. “Your mystery device here will locate anybody wearing a pair of those shoes?”

“That’s it. The emanations pass through most solids, in the fashion of X rays. The wearer of the shoes may be underground, or in a skyscraper. Simply by flying over the spot and pointing with the device, his whereabouts may be ascertained.”

Monk pointed at the box holding their own shoes. “You put our kicks in there so they wouldn’t interfere with the locator?”

The bronze man nodded. “The box is one metal the rays won’t penetrate!”

The whistle from the locator was becoming louder.

Binoculars were in cases fixed to the cabin walls. Doc extracted a pair and focused them on the terrain below. Monk followed his example.

“Note the two touring cars on that road,” Doc directed.

“I see ’em,” Monk grunted.

Doc called to Ham. “Drop down toward those cars.”

“They’re carrying our buddies?” Monk demanded.

“So it would seem.”

CHAPTER 9. MIDNAT'S STORY

The hissing sound the giant plane made as it rushed through the air became more violent as speed increased. The earth came up at them like the wrinkled hide of some pneumatic monster being inflated. A ribbon of gray widened and became a road to their unaided eyes. Specks magnified to bushes, trees.

The wailing from Doc's remarkable locator device grew in volume. The bronze man clicked the mechanism off.

"There's no doubt of it now. Renny or some of the others, possibly all of them, are in that car."

Monk, leaning half out of a window, calculated the speed of the cars.

"They're hitting a clip," he cried, his small voice lost in a roar of air which the open window admitted. "Fifty an hour, anyway."

"That much, at least."

"How're we gonna stop them? They ain't gonna pull up at our orders, and we can't shoot for fear of hittin' our buddies."

By way of answer, Doc Savage opened a cabin locker. He brought out metallic objects. They were egg-shaped, except for a pronounced taper at one end. The taper was fitted with metal fins. The articles were as large as Monk's head.

"Gas bombs!" Monk scratched the bristles on his neck. "But Doc, if we gas 'em, they'll crash up. At the rate the cars are goin', somebody might get killed."

The bronze man showed no concern over this dire prediction. The plane carried, mounted on the floorboards, bomb releases and sights. Into these the gas bombs were placed.

The plane was low now. It was possible to discern water puddles, put there by melting snow, beside the road. A rabbit scuttled madly for cover, frightened by the plane.

The occupants of the two touring cars were as yet unaware of the plane's presence. The moan of the auto engines, the staccato rattle of wind-slapped side curtains and fabric top mantled the aircraft hiss.

At a word from Doc, Ham prolonged the plane's dive. The great speed ship flattened at less than fifty feet above the touring cars. It flashed ahead.

Doc, calculating expertly, wrenched the bomb trip. The gas missiles hit in rapid succession, the first not a score of feet ahead of the foremost car. From the fragments gushed a snuff-colored vapor.

The cars spun into the cloud, through it and onward.

Monk still hung from the window. The air, roaring past his head, was cold, yet it blew perspiration droplets from his homely features. He was worried.

"They'll go off the road and smash," he groaned. "They'll go off——"

He stopped his dire predictions and blinked. A grin began to pull the ends of his oversize mouth back toward his ears.

The cars had not careened off the road, but had continued straight on. However, their pace was slowing.

"They're stopping!" he howled.

"They should," Doc said. "That gas was merely a vapor which, when drawn into the carburetors and mixed with the car fuel, renders the mixture unexplosive."

"The stuff killed their engines," Monk grinned, comprehending.

* * * * *

"Ham, swing over the cars again," Doc commanded.

Obediently, the sword cane-carrying lawyer swung the big craft back.

From another cabin locker, Doc produced more bombs. Markings on these indicated their contents differed from the first missiles. He fitted them in the discharge rack.

Men were piling out of the two stalled touring cars. With revolvers and rifles they fired upward. The first few slugs went wild. Then there was a sound as if an unseen hammer had struck the plane fuselage a hard blow.

Like a startled monkey, Monk jerked his head and shoulders in out of the window. More banging noises came—bullets striking.

Wrenching at the window, Monk pulled it shut. The panel, not especially thick, was of light bulletproof construction. It would turn revolver, rifle, and ordinary machine gun bullets.

The plane cabin was likewise bulletproof. Slugs of greater power than the regulation .30-calibre machine gun ammunition might penetrate. To anything of lesser power, the cabin was impervious.

Doc launched his new bombs. One struck a touring car. It burst with only sufficient force to release its gas content; the other struck nearer the target. Gas from these was colorless.

A wiry, dark man dropped his revolver, put his hands over his face and began to turn around and around slowly, like a top which had run down. Then he fell over. Others collapsed also.

Doc now took over the speed plane controls. The road offered the only landing place near by. Fortunately it was not paralleled by telephone wires. But the narrow concrete offered a tricky tarmac.

Doc moved a lever on the instrument dash, causing retractable landing wheels to withdraw from their wells.

By no means the least of the countless things which Doc Savage, by unrelenting practice, had learned to do with a unique skill, was his adeptness as a flyer. Many hours in cockpits, coupled with intensive study of aërodynamics, had furnished him with an ability as a pilot little short of magical. His time at the stick had been more than mere hours in the air. Every minute of it had been study and painstaking practice.

The man of bronze needed all of his dexterity in three-pointing the big ship on the concrete pavement. Landing speed of the bus was high, even though it was fitted with the latest design of wing slots.

For all of its danger and necessity of skill, the landing seemed easy, the way the remarkable man of metal accomplished it. When the ship was down solidly, he applied the wheel brakes. The big craft came to a stop perhaps a hundred yards from the cars. Its outflung wing tips were only a yard or so above the fence posts.

Doc and the others alighted and ran forward.

“There’s Long Tom!” Ham rapped.

“And Johnny, the bony galoot!” Monk added.

Long Tom and Johnny had stepped from the rearmost touring car. Although their late captors were unconscious to a man, they themselves looked little the worse for their experience. However, they staggered slightly as they ran to meet Doc.

“They act like they’re drunk,” Monk offered.

“They’re still having an ether jag,” Doc surmised. “Ether was used to overcome somebody in Mahal’s place. Probably it was Long Tom and Johnny.”

At this point, they caught sight of Renny. He came from the foremost car. Beside him, a young woman moved with a mincing grace.

“Say, she’s a nifty looker,” Monk grinned.

* * * * *

Small, dark-haired Midnat D’Avis was puzzled.

“I don’t see yet why you tell me to hold my breath as long as I could after that second gas barrage, m’sieu’,” she snapped at Renny.

“That was so you would escape the effects of the gas,” Renny rumbled patiently.

"I do not understand!"

"The gas was a form of anesthetic, producing unconsciousness the moment it is breathed," Renny elaborated. "The stuff mixes with the air and becomes ineffective in something less than a minute."

"Oh!" said the girl. "Who would think up such a gas!"

"Him," said Renny, and pointed a huge hand at Doc.

Midnat D'Avis looked at Doc Savage. Obviously, it was her first glimpse of the amazing man of bronze. Her eyes widened. Her lips parted. She stumbled and almost fell down.

"*That* is Doc Savage?" she gasped.

"Sure," Renny retorted. "Isn't he what you expected?"

The young woman eyed Doc, who was now quite near. She took in his unusual proportions, the lithe ease with which he moved, and his undeniable handsomeness.

"*Oui!*" she said, somewhat breathlessly. "He will do!"

She stared at the mighty man of bronze, fascinated, as he came to a stop before them.

"Tie the gang before they come out from under that anesthetic gas," Doc directed. "We'll question them. And Renny, get the first-aid kit out of the plane. Douse some antiseptics on those cuts in your chest."

Johnny and Long Tom were staggering in slow circles. They looked at each other; then both sat down.

"Ether drunk," Doc told them. "It'll wear off."

"Yeah, if my head holds out," Long Tom groaned. "Boy, does my conk ache!"

"Your cranial agony can be nothing compared to my own," insisted the scholastic Johnny.

Monk was giving the young woman a look of open admiration. Bashfulness was not one of his virtues.

Midnat D'Avis showed evidences of a slight pique. Being extremely pretty, she was accustomed to being openly admired by men, but the bronze giant was an exception. As far as the young woman could tell, Doc had not looked at her. To put it mildly, she was surprised.

She was further flabbergasted when Doc Savage walked on and began binding Stroam's unconscious henchmen with their own belts, neckties and shirtsleeves.

"Is he a woman-hater?" the girl asked the handiest individual, who happened to be—not by chance, either—the homely Monk.

"Who, Doc?" Monk gulped, surprised.

"He ignored me," said the young woman, with a trace of wrath.

"You're not the first one," Monk said, then added hastily, "I mean, he'll get around to you in good time."

"I like that!" said Midnat D'Avis coldly.

* * * * *

Monk groped for words to best explain the situation. In order to mollify the young woman, it would be necessary to make her understand Doc's attitude toward femininity in general. The bronze man simply did not permit himself an interest in that direction.

There was sound reasoning behind Doc's attitude. He had many enemies, and these would not hesitate to strike at him through any girl with whom he might permit himself to fall in love, or, if he married, a wife.

Not wishing to subject any woman to such peril, he kept aloof from the fair sex.

Monk was saved from the necessity of a lengthy explanation by his pig. Habeas Corpus had scrambled out of the plane. He came scampering up, huge ears a-flop.

He came to a stop and scrutinized the young woman. Words came from his mouth.

“The rest of us aren’t woman-haters.”

Midnat D’Avis started, gasped. “*Par petit!* For pity sakes! What——”

Monk grinned, and by way of breaking the ice, explained that it was ventriloquism. Then he elaborated on the good qualities of his pet, slyly inserting a few of his own qualifications.

Ham, from a distance, looked on in disgust. It irked him to see his homely enemy making an impression on the young lady.

The prisoners were loaded into the cars. Renny drove one; Long Tom and Johnny, recuperating from their ether jag, asserted they, together, could manage the other machine.

“Take the outfit to the warehouse hangar,” Doc directed. “The captives will be conscious by the time you arrive. I’ll meet you there. We’ll question them.”

The cars drove ahead far enough to give the plane take-off room.

“Into the plane,” Doc told the young woman.

This was the first word he had addressed to her. Her earlier hostility returned. She tapped angry heels to the plane, and got in.

They took off without mishap.

* * * * *

When he had the plane volleying toward the Hudson River, Doc turned the controls over to Monk and went back in the cabin, to where Midnat D’Avis occupied a seat.

“For the next few minutes we can talk,” Doc said quietly. “Suppose we become acquainted.”

Just a moment earlier, the young woman had been reflecting that she would give the bronze man a chilly reception when he did address her. She was

unaccountably irked because he had practically ignored her. This feeling surprised her somewhat. In the past, whether or not young men gave her attention had been immaterial. Usually, she preferred that they take their deferences elsewhere.

But she found herself extraordinarily fascinated by this bronze man, and she resented his lack of interest. Being a young woman of pride, however, she did not admit to herself that this was the reason. She tried to tell herself that she didn't like the handsome bronze giant.

"My name is Midnat D'Avis," said the young lady, and she was mightily surprised at the sugary content of the tones which she had intended to make sharp.

"You undoubtedly know my identity—Clark Savage, Jr.," Doc told her. "Now I'd appreciate it if you would tell me your exact position in this affair."

Midnat D'Avis reflected that she had never encountered a man with a more fascinating voice.

"I am a private detective," she stated. "My office is in Toronto, Canada. I am in the employ of a man named Ben Lane."

"Excellent! We are very anxious to obtain information about Ben Lane."

"I am afraid I will not be able to help you much, m'sieu'. I do not know Ben Lane personally."

"How did he employ you?"

"Our contact has been by telegraph alone. He wired me from a Mounted Police post in northern Canada. His telegram directed me to come to New York, watch the establishment of this man Mahal, and get on the trail of one named Stroam. I was to report what I learned to Ben Lane."

"Did Lane's telegram say why he wanted Stroam shadowed?"

"Non. I was merely to wire Ben Lane a description of Stroam, then keep on the man's trail."

The dark-haired girl was eyeing Doc. The bronze man seemed unaware of this, but he was quite mindful of the fact, and it made him slightly uncomfortable. The girl was an entrancing beauty.

“Ben Lane apparently knew that Stroam had headed for New York to contact Mahal.”

Midnat D’Avis nodded. “Undoubtedly, M’sieu’ Savage.”

“To where were you directed to send your report on Stroam’s movements?”

“To Captain Stonefelt, at the Snow Mountain post of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police.”

“Snow Mountain,” Doc reflected aloud. “That is far up in the Northwest Territory. It is one of the most remote Mounted Police posts. There are no telephone nor telegraph lines. Communication, at this season, is by Mounted Police radio.”

“You have been in the region?” asked the girl, surprised.

“Not exactly,” Doc told her quietly.

Midnat D’Avis wrinkled an attractive brow. “But how——”

Monk enlightened her.

“The longer you know Doc, the more you’ll be surprised,” he told her. “He has a fabulous fund of information. He is a mental marvel. He can name most of the streets in any city in the world you name.”

“That’s enough,” Doc advised Monk, uncomfortably.

Grinning, Monk subsided.

•—————•

CHAPTER 10. THE GLASS CAGE

The speed plane was crossing the bundled spires of New York City. It tilted, banked down and swooped for the Hudson.

"I was following Stroam," said Midnat D'Avis. "That's how I happened to be in Mahal's house."

Doc studied the young woman. "Can you tell us what this is all about?"

"Non, *m'sieu'*." She shook her head vehemently. "It is all a deep mystery to me."

It seemed to be a deep mystery to others as well—among them the hirelings who were willing to do murder in Stroam's pay, for when the two touring cars arrived at the warehouse hangar with the captives, Doc put questions—and got exactly nothing of value in answers.

These thugs, like the first group, were riffraff of the northland. They had taken Stroam's orders. They had done his bidding. They had asked no questions, because it was profitable not to do so.

Not one of them had ever seen Stroam's face.

"Stroam is always *ver'* careful," one explained. "He not show himself, *nevair'*"

"The scut didn't take any chances," Monk grumbled.

Midnat D'Avis stood by during the questioning. There was a slightly strange expression in her eyes. The cause of this soon came out.

She addressed Doc. "I neglected, *M'sieu'* Savage, to tell you another thing which Ben Lane commissioned me to do."

"Yes?"

"*Oui*. In his telegram he directed me to make inquiries about you—about your standing in the community."

“What did you learn?”

The young woman colored. “Several persons described you to me. I did not believe such a fabulous individual could exist.”

Ham came up, twirling his sword cane, and joined the conversation. He seemed to have overheard the last of it.

“Why could Ben Lane have been checking up on you, Doc?” he pondered aloud.

“We know Ben Lane had contemplated an appeal for help,” Doc stated. “It’s reasonable to suppose that he would want to check up to learn whether I could actually be of any assistance.”

Ham nodded agreement. “What’s our next move?” he asked.

“We’re going to get in touch with Ben Lane. Using the big radio transmitter at the office, we should be able to contact the Snow Mountain Mounted Police station. If not, we’ll have our messages relayed.”

“Captain Stonefelt at the Snow Mountain post should know something,” Midnat D’Avis interpolated. “As I told you, it was through him that I was to make my reports to Ben Lane.”

“Stroam and Mahal are still in town,” Ham said grimly. “This Stroam seems to be a bad customer. I wouldn’t be surprised if we got more attention from him.”

* * * * *

As a prophet, Ham was not bad. They found that out not many minutes later.

Using his finger-tip hypodermic needle, Doc Savage administered to the prisoners the drug which brought a condition of coma that would last until the use of an antidote. Then he employed the telephone for a long distance call to his weird “college” in upstate New York.

“A shipment of guinea pigs is ready for you,” he stated into the mouthpiece. “You will need three carrying cases. The guinea pigs can be picked up at the river place.”

Telephone operators, with time idle on their hands, have been known to listen in on conversations. Hence, Doc had used a simple code. The “guinea pigs” were the criminals now sleeping in the hangar, who were to be cured of their knavery. The “carrying cases” were ambulances, and the “river place,” of course, signified the warehouse hangar.

The bronze man made a second call. This was to the police.

“Anything we can do, Mr. Savage?” asked the officer who answered the call. The cop had recognized Doc’s unusual voice. He sounded extremely anxious to please. Evidently he knew something of Doc’s reputation. Probably he was also aware of an order posted in all precinct stations, signed by the police commissioner himself, directing that Doc Savage was to receive every coöperation, and no questions asked.

“Have a general pick-up order issued for the following men.”

Doc gave a rapid, accurate description of Mahal—a word picture which would have astounded Mahal, who had thought Doc had not so much as seen him.

“We know that fellow,” the officer stated. “He’s a fake mystic.”

“The other man you are to look for is known to us only as Stroam,” Doc stated. “Stroam may be found in the company of Mahal. Stroam wears size ten shoes. Mahal weighs about a hundred and forty. Stroam is about thirty pounds heavier. He walks with long strides.”

“What about his features?”

“We have never seen him,” Doc replied.

“Huh?” exploded the cop.

“Our information came from the study of his tracks,” Doc explained.

The bronze man ended the conversation, leaving the minion of the law somewhat baffled.

The policeman would have been more surprised had he known how Doc had made Stroam's footprints visible with the glowing powder. Doc had seen Mahal, hence knew his approximate weight. Stroam's prints on the carpet, Doc judged, had been thirty pounds heavier than Mahal's.

Ham was eyeing Monk in disgust. The homely chemist was engaged in telling attractive Midnat D'Avis some facts about Doc Savage.

Stated Monk, "Doc has countless enemies. Every criminal has reason to hate him. He is in constant peril."

"How does he avoid all the danger, M'sieu' Monk?"

"By employing every possible precaution," Monk told her. "Take his skyscraper office, for instance. The place is equipped with some unusual devices. A prowler cannot enter the place without warning of his presence being flashed. Moreover, there are contrivances which will seize the prowler."

The words were hardly off Monk's lips when an electric bell jangled loudly through the hangar.

"What's that?" queried the girl.

Monk had a startled look. "For the love of mud! That's one of the alarms I was tellin' you about! Somebody is in Doc's skyscraper office!"

* * * * *

Doc Savage was already flashing across the hangar. He jerked a lever which opened the great sliding entrance doors. Vaulting into one of the touring cars, he trod the starter pedal.

"Come on!" Monk directed the girl hastily. "Let's get up to the office." He seized Habeas Corpus by one ear.

They all piled outside, closed the hangar doors behind them and loaded into the touring car. The machine was not new, there being piston slaps in the motor and a bad jerking when the clutch took hold.

A moment after he had the machine in motion, Doc Savage surrendered the wheel to Monk. The bronze man slid out, and rode on the running board.

Doc Savage habitually did this. In the present instance, he was motivated by two reasons. First, he was outside where he could spot possible danger. Second, his presence on the running board was in the nature of a badge which passed him quickly through traffic. Most policemen knew him by sight. Traffic whistles shrilling, they opened a passage.

Peace filled the skyscraper lobby. Stenographers, clerical workers, business executives swarmed the place. It was quitting time for Manhattan's millions.

The private speed elevator lifted them to the eighty-sixth floor. Doc whipped out, the others crowding after him.

"Oh-oh!" Monk said, and pointed.

Some weeks ago, Doc Savage had equipped the office with a new door. Apparently of wood, it was actually of thick steel with a coating of veneer. Inset in the panel was a letter drop. The construction of this resembled that of the night depository receptacles used by banks. Where the lock of the door had been, an irregular hole now gaped.

"Somebody used a cutting torch on it," boomed big-fisted Renny.

The door swung open at Doc's touch; they entered.

"Lamp the mail box!" ejaculated Monk.

The cutting torch had also been used on the mail container. Letters which it had held were scattered on the floor, opened. They were largely advertising circulars.

The safe attracted their notice next. The torch had been employed on this, also, but unsuccessfully. The large vault was of laminated construction, some of the layers being of a metal impervious to any melting heat created by ordinary methods.

“The marauder was frustrated by the steel depository,” said the big-worded Johnny.

“I wonder if the birds got away,” pondered the unhealthy-looking Long Tom.

That was answered when they advanced into the library. An aisle led through the rows of bookcases to the laboratory beyond. This runway was several feet wide.

In it, Mahal paced. He stamped about in small circles, his eyes staring. Terror rode his almond face. His hat lay underfoot, shapeless. He had trampled on it.

Mahal’s hair had a very greasy appearance.

* * * * *

No lights were on in the laboratory. The afternoon sun shone on the opposite side of the building. As a result, there was gloom.

Midnat D’Avis stared at Mahal. She noticed the extremely narrow area which he paced. Just why Mahal should walk there in the aisle apparently dumbfounded her.

“What keeps him there, m’sieu?” she demanded.

Before an answer could be given, Mahal snatched a revolver out of his clothing. With a wild-eyed desperation he leveled the weapon. It exploded.

In mid-air, not more than a yard from Mahal’s face, the bullet mysteriously splattered into countless fragments.

“Oh!” the girl ejaculated. “I understand, now. *Oui!* He is enclosed by glass panels.”

“Bulletproof glass,” Monk elaborated. “Unless you walk along that aisle just so, the panels drop down from the ceiling. I told you Doc had traps in here. That’s just one of them.”

Mahal, more frightened than ever, threw down his gun. He waved his arms, screeched in his native tongue.

"I meant no harm, *sahib!*"

"What a lie," Monk grinned, and crossed the library to actuate the levers which caused the glass panels to withdraw into the ceiling. There, their presence became unnoticeable.

Mahal was seized. A search of his pockets yielded cartridges for the gun, a few American coins, and a sizeable roll of Canadian currency. Doc counted the latter—a thousand Dominion dollars.

"Stroam is not a cheap-skate," Ham said wryly. He prodded Mahal with his sword cane. "Stroam gave you that money, didn't he?"

"*Nahin, sahibs,*" Mahal lied. "No, sirs, I have never heard of a man named Stroam."

"A mendacious assertion, manifestly," said verbose Johnny.

Doc Savage now returned to the outer office. On the rich carpet he sprinkled some of his luminous compound which brought out foot prints. After studying the marks which were made visible, he returned to the library.

"You will notice there is no sign of the cutting torch which was used on the door and the mail box," he stated.

Monk winked tiny eyes. "Where'd it go to?"

"Stroam came here with Mahal. Tracks in the office show that. No doubt Stroam fled when Mahal was trapped, taking the torch, and whatever they secured from the mail box—letters or telegrams. Telegrams are delivered to the mail box in my absence."

Monk grinned at Mahal. "So your boss ran off and left you."

"I know nothing, *sahibs,*" Mahal snarled. "I demand that you release me."

"What a laugh!" Monk snorted.

CHAPTER 11. BEN LANE'S MESSAGE

Mahal was escorted to the reception room. Johnny, gaunt and ominous as a skeleton in his ill-fitting clothing, closed the outer door. It made little difference that there was a hole where the lock had been cut out. Since Doc occupied the entire eighty-sixth floor, there was unlikely to be passers-by who might hear whatever noise attended the process of making Mahal talk.

As for Mahal himself, he looked on with hot flames in his dark eyes. His earlier fright had subsided surprisingly.

Monk remarked of this.

"The mug seems to be getting his dander back. If I was in his socks, I'd do some tall worryin'."

In a bare space along one wall, Doc Savage placed a plain chair. Mahal seated himself in this meekly enough, when thus directed.

"You undoubtedly saw Stroam's face," Doc said. "You will describe him to us."

The bronze man's voice was pitched neither higher nor lower than usual. Yet it had acquired a quality of grimness which caused Mahal's almond skin to assume a hue somewhat resembling that of a freshly peeled onion.

"You have make the great mistake in seizing me, *sahibs*," he said.

"You might as well drop that attitude," Doc advised.

Mahal showed his fine white teeth in a sneer. "You threaten me?"

"What do you think?"

"Release me!" Mahal snapped. "I am becoming impatient!"

Bony Johnny fingered his magnifier-monocle. "The rogue exhibits a preposterous defiance, unless he possesses some unforeseen resource."

“He does act like he had an ace up his sleeve,” thumped Renny. He blocked out his huge fists and held them up for Mahal’s inspection. “How about me giving him a knuckle-kissing, Doc?”

Mahal squirmed. He lifted a hand and strained it through his greasy hair. “Free me!” he demanded.

“Monk,” Doc addressed the homely chemist, “you know where the truth serums are kept in the laboratory. Get them.”

Monk leered at Mahal, said, “Buddy, you may not think so, but you’re gonna tell more truth than you ever told before,” and ambled off toward the laboratory.

Mahal did an unexpected thing. He snatched out a small fistful of his own hair. The pain made him grimace. He held the hair close to his own lips.

“Fools!” he gritted. “Stroam foresaw this very possibility. He gave me the means of escape!”

Doc had not moved.

Renny, monster hands open, started for Mahal. Doc’s voice stopped him.

“Wait,” directed the bronze man. “The fellow isn’t kidding.”

“On my hair, Stroam smeared a chemical compound,” Mahal jeered. “Mixed with saliva, it forms a poisonous gas. I have but to chew it, and you will die.”

“He’s gone nuts,” Monk snorted, a trifle uneasily. “The gas will get him, too.”

“*Nahin!*” Mahal barked triumphantly. “No! I was given a potion to drink, a substance which makes the gas harmless to me.”

Doc Savage said nothing. His only move was to lift a hand and hold it, thumb and forefinger crooked, on a level with Mahal’s sloe orbs. The hand remained motionless. Flake-gold eyes bored a steady gaze upon Mahal, across the several feet separating them.

But Mahal knew what that meant.

“You would hypnotize me!” he shrieked. His hand darted for his lips.

Doc leaped. Even his giant muscles, attuned to a control approaching perfection by thousands of hours of conscientious exercise, could not carry him to Mahal in time.

Mahal crammed the greasy hair into his mouth. He chewed on it briskly.

Midnat D’Avis made a gasping sound, and ran for the door to escape the gas cloud Mahal had promised.

Doc himself, seeing his leap was too late, backed away.

Mahal stood up from the chair, very straight. His eyes flew wide; a weird expression crowded them, then they closed. His mouth opened slowly to its widest, and his tongue thrust out, covered with the hair. He dropped as if every muscle had turned to water.

Doc pitched to him. His first exploration for heartbeat told him the truth.

“Mahal is dead,” he said, and his great voice vibrated hollowly.

* * * * *

“But the gas!” Monk exploded.

“There was no gas,” Doc told him. His movements rapid, the bronze man made a further examination. “The stuff mixed with the grease on Mahal’s hair was potassium cyanide.”

“Poison!” the homely chemist muttered.

“One of the deadliest.”

Silence filled the richly furnished office for some moments. Midnat D’Avis emitted no outcry, but she covered her eyes with small, exquisitely manicured hands, and her breathing was labored and jerky. Apparently her contact with violent death had not been extensive.

“The man was convinced a fatal vapor would emanate from his lips upon mastication of the hair,” big-worded Johnny said hollowly. “He was a victim of unmitigated deception.”

“He was fooled, all right,” agreed pale Long Tom.

“You mean, he was murdered,” Renny rumbled.

“Murdered!”

“It’s obvious. Stroam smeared that stuff on his hair, told him a lie about it being able to make gas, and Mahal believed it.”

“Renny is probably right,” Doc agreed. “Stroam took that advance precaution to shut Mahal’s mouth in case he was captured.”

“This Stroam is a fiend, *oui!*” Midnat D’Avis said thickly.

Ham indicated the ruptured mail box with his sword cane, and ruminated aloud, “I wonder what Stroam got out of there?”

They learned the answer to that within the hour. The information was brought to them by Doc’s foresight in having the New York police spread a net for an individual fitting such characteristics of Stroam as he had been able to deduce from the footprints in Mahal’s establishment.

New York police are efficient. They had long ago learned that Doc Savage did not seek their coöperation, unless the occasion was important. So they were unusually thorough in the net they spread.

Among other things they watched the airports, giving great attention to men weighing about one hundred and seventy pounds, wearing shoes which appeared to be size ten, and who walked with long strides.

* * * * *

The phone in Doc Savage’s skyscraper headquarters rang. A police officer was on the wire.

“I am speaking from North Beach Airport,” he said. “I believe we just had a brush with the man you wanted—Stroam.”

“Did you seize him?” Doc demanded.

“It was like this: One of my men was watching at the field, and he learned that a man had chartered a plane for a long flight. It was a fast plane, and

the fellow who hired it wanted ski attachments for landing on snow put in the cabin, so they could be affixed later. The plane is among the fastest in the United States.”

The officer hesitated, as if he regretted the rest of his information.

“The bird who chartered the plane arrived. He had his overcoat turned up, his hat yanked down, and a muffler up around his nose. My cop started to question him, and got a blow over the eye with a pistol barrel that laid him out. But he grabbed the man’s overcoat pocket and tore it open and some stuff fell out.”

“Stroam escaped—if it was Stroam?”

“I’m very sorry, Mr. Savage, but he did. He ran to the plane, clubbed the pilot into senselessness the same way he did my cop, and took off. His plane is tremendously fast.”

“Which way did he head?”

“Due north. By now, not even a Schneider Cup racer could catch him.”

“Did anyone see his face?”

“Nope. Nobody.”

“Did he leave any tracks which could be measured?”

“Yes. And they were made by size ten shoes.”

“It was undoubtedly Stroam,” Doc replied. “You said objects fell out of his overcoat pocket when it was torn. What were they?”

“Some money and a telegram. The telegram was addressed to you. It was sent from a point in Canada, and is signed by Ben Lane.”

“Read it.”

The officer read slowly. “It says, ‘Doc Savage, New York City. Imperative that I have assistance of man of your ability. Stop. Am leaving Snow Mountain at once by dog team, enroute New York. Stop. By dog team, train and plane, trip will take several days. Stop. This wire is for purpose imploring you not to

engage in other affairs which would prevent your helping me.' And it's signed, 'Ben Lane.' "

Doc Savage considered briefly. "Look at the wire, officer, and see if it was relayed by radio."

"Yes. It says, 'Via radio,' at the top. It was sent from Snow Mountain, Canada."

"Very well. Any further information?"

"That's the end."

The other occupants of Doc's office had looked on during the conversation. All wore curious expressions.

"Ben Lane has started for New York, seeking our aid," Doc advised them.

"And Stroam has struck out for the north in a fast plane, in what I take to be a long-distance racing ship."

* * * * *

The bronze man's next move was to get in touch with Snow Mountain by radio. He found it impossible to do this directly. Snow Mountain was thousands of miles away, near the Arctic circle, and the Royal Northwest Mounted Police radio station at that point, although able to hear the bronze man's signals, did not possess a sending station of sufficient power to reply, except through an intermediate relay point.

Nearly an hour was consumed in the exchange of questions and replies. Up in the snow country there was heavy static at the moment, accompanying a play of Northern Lights, and this hampered communication.

Doc failed to contact Captain Stonefelt of the Northwest Mounted.

"Captain Stonefelt has been away from the post for some days, hunting Stroam," came the word. "I am the sergeant in charge during Stonefelt's absence."

Ben Lane, relayed the sergeant, was somewhat of a puzzle, even in the snow country. For one thing, his exact business was not known. Captain Stonefelt had agreed to relay Ben Lane's message out of courtesy.

Ben Lane, the sergeant admitted over thousands of miles of ether, had asked protection from someone named Stroom. The Mounted officer advised further that Captain Stonefelt and his men had investigated thoroughly, and had been unable to find a trace of anyone named Stroom.

Doc relayed a question as to when Ben Lane had left Snow Mountain.

"This morning," came the Mounted Policeman's reply. "He took two fast dog teams, lightly loaded sledges, and three men who know the north. And a Mounted officer went along to protect him against the mysterious Stroom."

"Did Ben Lane request the police escort?"

"He did."

"How long will it take Ben Lane to reach the nearest railroad point by dog team?" Doc transmitted.

"Four days," he was advised.

Once more, Doc asked what Ben Lane's business was, and there came crackling back another assurance that the sergeant did not know, and that, furthermore, the whole affair was making him think that Ben Lane might be slightly cuckoo.

Doc terminated the hookup via the air.

Monk looked intently at Doc. He asked no verbal question, but there was inquiry all over the simian chemist's homely face.

Doc did not reply to Monk's unspoken question. He evidently guessed its nature, however, for he nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Where's my snowshoes?" Monk howled, and wheeled in the direction of the laboratory.

“What do you wear in the snow country?” questioned Ham, who apparently knew what the pantomime meant.

“*That* would be your first worry!” Monk snorted from the laboratory.

Pretty Midnat D’Avis showed evidence of bewilderment.

“Does this mean you are going to northern Canada, m’sieu’?” she queried.

“As fast as a plane will take us,” Doc advised her. “We can meet Ben Lane somewhere along the trail from Snow Mountain to the nearest railroad point.”

The young woman nibbled her lower lip. “I’m going along.”

“As far as Toronto, where you have your detective agency office, if you wish,” Doc agreed politely.

“Non! I mean—all the way to Snow Mountain.”

Doc shook his head. “It is spring here, but only a little past the worst of the winter up there. It is no country for a woman.”

Midnat D’Avis stamped a small foot. “Ben Lane hired me,” she insisted. “I have a right to go!”

“Doc is right,” put in big-fisted Renny, siding with the bronze man. “What is your purpose in going, anyway, young lady?”

“To help Ben Lane, for which I am getting paid. He has hired me, I told you.”

Renny eyed her gloomily. “Do you think you can accomplish more than we can?”

“I would not be surprised, m’sieu’,” said the young woman frostily.

“The crust of the hussy!” Ham breathed in an aside. “But I like her style.”

* * * * *

The question of whether Midnat D’Avis was to accompany them or not was held in abeyance while Doc’s men got their equipment together.

Each took such apparatus as might be needed. Monk, for instance, had a wonderfully portable laboratory of chemicals, without which he never made a foray to a foreign clime.

Renny took maps, navigating instruments, and such other articles as he might find useful in any job for which his unusual ability as an engineer fitted him.

Johnny, the geologist and archaeologist, posted himself on the geologic facts concerning the vicinity of Snow Mountain.

Long Tom had an electrical assortment as compact and unique in its way as Monk's chemical laboratory. With it, he could fashion countless of the electrical devices which Doc frequently found useful. He got this together.

Ham, the lawyer, finding his legal ability temporarily unneeded, made use of his leaning for clothes. He assembled a wardrobe for everybody, which would equip them against the snow country cold.

Midnat D'Avis stood around and tried to eye Doc into permitting her to go along. She had not stopped to figure out just why she was so keen on going. Had she done so, she could not have helped but realize it was not the rather moderate fee which Ben Lane had telegraphed to her in Toronto. Nor could her desire be motivated by a personal concern over Ben Lane's safety. She did not even know the fellow by sight.

Had she mulled the situation over long enough, the entrancing young lady might have been forced to admit to herself that it was a fascinated interest in this remarkable group of men which made her want to accompany them. Not the least attraction was big, handsome, bronze Doc Savage himself.

It would have irked her to admit this.

She told herself that Doc was a cold man-machine, that she would snub him unmercifully when her chance came. The chance would come, too. She had never seen the man who could remain invulnerable to her charms for long. In her heart, she was quite confident that Doc would take her along.

Midnat D'Avis got a shock. Doc left her in New York.

He did this politely but firmly, explaining that, since she was being stubborn, they would not bother taking her even as far as Toronto, which would cost them valuable time.

Midnat was speechless.

Doc took off first, in a tiny plane which was almost all engine. It was, in fact, a racing ship, with a top speed of nearly four hundred miles an hour. In it there was room for only one man.

The other five took the great tri-motored speed craft which, although remarkably fast, fell short of the racing bus by almost a hundred miles an hour.

They had made full preparations for the peril which they might meet in the snow country. Yet they got away from New York before the coming of another dawn.

Midnat D'Avis stood on the banks of the Hudson and watched them off. She stamped first one small foot, then the other. She exploded angrily, time and again, in her attractive French-Canadian speech. She was experiencing the pique of a ravishingly attractive young woman who had, for the first time in her recollection, met a man whose attentions she would have welcomed, but who had quite firmly ignored her.

"He is not worth one snap of my finger!" she exclaimed peevishly.

The two planes lost themselves in the murk—Doc's racer first, then the larger, tri-motored craft.

"Oui, what a man!" Midnat D'Avis sighed. "Well, he will not get rid of me so easily!"

CHAPTER 12. SNOW ENIGMA

It was cold. The thermometer in the plane cockpit—it registered electrically the temperature out on one wing tip, away from the engine heat—read two degree-marks over fifty below zero.

The altimeter needle swayed at two thousand feet. Down on the snow-covered ground it might be warmer; probably it was no more than thirty-five or forty below.

Doc Savage slanted the plane down a little. The altimeter retreated to five hundred. There were exhaust silencers on the racer, but they were cut out. The cannonading of the giant motor rattled like thunder for many miles over the snow country waste.

The dash clock read two in the afternoon. The sun had already set. Up here, at this time of year, the sun was visible for only a period of two or three hours.

The moon was full, bright and yellow, like a round window with a candle behind it, and a little dirt on the window to outline the configuration sometimes dubbed the face of the Man in the Moon.

Moon and stars were both extremely brilliant. At times, when crossing a low hill, the plane actually made a darting moon-shadow.

Occasional hot blue sparks sprayed from the exhaust stacks of the motor. They were bright, bright like the unnaturally radiant stars.

Aurora Borealis surged in the northern sky; great, iridescent bands of green and blue and purple, an ethereal display of pyrotechnics breath-taking in its magnitude.

The plane thermometer had warmed up to forty below zero, with the decrease in altitude.

Doc Savage wore the universal winter garments of the north country—a loose-fitting tunic reaching nearly to the knees, with attached hood—a

parka—called “parky” by the natives. It had the advantage of offering freedom of movement, and had no openings between buttons, through which the wind could blow.

The hood could be yanked down over the face, to shut out the wind. The margin of this hood was trimmed with wolverine fur, which has the peculiar and desirable quality of not frosting when breathed upon.

Trousers were of bear skin, moccasins of moosehide. Over the whole was drawn an electrically warmed coverall, which was fitted with zippers and could be stripped off instantaneously.

The bronze man’s features were hooded completely with an electrically warmed mask. To this was attached light, spectaclelike binoculars.

Doc was air-tracing the trail from the railroad to Snow Mountain. He had not yet sighted Ben Lane’s dog-team caravan.

The sky held no clouds. A mountainous horizon saw-toothed whitely against the ultramarine of the heavens. There seemed to be no wind at all. The snow waste lay white, immobile.

Spruce thickets stood up blackly. Along streams, naked cottonwoods jutted skeletons of gray. A few willows protruded above the snow. Here and there, in low country, snow had blown away from the round knobs of small hills.

It was a vista of chill desolation.

The weird effulgence of the Borealis in the northern sky lent an aspect of omnipotence, a feeling of vastness.

It was the snow country, frozen and cruel, a land loved by those who knew it, a land in which there were no weak ones, for the fragile did not survive its rigors.

A domain of strangeness, of mystery, this. A region where the native folklore was replete with legend of the supernatural.

No mystery of the snow country, real or imagined, exceeded the fantastic scene upon which Doc Savage suddenly came.

* * * * *

Doc saw the dog teams first. The huskies were milling about. That was why he discerned them first; moving objects attract attention. Too, the back fur of the sled dogs was dark, and the snow all about was very white.

The animals—two teams of them, hooked to basket sledges—were in the middle of a clearing in the spruce. They stood out plainly against the snow.

No men were in sight; no tents were up; no cabin or other man-made shelter was near. A fire smouldered near the sleds. Its smoke-plume stood straight up, like something made of blued steel.

Doc Savage retarded the throttle, decreasing speed. He booted the racer into a tight circle over the dogs, the sledges, the fire. He searched for men.

The husky teams were not runaways. The fire showed that. It was down to coals. It had burned for a long time without the addition of fuel.

The utter mystery of the scene suddenly dawned on Doc Savage.

The snow was soft. Sledge trails to the camp were grooved deeply. Snowshoe prints stood out with distinctness. Snow covered the entire clearing like powdered sugar.

The man of bronze had encountered many mysteries in his career. He had schooled his nerves until they were under superb control. He could encounter grave peril, and by his capacity of self-restraint, fend off such feelings of fear as another would experience.

But, looking at what was below, his spine seemed to become one long, cold icicle, and his nerves threads of ice.

No tracks led from the camp!

* * * * *

Doc Savage discarded the spectacle-like binoculars and employed a larger, more powerful glass. Time and again he surveyed the snow in the clearing.

In spots, near the sledges, the snow was stained an ominous red.

The sledges were loaded lightly, as if for fast traveling. The stores had been opened; it looked as if a meal had been partly prepared.

But of the men who had expected to consume that food, there was no vestige.

A quarter of a mile from that clearing was another, much larger. Doc swung the plane toward it. The ship had a high landing speed and needed plenty of room.

A small crank was affixed to the cockpit wall. Doc gave it several revolutions. This lowered long landing skis, which had been retracted against the fuselage belly.

With skilled hands of metal, Doc sank the racer. At nearly a hundred miles an hour, it touched the ground. There was a loud hissing. Snow funneled up in a cloud behind the ship.

As speed slackened, a squealing of runners on snow arose. In the intense cold, the snow was like sand. The squealing mounted to a banshee sound, which ended in a groan as the craft halted.

Doc un-zipped his electrically warmed coverall and dropped out of the cockpit, sinking in snow to his waistline. The skis were in deep. The enormous horsepower of the engine, however, would make a take-off possible.

Opening a locker back of the cockpit, Doc removed snowshoes. The webbing fitted his moosehide moccasins.

The motor died when the ignition switch was touched. Starting it would not be difficult, since the carburetors had electric warmers.

Strangely like something nebulous yet solid, the utter silence of the snow country clamped down. The cold-dry snow moaned under the snowshoe webbing as the bronze giant swung toward the smaller clearing. He breathed slowly through his nostrils, for the bitterly cold air was like fire against lung tissue. His breath ran out in long steam plumes.

Doc entered the spruce. The conifers were stunted; they did not grow close together, and hampered passage by snowshoe not at all.

From off to the left came sound. It was a crack like a rifle shot, with ensuing reverberations remindful of the chatter of great, hard teeth. Doc paid it no attention. It was the cold, cracking a tree.

* * * * *

Doc Savage did not go directly to the camp. Instead, he circled the clearing which held the dog sleds and fire. His flake-gold eyes switched everywhere, seeking tracks. The deep snow, fluffily soft, would carry the imprint of anything, even a ptarmigan, or other hardy bird.

There were no tracks—except those which led to the camp. These latter received close scrutiny. They required no great talent as a trailer to read. The unusually soft snow showed everything.

Five men had comprised the party.

Doc's radio contact from New York with Snow Mountain had brought advice that three men who knew the snow country, and a Mounted Policeman, had accompanied Ben Lane. That made up the five.

Doc went on to the camp. The dogs greeted him with whines. They cowered in the snow. There was something curiously like abject terror in their behavior.

The bronze man made pointed note of the weird actions of the sled teams. It was unusual. These northern huskies were not easily frightened.

The red smears on the snow were frozen solid. They lifted up like stove lids when Doc inserted a stick under them. Unquestionably, the smears were spilled blood.

Marks in the snow about the thin scarlet platters indicated that men had fallen there. But the bodies were gone.

Snow about the camp was trampled. The dogs, their harness snarled, had wiped out much of the sign in their shifting about.

On the chance that someone, wearing reversed snowshoes, had carried the bodies over the back-trail, Doc back-tracked for some distance. Then he returned.

He was absolutely positive that no one had back-trailed. The snow would assuredly have shown that.

The fire coals glowed redly in the strangely brilliant northern night. A frying pan, a coffee pot, sat among them. Blackened shreds in the frying pan had once been bacon. Steam poured from the coffee pot.

Doc tipped up the lid. The pot had boiled nearly dry.

A mysterious tragedy had struck some time ago.

Rifles lay in the snow—five of them. Doc examined them and found that some held discharged cartridges. From the soft snow he unearthed other empty shells.

The party, it seemed, had battled the unknown horror which had overcome them.

The bronze man examined the sleds and their loads. He found one duffle sack stamped with the name “Ben Lane.” It contained only clothing.

Another discovery was a kit-bag which had belonged to a Mounted Policeman. It contained, among other things, a scarlet tunic, letters and various official papers of trivial nature.

Sergeant Leopold Casker had been the Mountie’s name. He was attached to the Snow Mountain Post commanded by Captain Stonefelt.

Doc Savage made another wide circle of the clearing. He found no tracks except his own.

Incredible as it seemed, Ben Lane and his companions had vanished without leaving a trace.



CHAPTER 13. KULDEN

Doc Savage snowshoed back to his plane. It held a radio set, a short-wave outfit, the type most efficient in coping with the static disturbances which seemed associated with the play of the Aurora Borealis. The apparatus could be used for either code or telephonic transmission. Doc employed the latter.

He contacted the big speed plane which was bringing his five companions northward. The larger craft had been left some hours behind by Doc's racer.

Long Tom, the electrical wizard, was operating the trimotor radio.

"What's your position now?" Doc queried.

There was a pause while Long Tom consulted Renny, the navigator.

"We're about four hundred miles south of Snow Mountain."

"Continue on to Snow Mountain," Doc advised. "Land there and await further instructions."

"Did you find Ben Lane?" Long Tom questioned.

"I found a mystery on the snow," Doc told him. "A profound mystery."

"I don't get you."

Packing into his words all the uncanny command of description of which he was capable, Doc Savage told exactly what he had encountered.

Apparently all five men in the distant speed plane heard the story. The other microphone was sensitive. Doc distinctly heard Renny's, "Holy cow!" and the bony Johnny's, "I'll be super-amalgamated!"—ejaculations of astonishment.

"But Doc, it's impossible!" Long Tom exploded. "Maybe somebody landed in an airplane, and carried them off."

"A landing plane would have left marks. There are none."

"It could have been an autogyro, or even a helicopter. The latter ship could rise and descend vertically."

"The snow is extremely soft," Doc explained with patience. "Rotation of a helicopter's wing blades would create quite a stir in the air. It could not help but disturb the snow. No, the thing can't be explained that simply."

"I've got it! The attackers came in a dirigible—an airship. One of those things, a blimp, for instance, could sink down without using its engines."

"And what would it have to do to take off again?" Doc countered.

"Drop ballast. It's too cold to use water ballast, so they probably employed dry sand."

"There you are," Doc told him. "There was no sand on the snow."

"Then I give up. What's your idea, Doc?"

"On the face of it, the thing seems inexplicable," Doc countered. "You fellows go on to Snow Mountain, consult Captain Stonefelt of the Mounted Police. He may be able to give you information."

"O. K."

"And inquire about Ben Lane. Try to ascertain his profession—what he was doing here in the snow country."

"O. K."

Doc turned off the radio and left the racer.

* * * * *

Within sight of the camp of mystery once again, Doc Savage came to a halt. The dogs were behaving strangely.

Holding his breath, so that it would not make steam before his eyes, Doc watched the huskies. Before, they had given the bronze man their attention. But now, when he was not near, they were staring at something else—a near-by snowdrift.

Doc advanced rapidly. The sledge team shifted their attention from the drift to him.

Directly toward the drift, the bronze man swung. He was ten feet from it when a great flurry arose in the white pile. Geyser fashion, the snow erupted.

A man appeared. He had been perfectly hidden there, all the time. Without a word, the fellow plunged away in wild flight. He did not have snowshoes. Floundering in the deep snow, he made hardly any progress at all.

Doc ripped forward, his great speed hampered little by the ponderous snowshoe webs.

The man standing in the snow wrenched out a knife.

“Keep away from me!” he yelled.

His voice was deep and showed evidences of culture. The man himself was of average size. He had a skin remarkably white for one dwelling in the northland, where the glare of sun on snow produces complexions almost as dark as those in the tropics. His garb was the regulation parka, skin trousers and moosehide moccasins.

Doc Savage voiced no word. He continued his rush toward the stranger.

“Get back!” the other shrilled.

Doc towered over him.

The fellow lunged desperately with his knife.

There was a blurred movement, a slapping sound—and the man stared vacantly at the hand which had held the knife. The blade was gone! It had been extracted from his clutch with a swiftness which defeated his eyes.

He started, as if vastly surprised, when he saw the glittering steel in Doc’s hand.

The bronze man tossed the blade over by the camp fire.

“How many more of you are hidden in the snowdrift?” he asked dryly.

The other shivered, stared, said nothing.

Doc walked slowly around the camp, studying the drifts. He perceived why he had not discovered the presence of the man earlier. The dogs had walked to the drifts in which the fellow was concealed, trampling out such traces as the man had made in burying himself.

He kicked about where the man had lain, wondering if others were hidden there. There was no one else. Doc's bootings brought to light an automatic pistol, a large weapon, of foreign manufacture.

Doc's bronze fingers tested the mechanism. Oil, unfitted to the terrific cold of the north, had been used upon it. This had congealed solidly. The weapon was literally frozen. It would not discharge when Doc pulled the trigger.

He went back to the pale man, and asked, "Are you Ben Lane?"

Before answering, the other considered for some time.

"I am Kulden," he said at last.

* * * * *

Doc juggled the gun. "Is this yours?" he asked.

"No," Kulden disclaimed, in his well-modulated voice. "It belonged to Ben Lane."

"Why did you hide yourself from me?"

Again, Kulden appeared to debate his reply. "I thought you might be connected with the—the thing."

Doc's flake-gold eyes bore steadily upon him. "What thing?"

"Who are you?" the other countered.

"Doc Savage."

Kulden started, as if profoundly impressed. "What a ghastly mistake I came near making! If that automatic had not been frozen, I might have shot you!"

“A native of the snow country would know enough to use proper oil on his gun during the winter,” Doc remarked, watching the man.

“It was Ben Lane’s gun, I told you. And I do not think Ben Lane was a native of the north. In fact, he was a tenderfoot.”

“Was?”

Kulden passed a hand over his brow, as if he felt slightly dizzy. His steaming breath came in staccato spurts.

“Was is right,” he muttered. “Something happened to him—something incredible!”

“Suppose you give me a coherent story,” Doc suggested.

“Ben Lane hired me and two others as guides and dog drivers on his trip to the railroad,” Kulden said slowly. “I am a trapper by profession. Ben Lane told us he was in a hurry to reach New York City—to see you, Doc Savage. He told us nothing else.”

“What is Ben Lane’s business?”

“That I do not know.” Pausing, the man eyed Doc Savage; then he went on more rapidly, more firmly. “Ben Lane is something of a mystery as far as the residents of Snow Mountain are concerned. He bought his supplies there. Then he would disappear into the back country for long periods.”

Doc was intently watching Kulden’s features. The lineaments were regular. It was not an unhandsome face, and was losing some of its paleness.

“We camped here to get a meal and rest,” Kulden went on. He passed a hand over his forehead again. “You won’t believe the rest. You’ll think I am crazy. I don’t know—I may be. As I lay there in the snow and thought about it, I began to believe I was insane. That is the only way to explain it—the hallucination of a crazy man.”

Doc’s expressive voice was quiet. “What happened?”

Kulden suddenly covered his eyes. “It couldn’t be! There must be something wrong with my mind!”

Doc waited for the man to go on.

Kulden uncovered his eyes. "Something came—something invisible."

"Invisible!"

"It attacked us!" Kulden's voice suddenly rose to a scream. "Don't believe me; I must be crazy! You couldn't see it, and it tore open their throats, just like a beast!"

The man began to tremble. "I can hear their screams yet, and the blood from their throats—it spouted, it streamed on the snow. They fell down and died, every one of them."

"Except you," Doc reminded.

"I ran and hid in the snow," Kulden groaned. "I shot at the things. But you couldn't see them. There was nothing to fire at. And it got me, I hid, and for some reason they didn't come for me."

"The bodies?" Doc questioned.

Kulden's voice had gone shriller and shriller. He waved his arms, beat his chest. A fine spray of saliva blew through his teeth with his words.

"That's the most hideous part," he shivered. "The bodies disappeared, right before my eyes. It was as if the invisible thing had—swallowed them!"

* * * * *

Kulden sank to his knees, as if weakened by his own excitement. He rocked from side to side. But gradually his breathing became more regular, his movements less nervous, until finally he sat perfectly still. When at last he looked up at Doc Savage, it was with an attitude of wan hope.

"Tell me," he requested with an unnatural calm, "is my mind affected? Could I only be dreaming?"

"Something mysterious did occur," Doc told him. "You came here with four other men, and they have vanished without leaving a trace."

The smile which Kulden made was plainly a muscular effort "It—was—horrible!"

"Get up," Doc suggested. "Walk around. You'll feel better."

Kulden was still unconvinced. "I've heard of you, Savage. Your name has penetrated even up here. You are the man who is skilled at many things. But greatest of all is your ability as a doctor. Tell me, do I show any symptoms of becoming an imbecile?"

"No," Doc assured him. "You are greatly excited, and that is all. Forget that idea of possible insanity."

"That is a relief," Kulden sighed, and got to his feet.

Doc Savage gathered up the rifles. One high-powered piece in particular aroused his interest. Of most modern construction, there was much inlay work of gold and silver and pearl. It was a weapon which would be owned by a man who loved guns.

"That belonged to Ben Lane," Kulden offered.

The rifle was of English manufacture. Doc jerked open the mechanism.

"The proper oil for this climate was used for the rifle," he remarked.

Kulden seemed not to hear. He had turned, and was bending over the coffee pot.

"I believe hot coffee would help me get rid of the memory of the awful invisible things," he muttered. "Liquor would be better. Have you any?"

"No."

Doc unloaded all the rifles and placed them in a pile on one of the sleds. The cartridges he kept in a pocket. Then, from within his clothing, he produced a case holding a magnifying glass and, among other articles, empty bottles.

"What are you doing?" Kulden asked curiously.

"Going to make an endeavor to dig up something which will explain what happened to your comrades," Doc replied.

The bronze man moved away from the camp in widening, concentric circles. Frequently he stopped, and at each halt he filled a bottle with snow.

His sampling carried him to the surrounding spruces. He disappeared into the timber.

CHAPTER 14. TREACHERY

For some time after Doc Savage was lost to sight in the spruces, Kulden sat motionless. His eyes were fixed intently on the spot where the bronze man had vanished.

Kulden's not unhandsome features had undergone a marked change. They held viciousness, and ugly determination.

"Damn him!" he gritted. "I wonder if he suspects me? He unloaded all the guns and took the cartridges with him."

With the bloodthirstiness of a mink waiting at a burrow mouth for a rabbit to appear, Kulden gazed at the black wall of spruce.

"If that automatic had not frozen, I could have killed him," he grated.

Conviction that Doc was engaged in a prolonged scrutiny of the thicket seized Kulden. He moved away from the camp, making toward the spot where Doc's racing plane stood. He did not show undue haste, nor did he glance around to see if he was observed.

"That would make the bronze guy suspicious if he saw me," he mumbled.

Passing through the spruce, he did not encounter Doc Savage. He stood briefly eyeing the fast plane. Its excellent lines impressed him.

"Unusual aërofoil design," he said appreciatively. "Somewhat unique dihedral rigging, which no doubt decreases head resistance."

Kulden, it was evident, possessed more than a layman's knowledge of aircraft.

He advanced, and walked slowly around the fast ship, then stepped up into the cockpit. Standing there, he looked around intently, searching for Doc Savage.

There was no sign of the bronze man.

Kulden drew a pen knife and, opening the parachute pads which formed the cockpit cushion, cut the shroud lines. He carefully closed the pack to hide his handiwork.

Scrambling forward, Kulden opened a door in the cowling back of the engine and plunged in a hand. He knew what he was doing. He twisted valves which shut off the fuel supply back of the carburetors. The carburetor bowls and a tiny vacuum tank held enough fuel to permit the engine to run for four or five minutes. Then it would stop.

“With this fast ship he hasn’t a chance in a million of getting down alive,” Kulden chuckled. “These two clearings are the only ones for miles where this ship could land safely.”

Kulden closed the door of the cowl carefully, clambered back to the cockpit and dropped down into the snow. Using a mitten, he knocked off such snow as his moccasins had deposited. Then he stepped back.

Judging by visible tracks, he had merely looked into the plane, as any curious individual might do.

He walked back to the camp.

* * * * *

Some minutes elapsed before Kulden sighted Doc Savage. To the sinister fellow’s relief, the bronze man was on the opposite side of the clearing. Doc’s actions caused Kulden to mutter profanely under his breath.

“What in blazes is he doing?” he growled.

Doc Savage was moving from tree to tree. From each he scraped particles of bark. These he placed in one of his small bottles. As the bottles were filled, he racked them in the case.

Last of all, Doc merely uncorked bottles, waved them about, then corked them again.

“Mind telling me what you are doing?” Kulden asked, when the bronze man walked up.

“Merely taking samples of the snow, tree bark, and air,” Doc informed him.

“Why?”

“As I told you, they may be useful in solving the puzzle of what happened to your companions—Ben Lane and the other three.”

Kulden covered his face with his hands. “It was awful—the invisible thing, tearing at their throats.”

“And the bodies being swallowed by invisible monsters,” Doc added.

“Please—I’d rather not—talk about it.”

Doc nodded sympathetically. “I see you left the camp.”

“Yes,” Kulden replied easily. “I walked over to look at your plane.”

“Like it?”

“I don’t know much about airplanes,” Kulden lied. “Never been up in one. But yours looks like a sky wagon that can get up and step.”

“I’m going to fly to Snow Mountain and inform Captain Stonefelt of the Mounted Police of what occurred here,” Doc said.

“Can you take me, too?” Kulden demanded, knowing very well from his inspection of the racer that it would carry only one man.

“No room,” Doc advised him. “You will have to stay here.”

Kulden managed to look blank. “I don’t fancy that. The—thing—may come back.”

“The racing plane is designed with everything sacrificed to speed,” Doc advised him. “There is no way of taking you.”

“Then it looks like I stay,” Kulden said, lips warping a crooked smile. “Better leave me some cartridges for a rifle, though.”

Without the slightest hesitation, Doc dropped a bronze hand into a pocket under his parka and drew out a fistful of shells.

“These are for Ben Lane’s rifle,” he said. “It’s the most powerful gun of the lot.”

Kulden picked up the expensive inlaid rifle which he had stated was the property of Ben Lane. He did not, however, thrust cartridges into the magazine.

Doc walked toward his plane, Kulden striding alongside.

The big motor, thanks to the electrical warming pads on the carburetor, started with the first grunt of the starter. Doc Savage warmed the motor thirty seconds, a minute.

Perspiration began to steam on Kulden’s forehead. He was fearful that the fuel would run out before Doc took off. But it did not.

With a blasting roar of giant cylinders, the plane ploughed forward. Ski runners climbed up on top of the soft snow. White flakes squirted in a boiling maelstrom behind the tail-skid.

The craft lifted into the cold, northern air.

A range of low hills lay immediately to the westward. The ship mounted just enough to top these, then dropped out of sight beyond.

Kulden smirked as he listened to the throbbing of the great engine.

“He’s flying low,” he chuckled. “He don’t know it, but he is committing suicide. He will have no time to pick a landing spot, even if there was one, and there is not.”

Kulden hastily loaded Ben Lane’s expensive rifle.

“I might have managed to shoot him,” he growled, “but the chance was too great. That bronze fellow is no ordinary foe.”

The gun reloaded, he lifted a hand to an ear. The volleying of the racer motor was still loud.

Suddenly, it stopped.

Kulden could not restrain a yell of vicious delight. “It ran out of gas!”

Dropping the rifle, Kulden cupped both hands behind his ears. He listened with a strained intentness.

The distant plane, descending, was making a whistling sound. This reached Kulden, although faintly. It told him the craft was coming down fast.

“Wish I could see it,” he groaned.

The range of high hills prevented that.

Then came a series of crashes. The first was not loud, being made, no doubt, by the plane colliding with the tree tops. Those which succeeded, however, mounted in volume—a crackling, snapping, which culminated in one vast, hideous carom of sound.

“That finished him,” Kulden gritted. “Hope he tried to use his parachute!”

* * * * *

Ben Lane’s rifle tucked under an arm, Kulden ran forward. He was anxious to see the results of his handiwork. The snow hampered him greatly, and he floundered, cursing.

An unpleasant train of thought gave him a bad few minutes.

“Suppose Doc Savage carried a spare parachute where he could get to it?” he groaned.

But after he had thought that over for a time, he felt easier.

“No chance!” he assured himself. “Even if he had one in the baggage compartment, he could not possibly have gotten it out between the time the motor stopped and the crash came.”

Kulden was not without cunning. When he topped the hill, he uttered several loud, anxious shouts.

“Doc Savage! What happened? Are you safe?”

He got no answer. And that made him grin. He searched—and stopped grinning. He did not find Doc’s mangled form in the torn remains of a ’chute, as he expected. Doc must have remained with the plane.

Kulden was somewhat disappointed when he found the plane. This feeling did not arise from the condition of the wreckage. That was highly satisfactory. The ship had knocked itself into countless fragments. Metal skin, bits of wing spars, were scattered over a wide area.

The engine and major portion of the fuselage, however, had gone into the river. And there was no sign of Doc's body.

The stream was one which ran with tremendous speed. It was frozen solid, except at certain points where the water rushed along at breakneck pace. It was into one of these stretches that the racer engine had ploughed, pulling the fore part of the fuselage with it.

So violent was the rush of water that the heavy engine had been rolled downstream under the ice, which covered a less turbulent stretch.

Kulden tramped around and around, using his eyes to the fullest. Finally, he breathed easier.

"Got him!" he concluded. "His body went into the river with the cockpit, part of the fuselage, and the engine."

* * * * *

Kulden did not return immediately to the camp. He made three wide circles, just on the chance that Doc Savage had actually landed with a spare parachute.

"Savage!" he screeched. "Did you escape?"

When no answer came, he tried not to laugh loudly.

He returned to the scene of the plane wreck. With painstaking thoroughness, he gathered up every fragment of the demolished ship. These, he flung into the river, and the pitching water carried the bits under the ice.

Kulden expended nearly two hours in that task. When he was finished, he was sure no piece of the plane could be found. He took a spruce bough and switched it over the snow, smoothing out the flakes. He did this to his own tracks.

Close inspection might show that the snow had been disturbed, but from the air, the fact could not be detected, even with binoculars.

Moreover, the first slight wind would obliterate all signs.

With sweepings of the spruce bough, Kulden erased his trail back to the camp. He gathered together all the rifles and made a bundle of them.

He made several apparently aimless trips to and from where the plane had landed. His purpose was to leave tracks, which would indicate to the unknowing that the party that had attacked the camp had come by plane.

"A little blood to drip along the trail would be a good idea," Kulden grinned. He tried to shoot a rabbit, intending to use its life fluid for this purpose.

It was then that he got an unpleasant surprise. The rifle would not discharge.

Kulden examined the cartridges. Twisting, he managed to extract the lead from one. It contained no powder.

"Savage gave me worthless shells!" he exploded. Thinking this over, he paled slightly. "Savage suspected me. He was taking no chances on me shooting him in the back."

Kulden made a pack of the rifles, slung them over his shoulder and set out in the direction of Snow Mountain.

From time to time he grinned in a warped fashion.

"Savage's five men are following him north, no doubt," he said grimly. "But I have a little idea that will take care of them. They'll never learn what happened to Ben Lane."

CHAPTER 15. THE LIAR

The Snow Mountain Mounted Police post consisted of a single building of logs—a combination barracks and administration office. The cabin had two wings, one on either side of a long structure. The wings were abbreviated, each one small room. These were cells. Radio aerial masts protruded above the roof.

Spruce had been cut away in a belt a hundred yards wide, as a protection against forest fires. Beyond, the trees grew thickly.

Near by, a river made a lane through the timber, the stream at present being frozen solid. Encircling mountains stuck up white fangs at the weirdly brilliant night sky.

The hour was late, even for a region where little attention was paid to daylight, there being only about three hours of it out of the twenty-four.

Captain Stonefelt of the Mounted sat in his office, wide awake. There was a sheet of paper before him.

A sergeant of the Mounted was also present.

With the pencil, Captain Stonefelt drew circles on the paper.

The captain drew circles while in deep thought. He drew them big and little, joined them together, and tried to make things out of them—rabbits and donkeys, and sometimes a Santa Claus. The Santa Claus was his best creation.

Outdoors, when he had no pencil and paper, he drew circles in the snow with his toe. The circle-inscribing was a habit.

In build, Captain Stonefelt was a husky man. He had a face like a red beet, and a white mustache the close-cropped bristles of which resembled nothing so much as a toothbrush. He was a rough man, given to violent talk and violent action.

Captain Stonefelt had only been in command of the post for a few weeks. He ruled with an iron hand.

He was moody, given to acts which vaguely bothered the officers in his command. For instance, he frequently betook himself away on snowshoes and was gone for days at a time. Questioned, he stated gruffly that he was keeping an eye on his realm.

This reflected on his subordinates, indicating he did not trust them, and it got under their skins.

In the few weeks he had been at the post, Captain Stonefelt had become thoroughly unpopular. When spring came, and the snow melted and the inspector paid his usual visit, somebody would probably complain, and Stonefelt would be censored.

The Mounted men at the post had decided that it was Captain Stonefelt's surliness which had caused him to be banished to this remote spot.

* * * * *

Captain Stonefelt was getting from the sergeant, who had been in charge, a report of what had occurred in his absence.

Some days ago, Ben Lane had come to Captain Stonefelt, saying he feared a man whom he knew only as Stroam. Stonefelt had put men to searching for Stroam, but they had found no sign of such an individual.

Captain Stonefelt had then gone off, expressing dissatisfaction, and saying he would find Stroam.

But he was back without the man he had sought.

With the pencil, the red-faced officer drew several circles, so that they made a caricature of a particularly awful-looking ogre. As an afterthought, he attached a spiked tail and a pair of horns. This last showed that Captain Stonefelt had formed an advance dislike for the individual he had in mind.

That personage was Doc Savage.

The sergeant had just informed Captain Stonefelt, who had less than an hour ago returned to the post, that Doc Savage had radioed for information about Ben Lane. Stonefelt had not shown true Mounted spirit at the news.

“I’ve heard of that Yankee!” he growled. “He goes around showing off and mixing in other people’s business. I don’t like that kind.”

Outside, where the spruces were gloomiest and thickest, another wakeful individual crouched. He kept under cover. From time to time, he cupped a palm to an ear and listened. When he smoked a cigarette, he took care to keep its glowing tip hidden.

It was Kulden.

He had traveled fast in reaching Snow Mountain. Very tired, he would have preferred to simply sit and rest, but to keep from freezing, it was necessary to move frequently about.

A stick crackled behind him. He whirled, drawing a revolver. This weapon, he had made sure, would not freeze in the intense cold.

The shadowy figure of a man shuffled up.

“Not so much noise, you fool!” Kulden commanded.

“Nobody is near, m’sieu’,” mumbled the newcomer. “Me, I ’ave come to tell yo’ zat trap down river, she is set. Zat place is only one close where plane, she can land.”

“Good!” said Kulden. “Stroam will be pleased.”

“Zis one, Stroam, it funny we nevair see him,” remarked the other.

“You see his money, don’t you?”

“Oui, m’sieu’. But me, I lak to know——”

“Lay off!” Kulden snapped. “Now, about the trap down the river. The men there understand everything—about the pig?”

“They is all understan’.”

“All right,” said Kulden. “Get back, and keep out of sight. There may be more orders, later.”

“Stroam is say for me to do zat, non?”

“Of course. Stroam gives all orders.”

The other—he was a stocky breed—was apparently on the point of inquiring more about Stroam, but he withheld his questions and listened intently.

“Me, I hear what is sound like gnat,” he grunted.

Kulden’s ears were less efficient. It was several seconds before he heard the gnat sound.

“It’s a plane,” he growled. “That’s my cue!”

* * * * *

Kulden ran for the Mounted Police station. There was no need for him to stagger to feign tiredness. He was already tired enough. He began to pant dramatically.

With a wild suddenness he flung open the door and plunged headlong into Captain Stonefelt’s office.

A big service revolver appeared with magical suddenness in Captain Stonefelt’s capable hand. The sergeant stared, wide-eyed.

“What’s this?” Stonefelt rapped.

Kulden, in the presence of Doc Savage, had demonstrated he was an excellent liar. He did himself handsomely now.

“Men in a plane!” he barked. “They attacked Ben Lane. They shot down your officer and the other two guides, and kidnaped Ben Lane.”

Captain Stonefelt’s toe absently described a circle on the floor as he digested this. “Who are you?” he asked.

“Kulden is my name. I was one of the three guides Ben Lane took along.”

Captain Stonefelt eyed Kulden intently. "I've seen you before, all right. But you haven't been around here long. Trapper, aren't you?"

"That's right," said Kulden. "I've only been in this vicinity a few months. Ben Lane hired me because I'm a good dog driver."

"We questioned him when hunting Stroam," put in the sergeant. "He showed us a cabin and some freshly caught furs."

"I knew Ben Lane took along three men besides my officer," the Mounted Police commandant rumbled. "I didn't know who they were. Ben Lane was satisfied they were reliable, he evidently thought. Now, what's this about murder and kidnaping?"

Kulden began to talk. He spoke loudly and rapidly, as though he wanted his voice to drown out the noise of the approaching airplane. He told a glib story, probably as fine a tissue of lies as was ever spun in the snow country.

Men had attacked the two sled teams after arriving by plane, he reiterated.

"My officer was killed?" Captain Stonefelt thundered.

"He certainly was."

"Then how did you escape?"

"When I saw the fight was hopeless, I dived into a snowdrift," Kulden explained smoothly. "Apparently they weren't sure how many were in the party. They didn't even hunt for me. They carried Ben Lane off alive, and took the bodies of the three dead men. They took all the rifles, too."

"The rifles, eh?" Captain Stonefelt muttered. "Ben Lane's rifle, too?"

"Yes."

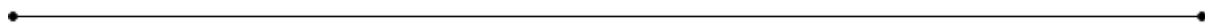
"I would know that gun anywhere. I'll remember that. It may help us identify them, if it turns up later."

The Mounted officer now heard the plane. He ran to the door, opened it, and heedless of the fact that he was in his shirt sleeves, stepped out into the biting chill. He watched the aircraft as it swooped low and began to circle.

Kulden had followed the policeman outside. Then he sprang his ace. "That's it!" he howled.

"That's what?"

"That's the plane which attacked us!" Kulden declared. "That's it, positively!"



CHAPTER 16. THE ARREST

Two miles below Snow Mountain Post the river widened, ran slowly and in a straight line, becoming at this point almost a long, narrow, natural lake. And here, at this time of the year, the ice varied in thickness from three to nine feet, depending on the current below.

The bony, scholastic Johnny was at the controls of Doc Savage's giant speed ship. He made for the wide point of the river, this spot offering the only suitable landing space in the neighborhood.

"An ultranodulated terrain," he remarked.

"What?" queried Monk.

"He means that it's a rough country, you hairy mistake," Ham advised.

Big-fisted Renny, occupying a seat beside Johnny in the pilot's compartment, was sweeping the ground with glasses.

"That stretch of river is the only place for landing," he rumbled. "Well, I guess the ice is thick enough."

Long Tom switched off his radio apparatus and made a puckering mouth of disgust.

"You know, I'd feel a lot easier if we had heard some word from Doc, since he found Ben Lane's raided camp," the electrical wizard said gloomily. "But I haven't even heard the carrier-wave hiss of his transmitter."

Monk, after peering at the chill, ghostly white world below them, crossed his long arms and shivered elaborately.

"Brothers, this is the original icebox," he chattered.

Johnny flew very low above the river, scrutinizing the ice as best he could in the brilliant northern night. There was nothing more treacherous than a frozen river, he knew.

Monk, after surveying the chilly realm below again, continued his dissertation on the surmised bad points of the vicinity.

“Dog-gone lonesome, too,” he grumbled. “Bet there ain’t a girl within two hundred miles.”

“Still indulging in lachrymations because Doc decreed that Midnat D’Avis remain behind,” chuckled gaunt Johnny.

“Do you guys blame me for grouching?” Monk grinned. “She was a peach for looks. A guy couldn’t want for better company.”

“She was sure set on fire when Doc wouldn’t take her,” Long Tom chuckled.

“It served her right,” Renny boomed. “The young lady was slightly conceited.”

The conversation came to an abrupt end, as Johnny cut the throttles and coasted down cold air lanes for a landing. All knew that even a small patch of ice, made thin by fast running water beneath, would bring disaster. The big plane was heavy. Moreover, it bore a substantial load, and the light was deceitful.

They were blissfully unaware that the ingenious Stroom had set a trap which held greater peril than tricky river ice.

* * * * *

Skis for snow landing were affixed to the hull. Johnny fishtailed away speed, kept the nose up and the tail down. The speed ship hit, bounced slightly, settled, and the skis scraped up a cloud of snow.

The men piled out, bulky figures in their Arctic garb, and anchored a wing tip. Johnny gunned the motors, swinging the big bus half around. They taxied close inshore where, in case the ice broke, the water was shallow.

Johnny cut the motors, then dropped out of the cabin.

The pig, Habeas Corpus, followed the skeleton-thin geologist. Habeas was a blasé traveler. He had been asleep in the rear of the cabin.

The dapper Ham took one look at Habeas—and blew up.

Habeas was wearing what might be called a porker-style parka. This was of rich sealskin.

“My dress-up pair of sealskin trousers!” Ham snarled, and rushed Monk. “You missing link! You cut a leg off my best pants and made that freak hog a fur coat.”

Monk scooped up a double fistful of snow and dashed it in Ham’s face, blinding him for the moment. Then he got clear of the enraged barrister’s belaboring sword cane.

Ham rubbed the snow out of his eyes, then looked about for Monk. It chanced that he saw Habeas instead. He lunged, apparently with the idea of retrieving what was left of his best sealskin trousers.

Habeas fled for the nearest shelter—the spruce-lined bank of the river. Traveling through the snow like a mole, at times lost entirely to sight, the homely pig vanished into the gloomy evergreens.

Ham turned his attention to Monk. He charged at him, spouting invectives.

Monk, ridiculously short-legged, was handicapped in the deep snow. Down the middle of the river, a trail was broken, probably by the passage of Mounted Police dog teams from the Snow Mountain Post. Monk sought to reach this, but unsuccessfully.

Ham overhauled him.

An observer, uninformed that the quarrel between these two was entirely good-natured, would have expected nothing less than a murder.

The whacks which Ham dealt Monk with his sheathed sword cane were lusty. Monk howled and grabbed Ham—and they were suddenly enveloped in a fog of loose snow. Out of the white maelstrom came Monk’s words.

“I’ll peel your clothes off and run you down this river in your underwear, you shyster.”

“Separate ’em,” Renny rumbled, and started forward.

“Let ’em slaughter each other,” yelled Long Tom. Both he and Johnny sprang upon Renny, and a second squabble started.

The whole affair was a boyishly enthusiastic method of letting off steam after the long, monotonous plane flight.

A volley of terrified squeals came from the point where Habeas Corpus had entered the spruce.

* * * * *

The scuffles stopped. The five men poised, rigid, as if some breath of magic had petrified them.

“Habeas!” Ham snapped. “Something’s got him!”

Ham sprang to his feet. Gripping his sword cane, he rushed toward the sound of Habeas Corpus’ squealing.

Ham’s manifest anxiety was a marked reversion of his pretended attitude a moment earlier. It demonstrated what all of Doc’s men knew. Ham was probably as fond of Habeas Corpus as was Monk, himself.

“Habeas must be in some guy’s wolf trap,” Monk groaned. “But I thought the hog had more sense than that.”

They plunged into the spruce, crashing into limbs, digging through underbrush. Snow, jarred off the coniferous twigs, fell down on them.

Unexpectedly, they caught sight of a running figure. In the gloom amid the evergreens, the form was indistinct.

“A bear!” Monk groaned. “A bear got Habeas!”

“Bears are in hibernation at this season,” Johnny rapped.

Habeas was still squealing. Obviously, the running figure they had seen was carrying the shoat.

The five men put on speed. They had neglected to get their snowshoes, and the going was hard.

Monk stooped suddenly and picked up a yellow object. He thrust it out for the others to inspect. "Lookit!"

"Corn!" Renny thumped. "An ear of corn!"

"A man got Habeas," Monk growled. "He used an ear of corn for bait."

They continued the chase. Their quarry, however, on snowshoes, drew farther and farther ahead. This was denoted by the increasing faintness of Habeas' pleading squeals. They covered possibly a quarter of a mile.

"Blast it!" Long Tom gritted, wallowing in snow which came to his neck.

"It'll pay us to go back and get our snowshoes."

This could not be denied. Reluctantly, they reversed their course. But they did not go far.

"Listen!" breathed Monk, pausing. "Habeas' squealing is getting louder!"

They strained their ears. Monk was not mistaken, for shortly afterward, Habeas himself appeared, still squealing, having untold difficulties with the deep snow.

"He must have got away," Monk grinned, and picked the delighted Habeas up by one over-sized ear.

Sober-faced Renny eyed the steam plume of his own breath.

"There's something phony about this," he rumbled. "Why should anybody want to kidnap that hog?"

* * * * *

Had Renny been back at the big speed plane at the moment, he would have received visual proof of his conjecture that something sinister backed what had just happened.

A squat, greasy man bundled in furs came down the trail, which was broken in the center of the river. He approached rapidly, and he was careful to keep on the trail. In his arms he carried a bundle of rifles.

Abreast of the plane, the man carefully stepped out of his snowshoes. He waded through the snow already disturbed by Monk and Ham in their scuffle, and reached the ship. He thrust the rifles into the cabin.

Very noticeable among the rifles was one which had costly and expensive inlay work. It was Ben Lane's rifle. The guns, five in all, were the weapons which had belonged to Ben Lane's party.

Leaving the rifles in the plane cabin, the man waded back to the trail, ducked into his snowshoe webs and continued downstream.

"Luck is with me," he chuckled. "They cannot prove from snow zat ze gun is be planted. *Bon! Good!*"

The greasy one was headed away from the Snow Mountain Mounted Police Post. He chuckled again, well contented with himself.

"Stroam is give me bonus for zat job, *oui!*" he assured himself optimistically; then he added generously, "Feller who is grab pig an' decoy men from plane, maybe get extra pay, too."

Once, he paused to listen. He could hear dogs barking in the distance. The Arctic stillness carried sound well, but the barking of the dogs was very faint. It came from the Mounted Police post, and signified activity.

"Captain Stonefelt is on way to plane, *oui,*" the dark-faced one smirked. "An' what evidence he will fin'!"

CHAPTER 17. THE DISAPPOINTMENT

In handling snowshoes, Captain Stonefelt of the Mounted had demonstrated himself an expert, with few equals in the snow country.

Captain Stonefelt was going his best as he came down the river. Kulden, who had started from the post with him, had been left half a mile behind.

Sighting the plane, Captain Stonefelt loosened his service revolver. He carried it under his parka, where body warmth would keep the fulminate in the cartridges from being rendered useless by the brittle cold.

Finding the plane deserted gave him a surprise. He snowshoed up briskly and looked in. It was rather dark in the cabin. He decided to turn on the light. The switch, he reasoned, was forward on the dash. The captain stooped to free his feet of the snowshoes, preparatory to scrambling inside.

A great weight slammed unexpectedly upon Captain Stonefelt's shoulders. He was smashed down, half buried in the snow. The flakes got in his eyes, blinding him. He wrenched and kicked, swearing violently. The service revolver was torn from his clutch before he could fire it. After that, he was yanked to his feet.

Sputtering, the officer pawed snow out of his eyes, then glowered wetly.

The man who had seized him resembled nothing so much as an enormous, slightly humanized gorilla. Four other men stood about, wearing ominous expressions.

Monk and the others, returning to the plane, had mistaken Captain Stonefelt for a marauder whose intentions were not good.

"Talk fast, beet face!" Renny rumbled at the ruddy-featured Mounted officer.

"You're under arrest," grated Captain Stonefelt.

"Holy cow!" Renny exploded.

Monk reached forward abruptly and wrenched up Captain Stonefelt's parka. This disclosed the regulation red coat.

"He's a Mounted Policeman!" Monk said, small-voiced.

"I'll be superamalgamated," offered the bony Johnny.

"You're all under arrest," Captain Stonefelt repeated.

Long Tom, his sallow features angry, demanded, "What for?"

"For kidnaping Ben Lane and murdering three of his companions, including a Mounted Policeman," the redcoat retorted grimly.

Kulden now put in an appearance. Some distance behind him came other redcoats.

Kulden levelled an accusing arm at Monk and the others.

"This is the gang that attacked us!" he shouted. "They kidnaped Ben Lane, killed the others."

Renny emitted a roar and started for Kulden, who prudently retreated.

The arrival of the other Mounted Policemen, rifles ready, brought Renny to a stop.

"This is the gang," Kulden repeated vehemently. "Why don't you search their plane, Captain Stonefelt. You may find Ben Lane, or the bodies—or maybe they've got Ben Lane's rifle in there."

"I'll look," Captain Stonefelt growled. He clambered into the plane. During the next several minutes, he made an extensive search. Then he thrust his head outside.

"There is no evidence in here," he stated.

Kulden hastily turned his head, in order that his blank expression might not betray him. He was stunned. Ben Lane's rifle not there! Kulden felt sure his henchman had planted the rifle.

Going to the plane, Kulden conducted a search of his own. When he emerged, he was very baffled indeed. The planted evidence was nowhere in

sight. Moreover, it was apparent that Doc Savage's five men had not removed the guns. Had the breeds, after all, failed to make the plant?

Kulden shivered a little inside his parka, as he tried to figure out the answer to that question.

* * * * *

There ensued a good deal of argument, some of it violent. Doc Savage's five men declared their innocence in no uncertain terms. The protestations had no appreciable effect upon Captain Stonefelt.

The Mounted chief simply listened, scowling blackly, drawing circles in the snow with a toe.

Perceiving that loud talk was getting them nowhere, Doc's men changed their tactics. Ham took over the conversation and began an impassioned plea.

A more convincing talker than Ham would be difficult to locate. The sartorially perfect lawyer had spent years developing a glib tongue in swaying juries. He now put forth his best oratory. He gestured, chose his words carefully; he flattered and cajoled. The talk he put up would have melted a stone man.

"Baloney!" growled Captain Stonefelt, after listening to Ham's best. "I'm going to lock you up while I hunt for evidence."

Monk and the others were searched, then marched back to the post. They were a dispirited lot. Furthermore, there occurred one of the quick changes in the weather for which the northern climate is noted.

Wind gusts came scampering down from the direction of the North Pole. These came faster, and within ten minutes a young gale was blowing. The sky remained clear and cloudless, but the wind blew up the snow in choking clouds, and it became quite murky.

"A blizzard when it ain't snowin'," Monk grumbled. "What a country!"

Cell accommodations at the Snow Mountain Mounted Police Post were not commodious. Captain Stonefelt scratched his head over the problem of how best to distribute the captives.

“We’d better separate the two big ones,” he decided, indicating Monk and Renny.

So Monk and Ham were placed in one room, while Renny, Long Tom, and Johnny were incarcerated in another. The latter chamber was a regulation cell with barred windows. The quarters which Monk and Ham occupied unwillingly was a storeroom, with a heavy door and no windows at all. A large bar secured the door on the outside.

Captain Stonefelt seemed to take a liking to Habeas Corpus. The homely pig was accorded the warmth of the officer’s private quarters. The fact that Habeas ignored Captain Stonefelt’s overtures of friendship, in the shape of the ear of corn which had been taken away from Monk, seemed to affect his standing not at all.

Monk and Ham sat in their cell and listened to the wind howl. Monk frowned at Ham. They seldom got into a predicament which made them forget their good-natured personal quarrel.

“Imagine being locked up with the likes of you!” Monk grumbled.

“Dry up, ape,” Ham said in a worried tone.

* * * * *

Nor was Ham the only one with a mental problem which brought brow wrinkles. Kulden was uneasy. True, Doc’s five men were locked up. But, other than Kulden’s lying statements, there existed no concrete evidence against them.

As soon as an opportunity presented, Kulden wandered out into the jungle-thick spruce. The gale was terrific. Flying snow made the air almost solidly white around him. It was as if he were embedded in a block of cold, white chalk.

He sought a certain rendezvous. Three greasy-looking breeds waited there, jumping about like caterpillars on a hot griddle to keep warm.

“What a bunch of dumbbells!” Kulden greeted them. “You failed to plant the rifles.”

“*Sacre bleu!* We did plant them!”

Kulden maintained a long minute of flabbergasted silence. Then: “What became of them?”

“Me, I not know.”

“Did you remain and watch the plane? If so, you should have seen who removed them.”

“We did not wait, m’sieu’. Your orders to us were to leave the place damn quick, after rifles planted.”

“Those were your orders,” Kulden agreed reluctantly.

For several minutes they discussed the situation. They kept very close together, in order to see each other in the howling maelstrom of snow.

“I do not like the way those rifles disappeared,” Kulden muttered at last. “I think we had better change our plan.”

“Change it how, m’sieu’?”

“Listen!” Kulden motioned all three closer, until their heads almost touched. Then he began to speak rapidly.

His three henchmen listened, with a dark-eyed intentness. Frequent nods, or muttered “*Oui’s*” signified their comprehension.

“It would be easier to kill them, m’sieu’,” offered one of the three.

“No,” said Kulden. “You will do as I tell you. Stroam would desire it like that.”

Through the naked birches and among the spruce boughs the wind wailed like lost wolves. Limbs swayed, cracked and popped. Snow was sucked away from exposed places, piled elsewhere in great drifts.

“Hurry!” was Kulden’s parting word to his three swarthy fellow conspirators. “This blow will not last long, and we want it to cover our trail.”

“Oui!” agreed a breed. “The wind, she not blow ver’ damn long.”

The sinister little group disbanded.

* * * * *

Monk, the chemist who came near being the world’s homeliest man, sat cross-legged on the floor of his prison cell and whiled away the time by making moaning noises in imitation of the blizzard sound around the eaves outside. Monk, in addition to being a ventriloquist, would have been a gift to a radio studio as a sound-effect man. His imitation blizzard wail was very realistic.

Ham was not an appreciative audience.

“Cut that out!” he snapped.

Monk only gave a louder imitation.

Ham threatened, “I’ll pull a wad of that red hair off you and choke you with it.”

“Any time you feel lucky,” Monk invited.

There came an interruption. The door was unbarred, and a Mounted Policeman shoved his head in. “You chappies hungry?”

“Brother, I’m always hungry,” Monk told him.

“We’ll send you some food around in a few minutes,” said the officer, and closed the door.

It was in connection with the preparation of this food that Kulden got in another touch of the underhanded work at which he was so adept. He watched the hot dishes being placed on a tray. He inquired, and was told who they were for.

Kulden had managed to return to the post without any one having noticed his absence.

The Mounted Policeman who was filling the cups turned away for a moment.

Kulden drifted a hand quickly to the coffee pot. Concealed between his fingers was a small bottle. The contents of this, a pale liquid, he poured into the coffee. He was unobserved.

Monk and Ham ate the food and drank the coffee. Since it came to them from the Mounted Policeman, they suspected nothing.

“Lousy coffee,” Monk offered.

“These Canadians are tea drinkers,” Ham told him. “Maybe that explains it.”

And that was as near as they came to suspecting that the beverage was drugged.

Ten minutes later, they slept very soundly.

Kulden sat in Captain Stonefelt’s office and talked. Out of his fertile brain he conjured further details of the imaginary kidnaping and murder of which he had accused Doc’s men.

While he listened, Captain Stonefelt, grim-faced, drew circles on a piece of paper. The sergeant was present, but he said little.

“I have dispatched troopers to the scene of the crime,” Stonefelt advised. “Unfortunately, this wind will have wiped out the tracks.”

No expression crossed Kulden’s features at these words. But he was not displeased. It was just as well that the Mounted Police should not be able to measure the tracks made by Doc’s racer. They might note that the ski prints were spaced more widely than those made by the big tri-motored speed plane.

Kulden had a reason for talking to the two policemen. He wanted to keep the officers occupied. Should one of them take a notion to visit Monk and Ham, it would be disastrous.

Even while Kulden talked, the bar of the door which imprisoned Monk and Ham slipped back silently. Three furtive men entered the cell—the trio with

whom Kulden had held his conference in the spruce copse. Lifting the motionless forms of Monk and Ham, they bore them out into the swirling snow.

Before departing, one of the men employed a hunting knife, and painstakingly cut a nick in the door, level with the bar. This was to make it look as if Monk and Ham had secreted a knife on their persons and had managed to liberate themselves, sliding the bar back with the blade.

The greasy trio bore their two senseless prizes off into the storm. The wind-stirred snow swiftly obliterated all tracks.

CHAPTER 18. MAN WITHOUT A FACE

Unfortunately, as it had developed, Monk and Ham had gulped down the entire pot of coffee. Hence they fell victim to the full strength of the drug. They slept soundly for some hours.

Monk, being almost as tough-fibered as one of the gorillas to which he bore physical resemblance, awakened first. He opened his small eyes, but at once shut them tightly.

“I’ve been hit in the head with an axe,” he bleated feebly.

He tried to bring up his hand to explore, to see what it was that made his head ache so intolerably. His wrists were bound with moosehide thongs, he discovered. Furthermore, they were linked to the floor with a chain perhaps two feet long. Monk tried to free himself, but failed.

He finally concluded that his head was not outwardly damaged, after all.

“Knockout drops,” he mumbled. “That’s where the ache came from.”

He roved his eyes around the room. The room was windowless; it was built of logs, with a ponderous door. The ceiling seemed to be of logs also, dirt-covered. This place was much larger than the Mounted Police post cell.

The sole article of furniture was one built-in bunk, which stood fully four feet above the floor.

Monk, from his sitting position, could not see into the bunk.

Ham reposed near by, likewise bound and chained to the floor. He snored weakly.

Managing to roll over, Monk reached Ham with a toe nudge. This got no response, so he kicked with more force.

Ham groaned, then wailed faintly, “My head!” He squirmed, succeeded in sitting up, and peered around. “Great Scott, we’ve been moved!”

“Where are we?” Monk asked.

“How should I know?” Ham snapped, then tried to grab his aching head. The chains stopped his arms.

Monk listened intently. Something was amiss. Abruptly, he got it. The whoop and howl of the storm! This could no longer be heard.

“We’ve been laid up quite a while,” he decided aloud. “Say, where in blazes can we be?”

Said a voice which neither Monk nor Ham had ever heard before, “You can’t prove it by me.”

* * * * *

Both the homely chemist and the dapper lawyer tried to spring erect. The chains kept them down.

The voice—it had come from the bunk—spoke again. “If you will raise up as high as you can, and if I roll over as far as my chain will permit, we may be able to see each other.”

Monk and Ham followed the suggestion.

A man became visible in the bunk. His ankles and wrists were lashed, and he was chained to the wall.

Monk and Ham emitted twin gasps of horror. Shock induced by what they had seen caused both to sink back to the floor.

The man on the bunk also collapsed, as if the effort of lifting himself slightly had taken all of his strength.

They could no longer see each other. But, before the eyes of Doc Savage’s aides still swam the image of the man’s head.

The man had no face!

Monk shuddered, then closed his eyes as if to shut out the vision.

Much of the flesh was gone from the features of the man on the hunk—literally eaten away. On his forehead, bare bone actually showed. That any

one could live in such a condition was surprising. That the unfortunate could speak with comparative levity was astounding.

The faceless man's eyes, both had noted, were untouched by the horror which had consumed part of his features.

During twenty or thirty seconds of pin-drop silence, nothing was said.

"I must look like hell," the man on the bunk said weakly.

"What did it?" Ham asked.

"Acid," replied the weak voice. "They let it fall on my face, a drop at a time. It hurt—it hurt awfully. I almost passed out every time a drop fell."

Monk, having a little difficulty with his words, asked, "Your eyes are—O. K.?"

"Oh, yes, they saved those. You see, I know the whereabouts of something they want. So they let me keep my eyes, to use in guiding them to the spot."

"Torture!" Monk muttered.

"Hell!" said the man on the bunk. "That's what it was."

Monk and Ham swapped intent looks, then nods. Both had reached the same conclusion.

"Ben Lane!" Monk called.

"Yes," said the faceless man. "That is my name. Now, who are you fellows?"

Monk introduced himself and his companion, ending, "We're two of Doc Savage's gang."

"Doc Savage!" Delight entered Ben Lane's feeble tones. "He came north? Where is he?"

"I wish I knew," groaned Ham. "The last word we had from him was by radio. He was——"

Ham subsided as a rattling came from the door; it was being unfastened. Rusty hinges complained metallically.

Men came in—two at first, rifles ready with hammers latched back. Four more trailed them. There were six altogether.

“The devil’s half dozen,” Monk growled.

He could not have been far wrong. Squat, broad, unappealing to the eye, offensive to the nostrils, not one could boast the pure blood of red Indian, olive Eskimo, or white Canadian. On their faces they bore the scars of past fights, and in their eyes an ugly glitter—a pinched beady look that comes from evil thoughts and vicious living.

“Stroam’s men,” Ben Lane said, wan-voiced, from the bunk.

* * * * *

One man, stocky and malodorous, sidled over and looked into the bunk.

“What a damn pret’ face, m’sieu’s,” he said thickly.

“You’ve got what you want,” Ben Lane told him. “Go ahead and cut my throat. That’s your style.”

The other cursed him hoarsely. “We is keep yo’ alive, m’sieu’. Maybe yo’ give us wrong dope, *non?*”

“You got the truth!” muttered Ben Lane.

The homely Monk scowled, and the expression on his unlovely features thereby became so ferocious that one of the riflemen retreated uneasily.

So Stroam had made Ben Lane divulge the whereabouts of the thing he wanted! The torture—droplets of acid to eat away the flesh of Ben Lane’s face—had been successful.

The fellow at the bunk swiveled away, and addressed one of his gang. “Ze acid, you got her?” he asked.

A thick-walled glass bottle was produced, together with a glass rod. The procedure was evidently to dip the rod into the acid, let the drops trickle off.

The spokesman studied Monk, then Ham. Monk’s homeliness seemed to intrigue him. He pointed at the furry chemist.

“Zis one first,” he directed. “Acid, she not mak’ that face much worse to look at. *Sacre bleu!* But she mak’ him yell out ze truth.”

Ham, who ordinarily relished any crack about Monk’s looks, showed no liking for this one. Hurling to the end of his chains, he tried to pull a rifle toward him with his knees. By a bare margin, he was unsuccessful.

“Yo’ later, m’sieu’,” he was promised.

Monk watched the glass cork being extracted from the bottle. His little eyes seemed to acquire a trace of redness, although his features remained immobile. Too, his face began to steam in the chill air, as perspiration came.

One rifleman took up a position as guard at the door. Four others seized Monk. They seemed to expect the big anthropoid of a fellow to struggle. But he disappointed them. Monk was canny; he intended to concentrate his efforts on spilling that bottle of acid.

The man with the bottle took up a position near the chemist’s head. “Yo’ will answer questions,” he insisted.

“What do you wanta know?” Monk asked, quietly enough.

“How much yo’ know about Stroam, hairy one?”

“Huh?”

“Stroam—he want know if yo’ got any idea who he is,” explained the breed.

“Did yo’ boss, Doc Savage, leave any ideas about Stroam written on paper. T’ings zat police is maybe get?”

“What do you mean—did Doc Savage leave——What’s happened to Doc?”

“Bronze man is dead.”

Monk reared up. Great muscles began to writhe and knot under his clothing. And then, quite suddenly, he collapsed.

A trilling sound—a note totally unlike any other—had impinged upon his ears. With an uncanny rhythm, it traveled up and down the musical scale.

Monk closed his eyes tightly, as if doubting his ears, and wondered if the trilling was a freak of his imagination. For the fantastic note, if it was genuine, signified the nearness of Doc Savage.

It was real enough.

* * * * *

The door had been closed. Now it snapped open. The squeal of its hinges seemed to mingle with the abrupt, terror-stricken shriek of the rifleman who stood there on guard.

Stroam's breeds spun about, jaws slackening at what they saw. For a moment they stood rigidly unmoving, like birds nerve-frozen by the nearness of a serpent. But in this case, they might be likened to the snake, and the giant man of bronze in the door a nemesis, a personification of the justice which they had long evaded.

Doc Savage's corded bronze fingers were about the neck of the guard. With a twist, he could have disjointed the fellow's head from the spinal column. A blow to the jaw could have ended the fellow's life with equal ease.

The bronze giant did neither. His knowledge of human anatomy told him the location of responsive nerve centers. He exerted pressure on those—a sudden twist. The guard became limp, dropping the rifle which there had not been time to use.

The breeds broke their spell as the bronze giant flashed toward them. One flung up a rifle. He was too slow, for the man of metal was magically beside him.

Doc grasped the back of the fellow's neck, exerted brief pressure, then released him.

The man let fall his rifle. He walked blindly, in strange fashion, across the cabin. He showed no awareness of the fight behind him. Unseeingly, he smashed against the wall. Even then he did not fall. He stood there erect, weirdly, rigid, as if his brain had gone to sleep—as indeed it had, for Doc's pressure had induced nerve paralysis.

Four of Stroam's henchmen remained on their feet. Monk disposed of one of these—the one with the acid. The homely chemist kicked violently. The acid was spilled over the swarthy individual who held it.

The man began to cry out with tremendous volume. He pawed at his face and his clothing, and wrung his hands violently, as the acid got on them and began to eat through the skin. He plunged outdoors, but wallowed only a few yards through the snow before he fell, moaning and squirming. After a time, he fainted.

A breed, unable to find Doc with his rifle sight, swung his gun club-fashion. The fellow goggled as his weapon seemed literally to pass through the bronze man, so swiftly did he dodge.

Doc leaned forward and struck the fellow on the jaw, just hard enough to cause unconsciousness. Then he lunged upon the other two.

So unearthly was the agility with which Doc moved, that the surviving pair seemed unutterably clumsy. They floundered about. One of their guns drove an aimless shot into the wall.

Then they were down, both limp, neither quite sure that he had seen the metallic fist which had hit him.

Six armed men had been vanquished. Yet a few divisions on a stop watch dial would have timed the whole fray.

Ben Lane, lifting himself slowly and weakly on the bunk, did not get in position in time to see any of the fight, so rapidly had it been terminated. He looked, saw only a towering man of bronze, and, on the floor, the sprawled breeds. He saw also the breed standing against the wall, as if paralyzed.

Ben Lane tried to point at that one. "What the hell ails him?" he asked weakly.



CHAPTER 19. THE MASTER METAL

Doc Savage strode over and shoved the breed standing against the wall. The fellow collapsed as if he were a jointed toy.

Monk and Ham jumped up and down to restore circulation, after Doc untied them.

“They thought you were finished, Doc!” Monk exclaimed. “How come?”

“That fellow Kulden doctored my plane so it would crash,” the bronze man explained. “He didn’t know I was watching him do it. Taking off, I flew over the nearest hill, bailed out with a spare parachute, and let the plane crash in a river.”

“But why?” Monk sputtered.

“To give me a chance to follow Kulden, in hope that he would lead me to Stroam. Kulden had some of his breeds plant rifles in your plane, Ben Lane’s rifle among them. Just why they were not there when Captain Stonefelt searched, is a great mystery to Stroam.”

“You took them, Doc?”

The bronze man nodded. “It was not difficult. Later, Kulden had his men carry you two away from the Mounted Police post. Hope of finding Stroam or Ben Lane was my motive in following.”

“How far are we from the post?”

“Quite a distance. They hauled you here by dog team.”

“Any sign of Stroam?”

“Not yet—unless these fellows know him by sight.” Doc indicated the breeds.

It required exactly thirty minutes to learn that the breeds had no information of importance concerning Stroam. They were not brave souls.

Awakening, the spell of terror induced by the bronze man's first appearance was still strong. They would talk, and did, gladly.

"We have nevair see Stroam," one insisted. "Me, I speak truth, m'sieu'. Kulden is hire us. Order, she come from Kulden. Always, oui."

The other five used different words, but they told exactly the same thing. The man burned by the acid was experiencing considerable pain. Everything considered, he had come off lucky. He was in no danger, and would not be permanently disfigured, for in all probability he could have new skin grafted on his forehead.

"Kulden seems to be the main straw boss," said Monk.

"Kulden is our man," Doc agreed. "We seem unable to get a line on Stroam, unless——"

The bronze giant went over and looked down at Ben Lane. The latter had already been untied.

"Have you ever seen Stroam?" Doc queried.

"No." Ben Lane managed a slight shake of his head. "Stroam is only—a name. He remains in the background."

Doc's flake-gold eyes studied Ben Lane. "Feel pretty tough, don't you?"

"I can take it."

"Buddy, you sure can!" Monk declared admiringly.

"You're not in a serious condition," Doc told Ben Lane. "The acid had a burning effect, which was actually self-cauterizing."

From inside his pocket, Doc drew a tiny but complete first-aid kit. With this, he treated Ben Lane's features.

"Don't worry too much about how you look," he suggested. "You'll be surprised how plastic surgery can fix that up."

"Thanks. And now I suppose you want my story."

* * * * *

The homely Monk took it on himself to answer this. "We've gone through a lot to get your yarn," he said. "Let's have it before something else happens."

"I am a metallurgical engineer," said Ben Lane. "More properly, I should say that *was* my profession. Four years ago, I resigned my position on the laboratory staff of one of the largest smelting firms in the United States. I was tired of working for a salary, and not an especially large salary at that."

"Scientists are practically always underpaid," Doc remarked. "Go on."

"I came north to prospect. A year ago I hit it. I wasn't sure about the stuff, so I took some of it south and had it refined and tested, to make sure of what I had."

"What was it?" Doc put in.

Ben Lane closed his eyes. "It is something more valuable than all the gold ever taken from Alaska, or the diamond fields of Africa. It has a value hard to estimate, a worth the extent of which taxes the imagination."

Monk squinted at Ham. The lawyer returned the glance, then made a corkscrew motion with one finger.

Ben Lane opened his eyes in time to see the by-play.

"I'm not screwy," he said dryly. "It is every bit as big as I say. You see, I've visited all the great metal companies of Canada and the United States. Everywhere they were enthusiastic. They will take millions of tons, the moment I can promise delivery."

Ben Lane stared levelly at Doc. "You see, Mr. Savage, in the manufacture of steel, manganese is added to give certain qualities of toughness and temper. Now this manganese in itself is not an especially valuable product. Its principal sources are in the Caucasus section of Russia—in India, West Africa, and Brazil. Not a great amount is produced elsewhere."

Ben Lane closed his eyes again. "It seems that a syndicate—a tremendous organization—now controls the greater part of the world's output of manganese. The syndicate seems confident of furthering its scope, and

eventually controlling the entire manganese industry. The men back of this syndicate have invested a tremendous sum of money, many millions. Naturally, they do not want to lose it."

"Stroam is the head of this syndicate," Doc suggested.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"From certain things one of my men overheard Stroam telling a henchman in New York City, a henchman whom Stroam later killed."

Lifting a hand, Ben Lane felt gingerly of the bandages on his features.

"Here in Canada, not fifty miles from this spot, I found a new metal which totally displaces manganese. This metal I have called benlanium. You see, I am an egotistical cuss."

"Your benlanium is present in quantities?" Doc demanded.

"An entire mountain of it," the other replied. "Benlanium does more than manganese ever did. Any steel company to which I gave demonstration will tell you that. By alloying it properly, you can produce a metal of unequalled lightness and strength, perfect for airplane construction."

"Stroam got wind of your discovery," Monk surmised aloud. "How?"

"A steel company executive in the United States apprised him of the fact, not dreaming of the trouble it would cause," Ben Lane explained. "This man Kulden came to me. He offered me a flat sum of two million dollars, in Stroam's name, for the location of my benlanium."

"They wanted to develop and market it?" Doc queried.

"No; not until they had got back the money they had sunk in the manganese industry. They simply wanted to get control of my product, keep it off the market until some future time. Naturally, I turned the two million down. The benlanium deposit is worth many times that."

"And now Stroam is trying to find out where the deposit is."

"He *has* found out," Ben Lane said weakly. "They made me tell."

* * * * *

Doc Savage was silent, quiescent as a statue of the bronze metal which he resembled. Small lights seemed to play in the flake gold of his eyes.

"Guess I have lost the benlanium," Ben Lane continued feebly. "It's a shame, too. The metal would be invaluable in the development of aviation."

"You haven't lost it. Not unless Stroam whips us," Doc stated.

Monk put a question. "Listen, Lane, why didn't you locate claims?"

"I was a damned fool not to do that when I made the discovery," Ben Lane muttered. "But I didn't have much money. I decided to save the fees, to finance my trip south and test the stuff thoroughly. I came back to locate the claims and make further tests. That's why I'm here now."

"There are two or three points you might clear up," Doc suggested.

"Shoot."

"Did Kulden accompany your two dog teams when you started for the railroad?"

"No. What makes you think he did?"

Doc told of his landing beside the trail of the mysteriously abandoned camp, of the fantastic tale which Kulden had told of invisible monsters.

"Kulden was lying, of course," he ended. "What did happen?"

Ben Lane made a small, bewildered gesture. "Danged if I know."

Doc Savage said nothing, and after a time Ben Lane continued.

"It was like this: We stopped to get a meal. All of a sudden I began to feel dizzy. Then things went blank and I keeled over. When I woke up, I was in here, and those greasy devils were getting ready to torture me."

Monk scratched his red-bristled neck. "As Johnny would say, I'll be superamalgamated! How did Kulden get to that camp without leaving tracks?"

“How Ben Lane and the other four—or their bodies, if they are dead—were removed, is an equal mystery,” Doc said dryly. “Their rifles had been fired, but maybe Kulden did that.”

Searching the cabin, and the lean-to adjacent, Doc Savage found several sets of dog harness. He employed thongs cut from these to bind the hands of the six breeds, then linked them together in a living chain, far enough apart to permit them to walk freely.

The dog sled upon which Monk and Ham had been hauled to the cabin was of the Yukon type. On the platform of this, Ben Lane was made comfortable, swathed in furs. Dogs were harnessed in.

With Monk at the gee pole of the sled, they started to mush for the Snow Mountain Mounted Police Post.

The string of six captives were forced to trot ahead and break trail. They cursed fluently at this job, but fell fearfully silent whenever the bronze man was near them.

“It’s four hours of hard traveling to the post,” Doc Savage advised.

“A lot can happen in four hours, sometimes,” Monk grunted, throwing his weight against the gee pole to steer the sled between two naked cottonwood trees.

CHAPTER 20. SNOW MAGIC

Monk had made his remark, about it being possible for a lot to happen in four hours, without particular thought. He was merely making talk.

He was more of a prophet than he knew.

In their cell in the Snow Mountain Mounted Police Post, gaunt Johnny did his best to make his bones comfortable on the hard, bare floor.

“I’ll be superamalgamated if I like this,” he complained.

Renny, at the window, tested the bars with his big fists. He strained until his fur parka all but split across the shoulders. The bars only squeaked.

“The wind has died down entirely,” he boomed, pretending an interest in the weather.

Long Tom sat in a corner. They had been fed some hours before—at the same time Monk and Ham received their ill-omened portion. The food for these three had not been drugged.

The fact that they had not been doped was explained by Kulden’s inability to get to their food without being observed.

Long Tom had not eaten his food. He had carefully wadded it in two round balls, which he had allowed to freeze. He now had two missiles equal to baseballs.

“I may want to bean somebody,” he said grouchily.

Kulden, his usual affable, glib self, sat in Captain Stonefelt’s office. Privately, he was wondering when the prisoners would be fed again, and hoping he would be able to dope the rest of them.

A bright, evil idea had evolved itself in Kulden’s mind. If all five of Doc Savage’s men could be gotten away from the post, they could be killed, and their bodies hidden. That would dispose of them nicely.

Captain Stonefelt, red-faced, more flushed than usual, had covered numerous sheets of paper with penciled circles.

The Mounted officers sent to Ben Lane's camp had returned. To a degree, they had corroborated Kulden's lying. The camp had been found deserted. True, the windstorm had wiped out all tracks, but they had found the frozen platters of blood, which indicated violence.

Captain Stonefelt's train of thought was interrupted. The door burst open and let a redcoat in.

"Two prisoners gone!" he shouted. "The ones called Monk and Ham!"

"Damn the luck!" Captain Stonefelt thundered. "Let's see if the other three are gone, too."

He charged to the cell where Renny, Long Tom and Johnny were incarcerated. When he saw them inside, he heaved a gusty sigh of relief, and drew a circle in the snow with his toe, while he considered.

"What's the excitement?" Renny rumbled through the window.

Captain Stonefelt informed them that Monk and Ham were missing, punctuating the advice with some scorching profanity.

"The wind has blown the snow into whatever tracks they made," he grated. "All I can do is send every available man out to travel in circles around the post, until their tracks are picked up. Now that the wind has died down, they'll make a plain trail."

Redcoats began to leave the post on snowshoes. They carried packs, for no wise man ever ventured far in the snow country without supplies. They were light packs, however.

Captain Stonefelt himself departed to hunt. He was now convinced of the guilt of the prisoners, he stated loudly.

Only two redcoats were left behind. One had a lame ankle; the other was the cook.

Kulden also stayed behind, pleading fatigue. He promised to help guard the remaining three prisoners.

* * * * *

Five minutes after Captain Stonefelt was out of sight, Kulden was in the Mounted Police radio room. Fortunately, the post was equipped with an electric lighting plant. Hence the motor generator which supplied current to the radio transmitter did not make enough noise to attract the attention of the two officers who had remained behind.

Kulden put this in operation.

Previously, Kulden had shown no small knowledge of airplanes. He now proved himself a radio man of ability. He changed the wave length on the post transmitter.

For some minutes he alternately spoke and listened, his voice low so the remaining redcoats would not hear him.

Returning the wave-length adjustment to where he had found it, he shut off the power. He looked sober, innocent, when he rejoined the two redcoats. He kindly helped the one who was lame to bind his ankle.

Renny, staring at Kulden through the bars, thumped deep in his chest. His hands shut into tremendous blocks of gristle and bone.

"I'd like to give that oily whelp's neck one good squeeze," he gritted.

Long Tom juggled one of his baseball-like lumps of frozen food. "Want to peg this at him?"

"Save them," Renny said. "We may need 'em."

Two long hours passed. Toward the end of this interval, Kulden showed signs of uneasiness. He glanced frequently to the westward. Finally, he released a sigh.

Four men had appeared in the west, advancing rapidly on snowshoes. No packs were on their backs. Rifles lay in the crooks of their arms.

When the quartet came closer, it could be noted that their high moccasins were beaded in the native fashion. Tails of fur-bearing animals fringed their parkas. Very worn, their garb would have been improved by a washing.

“Breeds,” said one of the two Mounties, studying them. “Tough lookin’, too. Seems to me like there’s been a lot of those birds in this section the last few weeks.”

Kulden said nothing, but he took a position near enough the officer who had spoken that he could attack the fellow, if necessary.

The four newcomers were arriving in answer to the summons which Kulden had radioed. They already had their orders nor did they lose time following them.

Twenty feet distant, all four snapped rifles to their shoulders. The weapons cocked in a clicking concert.

“Up with ze hands, m’sieu’s!” one snarled.

* * * * *

The two Mounted Policemen glared, but they were no fools. Up went their hands.

The riflemen advanced closer.

Kulden also started to elevate his hands. Then he dived fingers to a pocket as if to draw a gun.

Lunging, a greasy man rapped Kulden over the head with a rifle barrel.

Kulden slumped down heavily in the snow and pretended to be stunned. This by-play was just to make it look good.

One of the dark-skinned quartet looked at Renny’s long features, framed in the barred window.

“We ’ave come to rescue you, m’sieu’,” he growled. “Doc Savage sen’ us.”

Renny drew back from the window to stare at Long Tom and Johnny. They all wore dubious expressions.

“He’s a liar, I’m bettin’,” said pale Long Tom grimly.

“Ostensibly a mendacity,” agreed verbose Johnny.

“If there was any rescuing to be done, Doc would do it himself,” Renny concluded. “He wouldn’t enlist the aid of birds like these. Still, we’d better make sure that he didn’t send them.”

Pressing close to the bars, Renny called, “Danged if I believe you came from Doc Savage.”

“*Oui!* But we do. He give us orders himself.”

“Then you can describe Doc,” Renny boomed. “Do it.”

The greasy face outside became blank. The fellow was stumped. He floundered desperately for words.

“Doc Savage is ver’ strong——”

“For his size, you mean,” Renny suggested.

The other took the bait. “*Oui*, strong for his size, m’sieu’. Doc Savage is not big man.”

“You liar!” Renny roared. “You’ve never seen Doc Savage.”

“We not argue about zat, m’sieu’,” snarled the greasy man. “Yo’ will go with us.”

The Mounted Policeman and Kulden, who had now gotten up from the ground, were backed against the log wall of the post and searched for weapons. Then the four riflemen prepared to open the cell.

Long Tom hastily concealed the balls of frozen food in his clothing, whispering, “I had a hunch these would come in handy.”

Renny nodded. “I hope they don’t melt.”

The bar rattled and the door opened, followed by a small avalanche of snow.

“Come out, m’sieu’!”

Renny stamped outdoors, steam from his breath spurting angrily. He stared straight at the two Mounted Policemen and said, "Get this straight, officers. Doc Savage didn't send these guys."

The breed quartet gestured with their rifles. "Yo' will walk away from here ver' fast."

"On the contrary," said a metallic, feminine voice, "you will stand very still, m'sieu's!"

* * * * *

Like startled owls, the four armed men swiveled their heads toward the voice. The others were scarcely less surprised. All eyes sought the corner of the log post building.

"Midnat D'Avis!" Long Tom exploded.

The small, attractive feminine detective from Toronto made a striking picture—for two reasons.

In New York, she had been an entrancingly pretty young woman. Now, she was even more ravishing.

Her parka was colorful, exquisitely decorated. Her sealskin trousers were snug, ornamented with a mosaic panel consisting of many bits of colored leather. Her high boots were finely made, and replete with bead work. A more advantageous costume could hardly have been designed.

The thing about her which struck the four greasy visitors, however, was her rifle. Her manner of holding it indicated familiarity with firearms. The muzzle shifted meaningfully from one to the other of the quartet.

"Cochons!" she snapped. "Pigs! Drop your guns."

Three of the men tossed their rifles into the snow. The fourth made a mistake. He whirled, tried to get his weapon into action.

Red flame and a clap of noise, jumped from the snout of the girl's rifle!

The breed squawked as the lead struck his gun and tore it from his fingers. He wrung his hands.

“The next bullet will bounce off your thick skull—maybe,” Midnat D’Avis advised, brittle-voiced.

Renny looked very gloomy, which was his way of showing pleasure.

Shooting guns from an enemy’s hand is a trick which fiction writers have made sound easy. Renny happened to know that it required remarkable marksmanship.

“Dog-gone it, we’re glad to see you,” he told the young woman.

“That’s surprising,” Midnat D’Avis told him coldly, “after the way you left me in New York.”

Renny ignored the sarcasm. “How’d you get up here?”

“By plane, of course.”

“We didn’t hear any ship arrive. Where is it, and your pilot?”

“I flew it myself,” Midnat D’Avis told him. “I could not locate the post in that windstorm. My gasoline was getting low, so I made a forced landing about five miles to the westward. I was heading for the post on snowshoes when I saw these.”

She indicated the four grimy fellows.

“In the north, m’sieu’, men do not travel fast and without packs, except for good reasons. I did not like their looks through binoculars. So I trailed them and saw them hold up the officers. It was a simple matter to approach unobserved from the other side of the post.”

Kulden, who had successfully masked his perturbation over the turn things had taken, furnished an interruption. He pointed.

“There comes Captain Stonefelt. He will straighten out this affair.”

CHAPTER 21. SOMETHING INVISIBLE

Captain Stonefelt was approaching from the west. He was following the trail made by the four breeds. A wrathful roar poured out of his parka hood when he saw Doc's three men standing beside the post.

"What are you doing out of your cells?" he shouted.

"Four men came with rifles and held us up," said one Mounted Policeman.

"And then the girl held everybody up," ended the other officer.

Renny boomed, "We didn't want to be turned loose!"

"We not know a t'ing," scowled a breed.

Captain Stonefelt turned purple. He hated being confused, and this hodgepodge was making him dizzy. He waved his arms, and cried, "One of you at a time."

Kulden tried to talk. "This girl here, she——"

"Shut up!" growled Captain Stonefelt. Then he eyed Midnat D'Avis. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I am a Toronto private detective," retorted the young woman. "I am here to render Ben Lane any assistance I can."

"And why were you so free with your rifle?"

"I am helping Doc Savage, too."

Captain Stonefelt lunged forward, caught the young woman by surprise, and jerked the rifle from her hand.

"You're in with Doc Savage, eh? Well, you're under arrest."

The young woman promptly kicked off her snowshoes, in order to move more freely, and rushed Captain Stonefelt. She hit him in the eye, on the

nose. She clutched her rifle and had almost recovered it, when a policeman ran forward and seized her, holding her.

“Whe-e-w!” sputtered Captain Stonefelt. “What a tigress!”

Midnat D’Avis glared at the red-faced commandant. “You dumb *boeuf*! Ox! You are making a great mistake.”

Captain Stonefelt frowned. “Can you prove you are a detective?”

“Oui.” The young woman groped a hand inside her parka, then made a face of disappointment. “Non! I left my papers in the plane!”

For some moments Captain Stonefelt eyed Midnat D’Avis. He was human. Her exquisite beauty melted him, it seemed.

“I will go with you to get those papers,” he said.

Renny, Johnny and Long Tom were now returned to the cell. For company, they had their four would-be rescuers.

* * * * *

Kulden was a man of many talents. One of these was the ability to efface himself, to remain in the background, unnoticed, when he so desired. He was very careful to do this now. When an opportunity presented, he managed to enter the radio room.

Once more he switched on the motor generator and retuned the transmitter.

“Stroam’s headquarters?” he asked.

“Yes,” came the answer through the static.

“Things are not going so well,” said Kulden. “The attempt to remove Doc Savage’s three men from the hands of the Mounted Police ran into a snag.”

“That is unfortunate.”

“It is worse than that. Altogether, I do not like the way things are going.”

“I have even worse news,” said the voice on the radio.

“What is it?”

“The two men—Monk and Ham—are free. Moreover, they have rescued Ben Lane and captured those of our men who were holding them.”

For once, Kulden was not his bland self; he showed signs of apoplexy. Thirty seconds elapsed before he got his voice.

“How did it happen?”

“A messenger went to visit the cabin where they were being held,” said the radio voice. “The tracks told him what had happened. It seems that some outsider overcame our men.”

Kulden, thinking this over, lost color. His skin became doughlike. The next words from the radio did not help his state of mind.

“This one who attacked walked with tremendous strides, and the depths of the snowshoe prints show him to be a very heavy man,” came through the ether.

“Ugh!” Kulden gulped, and looked as if he were ill. The words had made him think of Doc Savage.

“We must act quickly,” he snapped.

There followed a volley of low, terse orders, an interchange of questions and answers.

Stilling the motor generator’s faint sound, Kulden left the radio room.

* * * * *

In their cell Renny, Long Tom and Johnny were in a huddle, heads close together, whispering. They had been talking things over and had decided it was time to do something. In the opposite corner, the four breeds stood and scowled at them.

Renny ambled over to the barred window.

Long Tom casually dropped a hand into his parka. The two lumps of frozen food reposed there; they had not melted. Without being observed by their

swarthy fellow—prisoners, Long Tom passed one of the hard lumps to the bony Johnny.

Then they went into action.

Long Tom drew his arm back and popped a breed between the eyes with the frozen food lump. The fellow collapsed in a heap. Johnny downed another in the same fashion.

Renny accounted for two more with mallet swings of his huge fists. The speed of the attack prevented an outcry.

Reviving a few minutes later, the dark-skinned quartet found themselves bound hand and foot with parts of their own clothing. Gags made out of their mittens distended their jaws.

The cell being virtually invulnerable, the outer air extremely cold, there was no guard at the door. The Mounted Policeman had taken the precaution of locking up all snowshoes. Without these, the prisoners, even if they escaped, could not get far. No noise from the cell had carried to a Mounted ear.

Renny seated himself on the chest of the most cowardly-looking breed, and from his own pocket extracted a coin—a silver half dollar.

Before the eyes of his captive, Renny calmly pinched the coin between a thumb and forefinger, and folded it neatly. It was an exhibition of incredible strength; it impressed the breed. He began to tremble.

Renny removed the gag, but kept a huge hand ready to prevent the fellow from crying out for help.

“Do you know where Doc Savage is?” Renny demanded.

The other could have denied any knowledge of the bronze man, and Renny would have believed him, but the fellow was frightened into speaking what he thought was the truth.

“Bronze man dead, m’sieu’,” he whimpered.

“Holy cow!” Renny thumped. “I don’t believe it!”

“Stroam is say zat,” insisted the other desperately.

“Do you know Stroam?” Renny rumbled.

The other maintained silence.

“Spit it out, you lardy lunk!” Renny boomed. “Who is Stroam?”

The breed rolled his eyes. “Yo’ turn me loose. Me, I tell yo’ then.”

Renny’s long face was grim justice itself. “You’ll tell me anyway.”

The breed’s eyes sought the far corners of the room. “Non! Me, I fear to tell.”

* * * * *

Renny lifted his enormous fists. But instead of striking with them, Renny eyed the fists. A strange and vacant expression overspread his long features. He scowled; then shut his eyes and opened them. He rubbed a hand against his forehead, and swayed a little as if dizzy.

Back of him, Johnny likewise looked befuddled.

“My head—I feel—superamalgamated,” Johnny mumbled.

Long Tom had been hunkered down on the floor. Attempting to straighten now, he nearly fell. Great effort was required to maintain his balance. Staggering to the window, he looked out.

“It’s coming!” he shrieked suddenly.

“What——” Renny tried to get up, but could not.

“The thing that’s getting us!” Long Tom tried to point through the window. The effort overbalanced him, and he fell heavily.

“Something—you can’t see—is getting us——” Renny thumped cavernously.

In an adjacent portion of the post, Midnat D’Avis heard Long Tom’s loud screech. She, too, was feeling strangely. She had been waiting for Captain

Stonefelt to appear and say he was ready to accompany her to the plane for her credentials.

Her head lolled, although she tried to hold it straight. Her struggle to leave the chair resulted only in depositing her on the floor. Her eyes closed—and remained so.

A great quiet descended upon the Mounted Police post.

CHAPTER 22. CORPSE PLANE

Doc Savage's party—Monk, Ham, Ben Lane, and the six prisoners—were near the end of the long mush back to the Snow Mountain Post.

Ben Lane, on the sled, said little. When he did speak, it was with a dry humor which seemed unaffected by the agony he must have been suffering.

"I forgot something!" he called.

"What?" Doc Savage queried. Doc had relieved Monk at the gee pole of the sled.

"I neglected to tell you how I learned Stroam was on his way to New York to investigate you," Ben Lane explained. "You see, I was keeping an eye on this Kulden. I didn't have anything to warrant having him arrested. So I just shadowed him. I heard him using the post radio."

"He had access to it?" Doc demanded.

"He sneaked in. He seemed to be an excellent radio operator. He radio-phoned a message to be transmitted to the man Mahal in New York. Immediately I got into the radio room myself and sent the message to Midnat D'Avis, asking her to pick up the trail at Mahal's place in New York."

"How did you come to pick Midnat D'Avis?"

"I visited Toronto when I was sounding out metal companies on benlanium, and saw her name in a newspaper. She had just solved a case. I happened to remember her name."

With seeming ease, Doc lifted the sled bodily over a fallen log. "There is another point: how did Stroam learn that you intended to appeal to me?"

"That, I don't know," Ben Lane replied. "I told Captain Stonefelt. Somebody must have been eavesdropping when I did. I think Stroam had me shadowed a lot of the time."

The six prisoners plodded ahead sullenly, breaking trail. They were lagging.

Monk ambled up beside them, long arms a-swing.

"Hump along, you mugs, or you'll get your ribs kicked in," he said fiercely.

"I wonder what became of my sword cane," Ham complained. He was seldom without his weapon. Now, he missed it.

It was very cold. Not a breath of wind stirred. A snowshoe rabbit, frightened up ahead of them, fled in a small maelstrom of snow. An owl hooted faintly. They crossed tracks of caribou.

The snow, made brittle by the intense cold, gave forth gritty grunts each time it was stepped upon. The sled runners screamed softly in the frigid air.

Then they sighted the lighted windows of the police post. From the chimney, blue smoke stood up straight in the sky, like fuzzy yarn invisibly suspended.

Their sled dogs barked and yipped; but strangely enough, there came no answering canine call from the post. Drawing closer, they noticed something peculiar.

The Mounted Police dogs cowered in their stockade, whimpering.

"Something is wrong here," Doc Savage said evenly.

* * * * *

The bronze giant glided ahead. His flake-gold eyes probed, searching for something physical to explain the terror which obviously gripped the sled huskies.

About the post, nothing stirred; no policeman appeared. There was only the whimpering of the weirdly terrified dogs.

The bronze man stepped out of his snowshoe webs and entered the post. He came first to the long barracks room, with its bunks, its neat uniforms on hangers and in duffle chests. On a table was a pair of snowshoes in the process of being re-strung.

The place held no policemen.

Doc tried other rooms—the kitchen, the radio room, Captain Stonefelt's office. In the latter place he noted the numerous paper sheets which Captain Stonefelt had covered with circles.

“Who around here had the absent-minded habit of drawing circles?” he queried.

“Captain Stonefelt,” explained Monk, who had noted the officer's addiction.

Doc Savage went to a window and stood motionless, staring out into the chill.

So softly that it was almost imperceptible at first, the air became filled with an exotic, melodious trilling. Fantastic, defying analysis, the eerie note came and ebbed, came again, and finally sank away, as if absorbed completely by the nothingness from which it had come.

Ben Lane had hobbled inside. Hearing the unusual sound, he was baffled. Recollection that he had heard it before, back at the prison cabin, came to him.

“What was that?” he asked.

Monk nodded at Doc, conveying wordlessly that the trilling sound was a thing the bronze man made unconsciously. But Monk, too, was wondering what it was that had caused Doc to make the sound.

“Something up, Doc?” he queried.

Doc Savage did not reply. He swung out, and around to the prison cells. The door of the one which had held Renny, Long Tom, and Johnny, gaped open. Only emptiness was inside.

Producing his flashlight, which had no batteries that might have frozen in the intense cold, Doc Savage began a search of the surroundings.

Monk, worriment on his simian features, muttered, “Say, what's happened around here? Where is everybody? And where's Habeas Corpus?”

“Call him,” Doc suggested.

“Habeas!” Monk howled, his usually small voice raised to a forlorn bellow.

From within the post came a faint grunt.

Monk called again.

Then, from around the corner of a door, Habeas poked an uneasy snout and a pair of winglike ears. Squealing, apparently satisfied at seeing his master, the pig bounded for Monk.

Monk, knowing Habeas, understood what his actions meant.

“The pig’s scared stiff!” mumbled the homely chemist.

* * * * *

Doc Savage was a man who possessed faculties and abilities far beyond those of others. There was no mystery about this. Exercises, two intensive hours of them each day, had given him his unusual powers.

Portions of the daily two-hour routine were devoted to muscular development. Other parts of the routine, in which special apparatus of a scientific nature was utilized, had developed his hearing, his sense of touch, his olfactory organs. Intricate calculations in mathematics, done mentally, developed concentration. He had schooled himself in observation, and in powers of memory.

All of the bronze man’s unique skill went into his scrutiny of the Snow Mountain Mounted Post and its environs.

“What do you think, Doc?” Monk asked finally.

The man of bronze did not reply immediately. His parka hood was thrown back; his hands bare. He seemed impervious to the cold. At last he spoke.

“Another mystery on the snow.”

Surprise spurted breath steam from Monk’s lips. “Huh?”

“Certain Mounted Policemen left the post, probably to search for you and Ham,” Doc elaborated. “The officers wear a snowshoe woven in a particular style. A pair of them, partially threaded, are in the barracks room. That identifies their tracks. But the others, who remained behind, have mysteriously vanished.”

Doc moved around, eyes searching, and indicated a small moccasin print.

“A woman showed up at the post. Midnat D’Avis.”

Ben Lane, listening, was struck with astonishment. “How do you know it was Midnat D’Avis?”

“She has a short, mincing walk,” Doc informed him. “And the moccasin indentations correspond to the size shoes she would wear.”

Ben Lane seemed only half convinced. “If she limped or something, I could understand it. But the tracks look like any other woman’s to me.”

Doc Savage did not go further into the matter of footprints. It might have taken some little time to convince Ben Lane that the bronze man, thanks to his uncanny powers of observation, could glean much information where others could see nothing of interest. To Doc, footprints differed almost as greatly as the features of the people who made them.

In some magical fashion, those at the post had vanished, and the agency which had wafted them away had struck terror into Habeas Corpus and the sled huskies.

Ham had found his sword cane in the post. He switched it about violently and scowled.

“Blast it, Doc,” he growled, “this is as mysterious as Ben Lane’s camp!”

“It couldn’t have been a dirigible that carried ’em away,” Monk grumbled. “A blimp would have to drop a lot of ballast to compensate that weight. And there ain’t no sign of ballast having fallen on the snow.”

Doc Savage indicated the trail which the four breeds had made.

“We’ll follow the tracks,” he said. “They were strangers.”

* * * * *

They took Ben Lane along.

“I know I’ll slow you up,” said the man with the acid-eaten face. “But I’ll be jiggered if I like to be left behind. There’s something uncanny about these disappearances. It gets under my skin.”

They exchanged the Yukon-type sled for a basket sled in which the wounded man would be more comfortable. Doc added a small pack of food.

They set out, retracing the trail of the four breeds. Ben Lane did not prove much of a hindrance. The dogs—they had borrowed a fresh team of the Mounted huskies—readily drew his weight.

A quarter of a mile from the post, Doc indicated a discovery to the others.

“Midnat D’Avis seems to have followed the four breeds to the post. Note how her tracks cover theirs. She wears the tracker type of snowshoes, the form adopted by snowshoe clubs in the vicinity of Toronto. The others are wearing the Indian style, which is much broader.”

Ben Lane, listening, eyed the bronze man thoughtfully. He was beginning to realize that this big fellow of metal possessed a knowledge which touched all things.

“A walking encyclopedia, that’s what he is,” Ben Lane reflected silently. “And what muscles!”

They crossed a hill, another, then traversed a wide flat where small hills made nodular humps. Cottonwoods and willows, leafless, fringed a creek which was frozen solid. Ptarmigan flushed up from a clump of Arctic sage.

They mushed over another hill.

“There’s her plane.” Ham pointed with his sword cane.

Midnat D’Avis’ ship was a cabin job—round of fuselage, tapering of wing. The single big motor was speed-cowled.

“It’s fast,” Monk offered.

“It had to be, to get her up here this quick,” Ham agreed.

It was significant that these two were not handing each other nasty digs. The uncanniness of what they had found back at the post—the disappearances of the men—was heavy in their thoughts.

What they found in the plane did not improve their state of mind.

Doc reached the craft first. He looked in—and kept on staring, perfectly motionless. The trilling sound, which was his particular property, trebled up faintly, like a far-away, half-lost lament.

Monk came alongside, stood on tiptoe and peered in. He sagged back suddenly and turned away. No breath steam came from his lips.

“What is it?” Ham demanded.

“The plane is full of dead men,” Monk said strangely.

CHAPTER 23. THE WHITE TERROR

“Renny—Long Tom—Johnny!” Ham yelled shrilly. “Is it them?”

Monk shuddered. “There’s four of them. They’re lyin’ so you can’t see their faces.”

Doc Savage opened the cabin door. He moved the bodies until their features were distinguishable. The cadavers made clumping sounds, like logs of wood, when he shifted them, for they were frozen.

Stepping back, the bronze man lifted Ben Lane and helped him to peer into the plane. “Know them?” he asked.

“A Mounted Policeman—three natives!” Ben Lane gasped.

“Know them?” Doc repeated.

“They are the men who started for the railroad with me,” Ben Lane cried.

Monk, overcoming his first shock, made a second scrutiny. “Look how they were killed,” he gulped.

Not a pleasant sight—this one to which Monk had called attention. The dead men were laid open in great rips. They were deep, those gashes. They cleft through bone, muscles, and internal organs.

Ben Lane suddenly began to tremble. The tremors shook him from head to foot.

“Those wounds——” he choked. “That story Kulden told—about something invisible devouring them. Those holes look like the teeth marks of some gigantic beast.”

Doc helped the wounded man back to the sled, bundled him in the basket with furs, saying nothing the while. Then he circled the plane.

Monk started after Doc, as if to corroborate the findings. What they found seemed to make him more miserable than ever. There were no departing tracks—other than those made by themselves and Midnat D’Avis.

“The bodies must have been—in the plane when she came,” Monk said jerkily.

In the sled, Ben Lane’s teeth made jerky clickings. “I really know very little of Midnat D’Avis. As I told you, I remembered her name from a story I read in a Toronto paper.”

“Do you think she’s connected with—Stroam?” Ham asked, apparently to himself.

No one answered him.

Doc Savage closed the plane door, making sure the latch caught. Then he straightened out the dog team.

“Mush!” he commanded.

The huskies twitched against the traces, showing anxiety to leave the plane and its macabre contents.

They returned to the trail of the four breeds. It led westward two miles, and terminated at a ramshackle cabin.

The interior of this structure held cooking necessities—flour, beans, salt. A caribou haunch dangled from the roof peak. There were furs—not many of them—which appeared to have been caught within recent weeks.

There was no stove in the cabin. Cooking had been done in a makeshift fireplace. There was no one present.

The one modern touch was a compact, portable radio transmitter—and–receiver. This was of low power, operated on short wave–length, and had simplified controls.

“Works on voice alone,” Doc stated, after an inspection. “Simple enough that a baby could operate it. Throw one switch, and it’s ready to go.”

The bronze man experimented with the set. Then he spoke into the transmitter.

“Stroam,” he called.

Perhaps a minute elapsed. Then a low hiss denoted the carrier waves of a sending station. A voice—the shrill, querulous tones of Stroam—came from the portable speaker.

“You are about at the end of your string, bronze man,” it jeered.

Then the carrier-wave hiss expired.

* * * * *

Three hours later, Doc Savage and his party were approaching their speed plane. They went up the river, watching their dog team closely to guard against the huskies’ barking. Scrutiny from a near-by hilltop had shown that Mounted Policemen, sent out to hunt for Ham and Monk, had returned to the post. Doc did not want to draw their attention.

“You said it,” Monk had agreed. “We’d have a tall time explaining things now. Anyway, we’ve got to clear this up or they’ll grab Midnat D’Avis for murder.”

“Maybe she did have something to do with it,” Ham snapped.

“Do you think so?” Monk scowled.

“I don’t know,” Ham said uneasily. “I hate to think so.”

The plane furnished them with fresh shocks.

“The fuel tanks!” Monk exploded.

The big plane carried its fuel in wing receptacles. These had been ripped open in enormous slashes and jabs, some large enough to admit a man’s foot.

“That could have been done with an axe,” Ham declared, then halted, and his eyes popped. “But there are no tracks!”

This was true. The earlier windstorm had smoothed the snow around the plane. It was absolutely bare of indentation.

Monk pointed at the gasoline. "The fuel was spilled *since* the windstorm, that's obvious."

Doc Savage, after scrutinizing the holes in the plane, clambered into the cabin. His equipment, contained in metal boxes of light, stout construction, was intact. Each box bore a number. Doc selected two, carried them out and loaded them on the dog sled.

Monk pointed at the spilled fuel, at the holes in the wing tanks.

"This thing is beginning to get me," he puzzled. "Once more, you'll notice that the snow around here bears no sign of dirigible ballast."

"Get your portable laboratory out of the plane," Doc directed.

Monk complied; this case also was added to the sled load.

"Feel equal to more traveling?" Doc asked Ben Lane.

"Sure, if it'll help any." The discoverer of benlanium managed a faint note of cheer.

"We're going after Stroam," Doc told him.

"Then I'm with you."

"Where is your mountain of benlanium?"

"Due north," said Ben Lane. "You can't miss it. It's the blackest mountain in the region. The black color is caused by an oxide of my benlanium metal."

Doc mushed the husky team. The dogs, freshened by the short breather, set out at a goodly clip. The party went north and kept moving fast, until the dogs began to pant and lag.

Doc called a rest halt. Then he called to Monk.

"Get your laboratory, Monk."

"Huh?" A look of surprise was on Monk's face.

“We’re going to do some high-speed analyzing,” Doc informed him.

* * * * *

Monk carried his case of apparatus to a near-by drift and, wading and kicking and stamping, made himself a place to work. He opened his portable laboratory. It required some one skilled in chemistry to realize its completeness, its infinite compactness. Such an individual would have been astounded.

From his clothing Doc Savage produced a flat case which, once opened, yielded several bottles.

“At Ben Lane’s camp—where I met Kulden—I took samples of the snow, the air, and pieces of outer tree bark,” the bronze man stated. “The snow is now melted, of course, but that makes little difference.”

“I’m to analyze it?” Monk demanded.

“Exactly.”

The homely chemist went to work. Secretly, he wondered why Doc did not conduct the analysis himself. The giant of bronze, Monk was not ashamed to admit, was his superior as a chemist. Doc had studied that profession intensively, just as he had pursued many other lines of knowledge.

Doc Savage, however, wished to question Ben Lane.

“Describe exactly the contour of the region around your mountain of benlanium,” he directed.

The man with the acid-marred face complied. The mountain, he explained, was surrounded by some extremely rough terrain—gullies, canyons, unscalable cliffs.

“That’s one reason I didn’t locate claims,” he added. “The mountain is not easy to get to. Moreover, there are few prospectors, this not being a region noted for mineral wealth.”

“Any bad canyons to cross?”

“Well, one. It swings around to the eastward, and is narrow and pretty deep. But we can make it.”

With a noisy grunt, the homely Monk extinguished the flashlight which had furnished illumination for his work, and folded up his laboratory. He had completed the analysis with miraculous speed. Monk possessed a small device perfected by himself, which, utilizing a combination of electro-chemistry properties, enabled him to ascertain the composition of any substance almost instantaneously. This device had a big brother which the more learned chemists of the industrial world had begun lately to employ.

“Argon, krypton, oxide of hydrogen, xenon, carbon dioxide,” Monk said, and took a fresh breath. Then he launched into a more involved stream of chemical terminology, naming what he had found.

Ham, a bystander, wrinkled his brow perplexedly. Chemistry had been one of his courses in college, but he was quite sure he had never before heard at least two-thirds of the words Monk was using.

“Excellent!” Doc said, when Monk had finished.

Monk grinned widely. “You say that stuff I analyzed came from around Ben Lane’s camp?”

“Right.”

“Then I think I understand the solution to these mysteries on the snow,” Monk declared. “The analysis furnished the clue.”

“Let’s get moving,” Doc suggested. “If we’re fortunate, we’ll find Stroom near the mountain of benlanium.”

* * * * *

Before mushing the dogs, Doc Savage opened the two cases he had removed from the plane. One of these held stubby repeating shotguns. These differed from the regular sporting-goods-store weapon in that breech and barrel parts were of singularly stout construction.

The second case held shells to fit these weapons. There were ball cartridges, gas shells, shot shells, flare shells, explosive bullets—ammo for all purposes. Each row of shells bore its distinctive identification mark.

The shotguns were charged with shells which the bronze man selected. The case did not hold many of the particular cartridges which he chose.

“There seemed little likelihood of a need for these missiles here in the north,” he stated. “As a result, we have only a few. Try to make each shot count.”

Doc distributed the shotguns.

Ben Lane, who was retaining his strength in remarkable fashion, balanced the shotgun across his fur-swathed chest. “I hope the target’s big enough for me to hit,” he said.

“It will be,” Doc assured him.

They went forward. The windstorm had not endured long enough to pack the snow, hence it was necessary to trail-break through drifts. The dogs panted and tugged, taking the drifts at a run.

The pig, Habeas Corpus, had been riding the sled with Ben Lane. He bounded out, but after a few minutes of hard going through the snow, decided to clamber back into the sledge.

A marsh studded with brambles made hard going, although its quaggy surface was frozen.

Ahead, a black mountain finally reared up.

“Benlanium,” said Ben Lane, pointing at the upthrust of earth. “A stupendous deposit.”

They began to encounter hills, not large, but abrupt and difficult to scale. Soon it became necessary to work around these. Spruces became stunted, then almost non-existent.

To the north, the Aurora Borealis had lost some of its eerie splendor. It was being faded by a growing rosiness in the southern sky.

“Dawn approaching,” Monk hazarded.

“Yeah—the beginning of our three-hour day,” Ben Lane agreed.

A few moments after that exchange, Doc Savage said sharply, “Quick! The rocks to the left. Into them!”

The others had heard nothing, seen nothing. Ham turned the dog team hastily, guiding them into a cluster of rocks which had been wind-sculptured by countless northern gales. They crouched there, wondering at Doc’s sudden command.

“Stroam must have had a lookout on the mountain,” Doc Savage said quietly. “They’re coming for us.”

The others, with senses less keen than those of the bronze man, had not detected danger. They listened, but could hear nothing. But the dogs began to lift their heads, bristles erect on the napes of their necks.

Habeas Corpus thrust his head out of the sled, huge ears distended. He emitted an uneasy grunt or two.

“Directly north,” Doc rapped. “Watch!”

Monk did so, and his little eyes suddenly began to protrude.

“Lookit!” he cried in wonderment. “A small blimp!”

CHAPTER 24. THE UPSET

The airship was painted an unrelieved white. The bag, alone, was not of alabaster hue, but the gondola and engines, even the dangling hand lines, as well.

The exhaust stacks of the motor—the power plants numbered two, one on either side of the car—were efficiently silenced. A faint buzz was the only sound the ghostly ship made, and that could not be detected by normal ears at a distance of a quarter of a mile.

“The white color blends with the snow on the mountains,” Ham said grimly. “That explains why it hasn’t been seen.”

“But they have to drop ballast!” Ben Lane exclaimed. “Where does it go to?”

“Monk’s chemical analysis answered that question,” Doc Savage told him. “For ballast, they use a liquid chemical mixture which, when poured out, becomes a gas. The samples from your camp site showed presence of deposits, invisible to the eyes, made by such a gas. The blimp explains the mystery attacks.”

No more was said. Shotguns poised, they watched the blimp.

The craft was of light construction, the gondola in sections, capable of being quickly dismantled. The gas bag, having no metal framework in contrast to a dirigible proper, could be deflated and hurriedly packed.

“Stroam probably brought it north to use in a secret hunt for my benlanium deposit,” muttered Ben Lane.

Monk cocked his shotgun. “What do we aim at, Doc—the gondola?”

“The gas bag!” Doc replied.

The blimp swept toward them. There was an uncanniness in its sepulchral quiet. Mere sight of the strange airship seemed to create again some of the

horror which had come with the discovery of its earlier depredations. Its presence, its silence, smacked of fresh mystery over the snow.

The blimp slowed, began to hover motionless.

A man leaned out of the gondola—a breed! He slanted a rifle, aimed and fired. With a coughing sound, his bullet lost itself in the near-by snow. Echoes rebounded, whooping.

“They started it,” Doc said, quietly enough. “Turn loose, brothers! The gas bag!”

The bronze man aimed, put weight on the trigger, and the reënforced shotgun made an unexpectedly loud noise. Muscular giant though the bronze man was, the recoil jarred him.

Ham, firing a split-second later, was upset completely; Monk grimaced at the terrific kick of his own gun.

“Golly!” he gulped. “Cannons!”

Ben Lane shot, and the shock was almost too much for him. He lay back, gasping.

In the blimp’s white gondola a man leaned out, peered upward, then began cursing at what he saw.

“*Sacre bleu!*” he shrieked. “They are cut ze bag to pieces!”

He had not exaggerated. The missiles the shotgun fired with such pronounced recoil were diminutive chain shot—two blobs of metal connected by a saw-link chain of tough alloy. They opened ragged apertures each time they struck.

The ghost blimp began sinking, to the profound horror of the crew. Frantic hands on the rudder wheel sought to sheer the ship to one side. The move succeeded partially, but it became obvious the craft would strike within a hundred and fifty yards of Doc and his men.

Doc opened the ammo chest on the sledge. A fresh type of shell for the shotguns came out.

“Gas,” he said. “Let them have it as soon as they land.”

His simian face all a-grin, Monk charged his gun.

Doc Savage whirled abruptly to look behind them. He stared perhaps ten seconds. Then, very slowly, he laid his shotgun in the snow.

Monk glanced around. He, too, deposited his weapon in the white flakes.

* * * * *

Mounted Policemen, red coats showing inside their parkas, had crept close under cover of the blimp fight. They had stubby service rifles leveled. Hard resolve sat on their features. They were in no mood to be trifled with.

“Luckily, we decided to take a look at your plane,” the Mounted spokesman growled. “We found your trail and followed it. We saw what just happened. Attempt to kill those in the airship can be added to the charge of murdering Ben Lane.”

“You numskulls!” Ben Lane shouted weakly. “I’m Ben Lane!”

The officer showed teeth in a cold grin. “We’ll give you a chance to prove that. Drop your gun!”

Came a crash, a thump, shouts and swear words intermingling, as the blimp struck. It lay wallowing sluggishly, bag wrinkling and collapsing slowly. The human cargo scrambled out from under the fabric folds.

Quickly hissing words, the breed who seemed to be in command, stopped the crew. They conferred in a whispering group.

“Watch that gang!” Doc warned the Mounted officers. “They’re Stroam’s men.”

The policeman scowled doubtfully, then yanked off his fur parka, in order that his scarlet uniform coat might show more plainly.

“We’re Mounted men!” he yelled at those near the blimp. “You fellows come over here. Mind you, no guns!”

Stroam's henchmen—Doc held no doubt about their being such, although he had seen none of them before—hesitated. More whispering ensued. Then the group approached.

"They're up to something," Doc rapped. "Keep an eye on them."

"Quiet," he was ordered. "We have an eye on you, too, bronze man."

Doc Savage had his hands up. He shifted three paces to one side, and stood beside the sled which held the metal equipment cases. Small lights stirred in his flake-gold eyes, a tiny luminance which might have come from the beginning of the short snow-country day.

The redcoats gave Doc Savage's party most of their attention. This signified no lack of astuteness on their part. Monk and Ham stood accused by Kulden as murderers. They were escaped prisoners. Ben Lane claimed to be a man whom Kulden had said was dead. And Doc's group had been caught shooting down the blimp.

They reasoned that Doc's gang were the malefactors. And that thought was their downfall.

Stroam's men came within a score of yards. Not all were breeds. Two, who seemed to be Europeans, had faces showing intelligence in a ratty way. Grease-stained garments marked them as pilot and mechanic of the blimp.

Forty feet distant, they all moved in concert. Their hands snapped under parkas, brought out metallic canisters and flung them. The containers opened in the air, thanks to some trigger device. Vile-tinted liquid sprayed out with each gyration.

Rid of their surprise missiles, Stroam's men whirled and ran.

The mounted policemen shouted angrily. Three fired their rifles, dropping with leg wounds two of the breeds.

The vile liquid had turned into a colorless vapor. This descended upon the policemen. They began toppling over.

* * * * *

Monk and Ham leaped to Ben Lane, scooped him up, and tried to escape by running. But they had no chance. Even if they had had Doc Savage's superior speed, they could not have gotten clear. All three folded down.

Habeas Corpus ran to them, squealing, then collapsed.

Doc Savage alone moved with a purpose that seemed other than a wild attempt at escape. He swooped upon the sled near which he stood, and wrenched out an equipment chest. With this, he dived headlong into the nearest snowdrift.

There was a flurry of white flakes, then he vanished entirely beneath the drift surface.

Stroam's men stopped at some distance.

"Yo' sure ze gas not reach 'ere, m'sieu's?" one muttered dubiously. "She got no smell, so we not know until too late."

"Non. Not zis far."

They waited. The collapse of the Mounted officers brought grins from some—and curses from those who had stopped bullets with their legs.

"Shoot ze damn redcoats!" one of the latter shouted.

"Non," refused the spokesman. "Why shoot zem now? Let Stroam make decide. Maybe he get ze big idea. Killing redcoats bad business."

Some ten minutes elapsed, during which a sharp watch was kept on the drift where Doc Savage had disappeared. The bronze man had not shown himself.

"Damn!" exploded a man. "Ze gas zat mak' yo' sleep, reckon she is soak down in ze snow?"

Nobody seemed to know about that. Soon they concluded the vapor had dispersed, and they ran forward.

"Remember," yelled the chief. "Yo' not shoot a damn one! Let Stroam mak' the decide on what to do."

“How about ze bronze one?”

“If he be unconscious, we tak’ him to Stroam. If not, we shoot hell out of him.”

They found Doc in the snowdrift into which he had dived, his giant, metal-like frame limp. They howled in delight at the sight. Two backed off and kicked the bronze figure to show how they felt.

Doc Savage did not stir at the impact of the feet. Only regular breathing of cold-steam from his lips showed that he still was alive.

“Bon!” a breed grinned. “Now we use zat radio t’ing in ze airship to ’ave Stroam sen’ us help for haul these fellair to ze headquarter’.”

Habeas Corpus was lifted, inspected curiously, and remarks were made concerning his extreme homeliness. Then he was tossed at a snowdrift, into which his sharp-nosed form disappeared like a bullet.

CHAPTER 25. DEATH PLAN

The pilot and mechanic of the wrecked blimp galloped off to see if the radio apparatus in the craft would still function. Upon reaching the collapsed mass of the airship and inspecting the radio, they called back it would work.

One breed thought of something. “*Sacre bleu!* Ze bronze man ’ave box w’en he jump into snow. Where it go?”

Much kicking about in the snow ensued, and they turned up the box finally. Curious, they opened the metal container, and there came to view many contrivances which had been with the shotguns. The intricate nature of the devices befuddled the examiners.

“Damn bronze man’s box of magic, *oui!*” was their decision.

Pilot and mechanic returned from the wrinkled white hump of the blimp—it now looked like a huge, snow-hued prune—and brought with them the handling ropes, which they had cut off, and verbal information that they had contacted Stroam, and that men were now on their way to help carry in the prisoners.

The handling ropes were cut into lengths for binding Doc and the others. Upon the bronze man a particularly thorough job was done, numerous turns being taken.

A breed, pinching Doc’s frame, and finding it rock-solid, opined, “He ver’ strong, lak *boeuf*,” and added a few extra knots.

Doc gave no sign of life.

Stroam’s other men arrived shortly, mushing with dog sleds, and the prisoners were loaded without delay. Stroam, it seemed, wished to have the prisoners at once, and the salvaging of the white blimp could be left for later.

The mush to headquarters was marked by a lack of conversation. Breath was needed for traveling in the deep snow.

Headquarters proved to be two large cabins in the very canyon which Ben Lane had indicated to Doc Savage might be difficult to cross. The structures showed by the newness of ax marks that they had been built within the last few weeks. There were no chimneys, and the cabins stood below a great sloping cliff. A radio aerial was slung above the rooftops.

Obviously, the cabins were intended to attract no notice. The lack of chimneys hinted at gasoline stoves for cooking and heat.

The cabins were close together, with an alleylike space between them which had been closed off with walls of spruce poles, and on which had been nailed bark, crudely hacked slabs, and even a few caribou hides. The penlike enclosure thus made served as a sort of hangar for the strange white blimp.

There were two planes in the enclosure. One, large and slow, must have been used as a transport; the other, a smaller craft with lines denoting tremendous speed, was undoubtedly the ship in which Stroam had made his race northward from New York.

"Stroam is mak' headquarters close to benlanium mountain an' not know it," grinned a man.

"He ver' well know it now," chuckled another.

"Mush, yo' barking devils!" one yelled at the dogs.

They pulled up before the less pretentious of the two cabins. Here, the prisoners were unloaded and taken inside.

Bound figures were already arrayed along the wall.

* * * * *

Renny, Long Tom, Johnny and the two Mounted Policemen from the Snow Mountain Post were in the assortment. There was no sign of Captain Stonefelt, nor of dark-eyed Midnat D'Avis.

Renny groaned rumblingly at sight of Doc. "Holy cow!"

Gaunt Johnny said he would be super-amalgamated, and Long Tom wrenched futilely at the ropes which secured him. The two redcoats stared unwinkingly.

The breeds stacked the new captives against the wall, then went over their bonds to make sure they were solid. Once more, a man was impressed with Doc's hardness of muscle.

"Thees man lak a rock," he muttered.

Kulden, smug, and swaggering of step, put in an appearance.

"Stroam wants to see you mugs," he said. "He's got an idea that will take care of everything. Post a guard outside."

"What about ze two zat redcoats shoot in leg?"

"Stroam'll fix them up."

The men filed outside, closing the door as they departed. It became very dark within the cabin, for there were only two openings, which served as windows, over which was stretched caribou stomach tissue. Moreover, it was exceedingly gloomy here under the shadow of the cliff.

Renny groaned. "I wonder how long it'll be before Doc comes out of it?"

"Depends on how long ago he was gassed," Long Tom offered. "The stuff kept us under for about two hours."

Renny opened his mouth to make a further comment, and was dumbfounded when his own cavernous tones—or it seemed they were his own—came thumping from a spot in the pitch dark several feet away.

"Lay off the talk, you guys!" said the voice.

Renny wet his lips, wondered if his ears had turned practical jokers—then suddenly understood. Doc Savage! The bronze man had spoken.

The metallic giant was a master of voice mimicry. He was directing them to remain quiet, and using Renny's voice so that the guards outside would not suspect he was conscious.

Doc Savage silently stood erect from the sitting position in which Stroam's hirelings had placed him. At no time on the long trek to the headquarters, or before, during the gas attack in the snow, had the bronze man been unconscious.

Diving into the snowdrift during the gas attack, he had plucked a mask from the metal equipment case, donned it, and only removed it when the vapor was dissipated and he had heard Stroam's breeds coming to investigate.

Their words that the captives were not to be slain immediately had moved Doc to pretend unconsciousness, so he had thrust the gas mask away, knowing that to return it to the case might arouse suspicion. Temporarily, he knew, there was no danger. He wanted to find his companions.

In tying Doc, the breeds thought they had done a good job. They would have been thoroughly shocked at what happened now, for the bronze man had kept his great muscles tense during the tying, and the ropes were actually only moderately snug. He twisted and squirmed; coiling thews rose in great mounds, like cats arching their backs under his bronze skin. A knot gave, a rope parted, and other strands slipped.

Thirty seconds after his effort began, Doc quietly lowered the coils to the dirt floor and stepped clear.

Then he listened intently.

* * * * *

Outside, snow squeaked as the guards stamped about, keeping warm. These sounds, small as they were, echoed back from the cliff. From the other cabin drifted a mumble-jumble of talk noises, none of it understandable.

A wolf howled somewhere in the canyon, and that unholy note was unnaturally loud, thanks to the towering walls.

To Renny, Long Tom, then Johnny, Doc moved in turn, acquainting them with his freedom in a voice which could be heard outside, then untying their bonds.

Monk, Ham, and the redcoats were also freed, although the latter, except for the two Mounties who had been seized with Renny's party, were still in a doped sleep.

"Ten or fifteen minutes more should see them awakening," Doc breathed. "That is, if the gas effects last two hours, as you said."

"Two hours is right," Long Tom agreed.

"Where are Captain Stonefelt and the girl?"

"They were taken away—for questioning, Stroam's rats told us," Renny answered, experiencing trouble in keeping his deep rumble to a whisper.

"Where's Habeas?" asked a faint voice.

It was Monk. With his toughness of fibre, he had been first to awaken. Doc glided over to him.

"The pig was left behind in a snowdrift," he advised. "He'll be all right."

"Unless he freezes," Monk muttered uneasily. "Say, they must feel pretty sure of us, or they'd have us tied up."

"You were tied; I've just untied you. They don't know we're loose," Doc replied. "But we're a long ways from out of this, or taking care of Stroam."

Ham revived next, then the Mounted Policemen. One of the latter breathed an apology to Doc Savage.

"What jolly goats we turned out to be!" he declared.

"You fellows were doing your duty, and no higher compliment could be paid," Doc told him genuinely.

"You seem to be a man of miracles," murmured the cop. "You don't happen to have smuggled a gun in, eh?"

"They searched me," Doc advised. "But they neglected——"

He did not finish. From the direction of the other cabin a shrill sound piped, feminine and angry. It was Midnat D'Avis, and she cried out again.

Blows smacked; the squeaking of snow indicated a struggle.

A man was shouting wrathfully as well—and his voice was one entirely strange. They had not heard it before.

The sounds came closer. The girl and the man—the stranger—were being carried to the cabin, and fighting against it.

The door bar rattled, the panel came open—and Midnat D'Avis came flying across the threshold, propelled by angry arms.

A man was flung after her. He was a burly man, somewhat ruddy of countenance, with a prominent nose that was now streaming crimson, and pale blue eyes, one of which was swollen nearly shut. This was the individual whose voice had not been heard before.

He wore a regulation red Mounted Police coat, from which a sleeve had been ripped.

The door slammed quickly, Stroam's men not having seen, due to the darkness, that those inside were free of their tyings.

Midnat D'Avis cried out frantically.

"They have send a man up the cliff!" she shrilled. "He is to use dynamite, m'sieu's, to start avalanche that will bury this cabin so deeply it will never be discovered."

Outside, Kulden bellowed, "Grab your stuff and get away from the cabins! Stroam's orders! We're to move the planes, too."

* * * * *

Doc Savage was already at the door. He exerted pressure on it, but the timbers hardly shifted. He explored with sensitive finger tips, and knew instantly that the panel would defy even his tremendous muscles.

The windows got his attention next. He did not rupture the caribou tissue panels, for the openings were too small to pass even the smallest of the men in the cabin.

Midnat D'Avis cried, "The door! Try to smash it——"

“Get away from the door!” Doc ordered.

That was the first Midnat D’Avis knew of the bronze man’s presence, for the darkness in the cabin was dense. The quality of quiet strength in his voice caused her to go silent.

“M’sieur Savage—you here?” she said in a voice that held stark horror. “How awful!”

Not a man in the room, hearing her, but knew what her words meant. The young woman was in love with this mighty man of bronze. The fact throbbed in her voice. And the fact that he was in danger affected her even more profoundly than her own peril.

As Monk said in an aside to Ham, “Dog—gone it! She’s sure tumbled for Doc. She’s more worried about him than herself.”

Doc Savage himself said nothing. He had not missed the quality in the exquisite voice, and, although a light on his metallic features at that instant would have shown no expression, he was moved more than a little.

The bronze man sank to the floor, and pulled off one high moccasin, then the other. These lined, not with the usual sheepskin or rabbit fur, but with what might have seemed to an experienced northerner, somewhat inefficient felt.

But that felt possessed special qualities.

Doc picked the lining bodily from each moccasin. He dived to the door, twisting the linings together as he did so. By the time he reached the heavy door, he had a rope of felt perhaps two feet in length.

With stiffened fingers, he calked the felt rope under the bottom of the door. Then, moistening a finger tip on his lips, he dampened one end of the felt twist.

“Back!” he rapped, and pitched to the far side of the cabin.

The others followed him. Huddled against the wall, they watched the door.

First, their nostrils detected smoke scent, as of something burning. Then the end of the felt, where it had been moistened, began glowing redly. Finally, flame spurted out in a tiny tongue.

Instantly, there was a flash of such brilliance that their eyes ached for moments afterward. Concussions—a titanic slap of sound that seemed to smash air through their ear-drums, accompanied the gush of white.

The door was rent apart, ax-hewn timbers splitting as if lightning-struck. A full half of the panel slapped across the cabin; the rest went outdoors.



CHAPTER 26. HABEAS DOES A BIT

Doc Savage was through the door while splinters still boiled in the air.

Kulden stood a dozen feet to one side. He held a rifle, but it was loose in his hands, and he goggled, stupefied by the unexpectedness of the blast. He had no idea what had caused it.

Neither Kulden nor the others had the imagination to picture moccasins lined with a chemically-treated felt, which, when twisted together, made a high explosive akin to gun-cotton. They had relieved Doc of all fire-making implements—matches and the cigarette lighter which the bronze man always carried, although he never smoked.

That moisture applied to some chemicals would produce combustion was something they had forgotten, if they had ever studied chemistry.

Kulden's rifle started upward too late. Doc was upon him, a nemesis in bronze. Kulden felt the gun leave his clutch with an irresistible wrench.

Stroam's lieutenant was agile. He bounded backward, turning in mid-air, and fled.

Doc lunged for him, only to whip aside as a rifle barrel poked from a window of the other cabin and spat a clapping noise. Twisting, the man of bronze reversed his course and gained the shelter of the prison cabin.

Kulden popped into the structure which held his fellows—and Stroam.

Renny, Midnat D'Avis and the others were outside. The young woman kept her gaze on Doc with a fascinated steadiness, until, realizing she looked her emotions, she colored and glanced away.

"Keep behind the cabin and run!" Doc directed.

The others set off, except for Midnat D'Avis, who saw that Doc was remaining, and showed some vague intention of staying herself. Monk scooped her up and bore her away.

The rifle in the other cabin was rapping steadily. Orders for the breeds to get outside and fight were volleying, too, and they bore, in their high anger, a squeaky quality.

It was the voice of Stroam, although only vaguely like the artificial tones with which he had addressed Mahal in New York City.

Doc lunged around the cabin corner; his rifle whacked. There was no human target in sight, but one of the rifle barrels protruding from a window bent slightly under the impact of his jacketed slug. Considering that he was firing a strange weapon, it was not a bad shot.

The bronze man himself now retreated. He looked upward at the cliff face—and gave a terrific spring to one side. A bullet, striking about where he had stood, knocked up snow.

The man who had been dispatched up the cliff to start the avalanche, had sent the missile. Doc moved to snap lead back, but the other, a cautious soul, ducked from sight.

Doc continued his retreat.

In the cabin, Stroam still swore shrilly at his men trying to get them outdoors. But they had more conservative ideas.

“Zat bronze one, he could hit gnats on ze wing!” a breed wailed fearfully.

Doc kept a watch upward and soon saw something to warrant uneasiness; the man with the explosive was moving along the steep slope above, sheltered by the boulders and snow.

His purpose was plain. He intended to get into a position where he could hurl his dynamite, no doubt already capped and fused, down upon Doc and the others.

Doc lifted his rifle, but the other was sharp of eye and too quick, ducking among the many boulders which clung to the steep slope.

The canyon bed veered, and Doc, calculating swiftly, realized that the other man would head them off, since he had to traverse a shorter distance to get

around the angle. Doc and his party would be forced to go several yards beyond, to round an outthrust of stone.

Doc Savage halted, lifted his rifle and aimed deliberately. Long seconds elapsed before the shot came. Its echoes cackled and whooped in the canyon.

High above, at the spot where the man with the explosive was traveling, Doc's rifle bullet knocked a small boulder from its foundation of ice and snow.

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The boulder jumped downward. It knocked loose another stone, then a third, and these in turn dislodged others. Thus the avalanche started, slowly at first, with a few great rocks hopping along. These were joined by loose snow, more stones, and soon a great river of debris was flowing down the sharp slope.

The man with the explosive came into view, and his behavior was not what Doc had expected. The fellow might have escaped by turning back; the slide was ahead of him and not far off, and he could have escaped before it spread.

But he elected, in his bloodthirsty ferocity, to take the other chance: He tried to outrun the slide, to get ahead of it where he could use his explosive upon Doc Savage and the others. By doing that he committed suicide, in a manner of speaking.

Too late, the man saw that the slide was going to overhaul him. He spun, and endeavored madly to escape; but his very haste was his undoing, for he took fatal chances and soon lost his footing, after which he gyrated down the slope, keeping ahead of the slide.

The avalanche overhauled him and he sank beneath it, screeching as only a man can screech when he looks at death. He was soon lost to sight between the grisly, white, boulder-freckled quilt that was the slide.

Over the roar of the down-pouring snow and stone, Doc Savage lifted his voice.

“Stroam!” he yelled. “Run for it!”

Stroam and his men, thinking there was some trick in the bronze man’s warning, held to the cabin.

“Run!” Doc yelled at them.

Stroam’s men comprehended their danger, for the slide was bearing down upon their shelter. The doors burst open and they sprang out, eyes wild, yelling in sudden terror.

Kulden appeared first, then the breeds, then—Captain Stonefelt!

Captain Stonefelt was not bound or gagged, and he ran with the others. More swarthy men, among whom were the blimp pilot and the engineer, brought up the rear. No one other than these came from the cabin.

Like dirty sugar with an admixture of dark beans and peas, except that the picture was magnified a thousandfold, the slide poured upon the fleeing men. They had delayed too long.

In the space of a finger snap they were inundated. One moment their shrieks of fear piped out, remarkably like sheep bleating, and the next instant that sound was gone, and there was audible only the mammoth grumble of moving snow and stone. The men had died, but had been permitted, before the end came, a few moments in contemplation of death.

* * * * *

Doc Savage, retreating swiftly to escape the outermost edge of the slide, joined his companions. He found that Ben Lane had collapsed from exhaustion, to which was added the agony of his acid-eaten features.

Lane’s thoughts, however, were not for his own condition, for he stared blankly at Doc, then spoke in a voice which held an undertone of horror.

“Captain Stonefelt,” he said. “Poor fellow!”

“Yeah,” the homely Monk put in, small-voiced. “They must’ve turned him loose and let him run for it with them, but he died with the rest. That’s tough. He didn’t deserve it.”

“That depends on how you look at it,” Doc said dryly. Then the bronze man turned to eye the stranger—the man who wore the red jacket of the Mounted. “I have a good idea who you are. Will you verify it?”

The redcoat who had been Stroam’s prisoner, nodded. “Of course. I am Captain Stonefelt.”

“This guy—is Captain Stonefelt!” Monk’s simian face was blank. “I don’t get this, Doc. I just saw Captain Stonefelt caught in that snow slide!”

“You mean—you saw the end of the man we have known as Captain Stonefelt,” Doc corrected.

“That other Stonefelt was an impostor, a faker!” snapped the redcoat who was proving to be the genuine Captain Stonefelt. “He seized me some months ago and held me prisoner. He took my identity and assumed command of the post.”

Monk shook his head slowly. “But how could he manage that?”

“Not so difficult, blast it!” explained the genuine Captain Stonefelt. “As you know, there was an official change of commandants at the post some months ago. I was sent up from the south to take charge. No one around Snow Mountain knew me by sight. This man simply grabbed me, then went on with my papers to the post. Since it was winter, and no one came in from the south, he stood little chance of being discovered.”

“Holy cow!” rumbled Renny. “That other guy wasn’t a Mounted Policeman at all!”

“He was Stroam,” said the genuine Captain Stonefelt.

Monk scratched in the bristles atop his bullet head. “Stroam!”

“Stroam was his name,” insisted the officer. “I heard him called that by his men, and he bragged of his cleverness to me.”

“That guy sure had a head on ’im!” Monk grunted. “Masqueradin’ as the Mounted Police commandant, he was in touch with everything that went on. That’s why he took all the risk of swappin’ identities. He wanted to keep in touch with things.”

Ben Lane, sprawled on the snow where he had collapsed because of exhaustion, put in, "And it worked! Hell! Without knowin' it, I went to that guy Stroam and asked him to hunt himself. What a laugh that was!"

Doc eyed Captain Stonefelt. "You know why you were kept alive?"

The officer who had been a prisoner nodded. "Righto. This fellow Stroam did not know too much about official routine. Whenever he got stuck, he came to me and made me advise him what to do. That is why he forswore the pleasure of killing me."

"That other Stonefelt—was Stroam," rumbled Renny, as if the whole thing had him stunned.

"Bally glad I am to have you get me out of this mess," the redcoat prisoner told Doc earnestly. "Stroam would have killed me eventually."

Monk squinted at Doc Savage. "Say, Doc, you don't seem very surprised to find out that Stonefelt was Stroam."

"No," Doc admitted. "Remember when I told you about the strange circle on the floor behind the curtains in Mahal's office in New York—a circle which must have been made when some one absent-mindedly drew their toe over the floor?"

"I remember," Monk said.

"Captain Stonefelt had a habit of drawing circles—the fake Stonefelt, that is."

Monk grinned. "So that tipped you off."

* * * * *

Entrancingly pretty, Midnat D'Avis murmured, "Thank you, M'sieur Savage, for saving our lives."

Doc did not quite manage to keep from looking embarrassed. He would, he reflected, have to make this totally inviting bit of femininity understand that she had best subdue her affections, and probably Monk was the best one to whom that job could be relegated. At the first chance, Doc resolved, he

would tip Monk off to explain to the young lady that there was no place for the so-called tender passion in the perilous career which he had chosen as his lot.

Another thing demanding attention was the condition of Ben Lane's features. The outcome there would be satisfactory, for plastic surgery, of which Doc was a master, would return to the metallurgist almost the perfect features that he had been given by nature.

At this point, Ben Lane evidenced something akin to mind-reading ability.

"Mr. Savage," he said abruptly, "I am going to insist upon turning over a half interest in the benlanium deposit to you and your group of men."

That, Doc decided, was another angle which would have to be disposed of before they left Canada, for himself and his men never accepted financial reward, possessing as they did almost unfathomable wealth of their own.

Proceeds from the sale of benlanium would go, Doc reflected, to financing construction of railroads into northern Canada, a region rich in mineral deposits and with agricultural possibilities of a sort. Transportation facilities would open up an industrial field that would give employment and homes to thousands of people.
