

# **FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE**

A Doc Savage adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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# FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

## A Doc Savage adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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## Chapter 1. THE STRANGE BLUE DOME

It was unfortunate that Doc Savage had never heard of John Sunlight. Doc Savage's life work was dedicated to attending to such men as John Sunlight, preferably before they managed to get too near their goal. But Doc Savage did not hear of John Sunlight in time.

It was also too bad that John Sunlight was destined to be the man who found the Strange Blue Dome.

It seemed from the first that John Sunlight had been put on this earth so that men could be afraid of him.

Russia was the first government to become afraid of him. It just happened that Russia was the first – John Sunlight wasn't a Russian. No one knew what he was, exactly. They did know that he was something horrible with a human body.

Serge Mafnoff wanted to give John Sunlight to a firing squad. Serge Mafnoff was the Russian official who captured John Sunlight and prosecuted him before the Soviet equivalent of a court.

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"This thing known as John Sunlight," Serge Mafnoff said earnestly, "is incredible and shocking. We owe it to humanity to see that he is shot."

Serge Mafnoff was an honest, earnest, idealistic man. About John Sunlight, he was right.

John Sunlight took a silent vow to some day take revenge on Serge Mafnoff.

But the jury was soft. John Sunlight was accused of using blackmail on his superior officers in the army to force them to advance him in rank, and that might be only misdirected ambition. Serge Mafnoff knew it was more grim than that.

Anyway, John Sunlight didn't look the part. Not when he didn't wish, at least. He resembled a gentle poet, with his great shock of dark hair, his remarkably high forehead, his hollow burning eyes set in a starved face. His body was very long, very thin. His fingers, particularly, were so long and thin – the longest fingers being almost the length of an ordinary man's whole hand.

The jury didn't believe Serge Mafnoff when he told them that John Sunlight had the strength to seize any two of them and throttle them to death. And would, too, if he could thereby get the power to dominate a score of men's souls.

John Sunlight went to a Siberian prison camp.

He had never, as yet, heard of the Strange Blue Dome. But he was determined some day to pay off Serge Mafnoff.

The prison camp was located on the outer northern Siberian coast. Hundreds of miles of impassable ice and tundra lay south; to the north was the Arctic Ocean and the North Pole. Once each year, an ice-breaker rammed through to the prison colony with food and more prisoners.

No one had ever escaped the camp.

The ice-breaker took John Sunlight to the Siberian camp one August. It came back.

The next August, a year later, the ice-breaker sailed for the camp again. This time, it did not come back.

It was two months before the Soviets became excited and sent planes to see what had happened. They might have saved the gasoline the plane engines burned. For they found some piles of ashes where the prison camp had been, and nothing else.

They didn't even find an ash pile to hint what had become of convicts, ice-breaker, and ice-breaker crew.

SEVEN months later, John Sunlight stepped out on the bridge of the ice-breaker, and forty-six persons sank to their knees in craven terror. This pleased John Sunlight. He liked to break souls to do his bidding.

No one had been killed yet. The forty-six included the crew of the ice-breaker, and the convicts. For one of the queerest quirks of John Sunlight's weird nature was that he preferred to control a mind, rather than detach it from the owner's body with a bullet or a knife.

The ice-breaker had now been fast in the ice for four months.

It looked very much as if they were all going to die.

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None of them yet knew that the Strange Blue Dome existed.

Civan was John Sunlight's chief aid. Civan had helped in the prison camp break. It was he who emptied the powder from the guards' cartridges, working secretly over a period of days. Civan had fired the camp. Civan had a streak of sadism in his nature – he liked to destroy things. He had wanted to destroy the Soviet government. But he hadn't been in the prison camp for that. He had been there for destroying a man whose wife and money he coveted.

Civan was a bestial black ox to look at, but he did have a certain amount of brains. He had, however, absolutely no conscience. And so that strange and terrible thing, John Sunlight, had picked Civan to be his lieutenant.

Queerly, too, Civan feared John Sunlight infinitely more than anyone else. John Sunlight saw to that. Terror was the rope that John Sunlight kept around men's necks.

The ice-breaker drifted, trapped in the arctic ice. They shot a seal now and then. But they slowly starved, too.

Women are supposed to be more hardy than men.

So the two giantesses, Titania and Giantia – these were their vaudeville names – did not waste away. Their great muscles retained the strength to open horseshoes and bend silver rubles double. Giantia and Titania – their other name was Jeeves. They were Americans. They were great women, very blond. They were amazing women. They were a little queer, maybe, because all their lives men had been scared of them. They were such amazons.

They had gone to Russia with a vaudeville act, and had been accused of dabbling in a bit of profitable spy work on the side. They were quite guilty, so the United States government looked the other way when they were sent to Siberia.

Titania and Giantia were afraid of John Sunlight. They had never been scared of any other man. But they did not worry about John Sunlight.

Fifi – they worried more about Fifi, Titania and Giantia did. Fifi was their little sister, their tiny, cute, exquisitely beautiful sister. Fifi had been left in New York. Fifi was such a nitwitted little sweetiekins, and they were bothered all the time they were in Siberian exile about how she would get along in big wicked New York. And they were still worrying about it.

It did look, though, as if they had troubles enough of their own.

Two months more, and they had surrendered themselves to all being dead in another month. But they didn't die.

Because they saw the Strange Blue Dome.

THERE was a fog, a low fog no more than twenty feet deep, and they could stand on the ice-breaker upper deck and look out over it. So they first saw only the top of the Strange Blue Dome.

"Blue whale off the bow!" the lookout squalled weakly.

Titania and Giantia galloped to the upperdeck as if rushing on a vaudeville stage to bend iron bars and do handstands before an audience. Some of the others had to crawl – ten couldn't make it at all. John Sunlight

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came walking with slow, cold ominousness, like a devil in black, or a Frankenstein, or a Dracula. They shrank away from him, and did not forget to sink to their knees.

They looked at the Strange Blue Dome for a long time. And they became very puzzled. It was no whale, blue or otherwise.

It was no rock, either.

It was like nothing that should be. Its height must be all of a hundred feet, and there was a shimmering luminance to it that was eerie, even if they had not seen it standing, as if completely disembodied, above a gray carpet of fog. Generally, it resembled the perfectly spherical half of an opaque blue crystal ball – of incredible size, of course.

They stood and stared, breathing only when they had to.

The crushing of the ice-breaker brought them out of their awed trance. The ice-breaker hull caved in. Suddenly. There was no warning, just a great grinding and screaming of collapsing metal, a popping of pulled rivets, the feeble screams of the men who had been too weak to come on deck and were trapped.

"Get those men out!" John Sunlight ordered.

He did not want men to die. A man dead was a man he could not dominate.

Ten had been below decks. They got six out, but four had been crushed to death.

"Get the bodies out," John Sunlight directed, a spark of awful determination in the eyes that now burned like sparks in the hollows of his dark, poetic face.

They did it, shuddering all the while, for they knew what he meant. There had been no food for days and days, not even boiled shoes.

The ice was piling up against a stone island, and this had caused the ice-breaker to be crushed. They found that out soon.

The rocky island was as smooth as a great boulder, with no speck of soil anywhere, no chance of anything green growing. They crawled upon it in the fog, and it was more bleak and cold and inhospitable than they had believed anything could ever be, even after what they had been through.

They wanted to die, except for John Sunlight.

"Rest," he ordered. "Wait and rest."

He walked toward the Strange Blue Dome. It was now lost in the fog. John Sunlight went slowly, seeming to select and plan each step with care, for he was weaker than the others. He had taken less food than any of them, from the first, and the reason was that he did not want them to die. They were his, his toys, his tools, and he prized them as a carpenter values his best planes and saws, only infinitely more.

So he had given them most of his share of the food, to keep them alive, that he might dominate them. He was sustained now only by the power of the awful thing that was his mind.

This John Sunlight was a weird, terrible being.

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At the outer edge of the bleak stone island – it seemed to be one great mass of solid gray rock – the wind had swept all snow away. But farther in, there was snow that got deeper, and was almost impassable to a man without snowshoes.

It was doubtful if a strong man of courage, well-fed, could have struggled through the snow to the side of the Strange Blue Dome.

But John Sunlight did so, and stood beside the fantastic thing and made a low growling sound.

### **Chapter 2. A MAN'S BLACK GHOST**

IT was still not too late, had Doc Savage known of John Sunlight. Doc Savage had the finest planes, and knowledge and courage and scientific skill. And he could have reached this arctic rock in time.

Doc Savage, combination of mental wizard, scientific genius, muscular phenomena, would not have been too late – yet.

For John Sunlight could find no way into the weird blue half ball. He looked first at the base of the thing, but the glasslike blue walls seemed to continue on down into the solid rock.

John Sunlight clawed at the glazed blue. It felt as hard and cold as steel. He put his face against it and tried to see through the blue substance, whatever it was. It seemed that he should be able to peer through it – the stuff had a certain transparent aspect. But he could see nothing.

Next, John Sunlight made a complete circle of the thing. He found no door, no window, no break of any kind.

The blue dome was not made of bricks, or even great blocks. It appeared to be one solid substance of a nature unknown. Not glass, and yet not metal either. Something mysterious.

It took a long time to satisfy John Sunlight that he could find no door.

He went back to the others.

"Get sledge hammers off the wrecked ice-breaker," he said coldly.

The sledge hammers were brought him. Titania and Giantia alone had the strength to fetch them.

John Sunlight took the heaviest sledge.

"Stay here." His eyes smoldered in the almost-black cups which his eye sockets had become. "Stay here."

He stood and gave each of them hypnotic attention in turn.

"None of you must ever go near that blue dome," he said with stark intensity.

He did not say what would happen if they disobeyed; did not voice a single threat. It was not his way to give physical threats; no one had ever heard him do so. Because it is easy to threaten a man's body, but difficult to explain how a terrible thing can happen to a mind. That kind of a threat would not sound convincing, or even anything but silly.

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But they knew when they heard him. And he knew, too, that not one of them would go near the Strange Blue Dome. He had not exerted his hideous sway over them for months for nothing.

It took a longer time for John Sunlight to make his way back to the vast blue thing. He planted his feet wide, and raised the sledge hammer, and gathered all his great strength – his strength was more incredible than anyone could have imagined, even starved as he was – and hit the blue dome.

There was a single clear ringing note, as if a great bell had been tapped once, and the sound doubtless carried for miles, although it did not seem loud.

John Sunlight lowered the sledge hammer, examined the place where he had struck. He made his growling. It was a low and beastly growl, almost the only emotional sound he ever made. Too, the bestial growl was almost the only meaty, physical thing he ever did. Otherwise he seemed to be composed entirely of a frightful mind.

His sledge blow had not even nicked the mysterious blue substance of which the dome was composed.

John Sunlight hit again, again, and again –

He was still hitting when the Eskimo said something guttural.

It was a sinister indication of John Sunlight's mental control that he did not show surprise when the Eskimo grunted. He did not know what the Eskimo had said. He did not speak the Eskimo tongue. And an Eskimo was one of the last things he had expected to appear.

Particularly a well-fed, round butterball of an Eskimo with a happy smile, holding a large, frozen chunk of walrus meat.

John Sunlight smiled. He could smile when he wished.

"How, Eskimo," he said. "You fella savvy us fella plenty happy see you fella."

The Eskimo smiled from ear to ear.

Then he spoke in the best of English.

"How do you do," he said. "One of my brothers reported sighting you landing from a wrecked ship, and stated that he believed you were without food, so I brought you some walrus meat."

John Sunlight's bony, dark face did not change a particle. He was not a man who showed what he thought.

"You live close?" John Sunlight asked.

The Eskimo nodded and pointed.

"Over there, a few hundred yards," he said.

"How many Eskimos are in your camp?" inquired John Sunlight.

"An even dozen, including myself," replied the Eskimo.

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John Sunlight leveled a rigid arm at the Strange Blue Dome.

"What is it?" he asked.

The Eskimo stared straight at the blue dome, and looked faintly puzzled.

"I do not see anything," he said.

John Sunlight gave a violent start – in spite of the fact that he rarely showed emotion. This was different. Insanity was the one thing he feared. Insanity – that would take away the incredible thing that was his mind.

He thought, for a horrible instant, that he was imagining all this; that no blue dome was there.

"You do not see a great blue dome?" John Sunlight asked tensely.

The Eskimo shook his head elaborately.

"I see nothing of the kind," he said.

John Sunlight took hold of his lip with teeth that were unnaturally huge and white, and gave him the aspect of a grinning skull when he showed them.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"Only snow," said the Eskimo calmly.

John Sunlight moved quickly then. He seized the Eskimo. The Eskimo was round and strong and well-fed, but he was no match for John Sunlight's mad strength.

John Sunlight hurled the Eskimo against the side of the blue dome. The Eskimo moaned and fell back to the snow, unconscious.

"That must have felt pretty hard, for something you couldn't see," John Sunlight snarled.

He then dragged the Eskimo back to the others, along with the large chunk of walrus meat. There was not enough walrus meat for everyone, so John Sunlight divided it among not the weakest, this time – but the strongest. He wanted to make them stronger, so they could overcome the colony of Eskimos. They cooked up the walrus meat, and the weak sat back in shaking silence and watched the strong eat, although they were starving.

John Sunlight did not eat any himself. He was a strange man.

Meantime, the Eskimo regained consciousness. He rolled his little black grape eyes and said nothing.

He still had said nothing, even after John Sunlight had kicked in half of his ribs. He only lay silent, coughing a little scarlet when he could not help it.

The Eskimo had not even admitted that he could see the Strange Blue Dome.

They had saved rifles off the ice-breaker. They took those and went to capture the rest of the Eskimos.

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THE capture was easy enough. They merely walked in and presented the rifle snouts for the Eskimos' inspection, and the Eskimos, after first laughing heartily as if they thought it was one huge joke, realized it wasn't, and became silent and beady-eyed with wonder.

There were four igloos, very large and fashioned with picture-book perfection from blocks of frozen snow. Each igloo had a long tunnel for an entrance, and along these tunnels were smaller igloos used to store food. There were also other very small igloos scattered around, in which the dogs slept. There were not many dogs.

"What is that blue dome?" John Sunlight asked.

They stared at him wonderingly. "What blue dome?"

"Don't you see it?"

The Eskimos all talked like that, and it made John Sunlight more gaunt and grim, until finally, to satisfy himself of his own rationality, he broke down his order that no white person but himself should go near the Strange Blue Dome. He took Civan and Giantia and Titania and some of the others to the dome and made them feel of it, made them kick the sledge hammer out of the snow, pick it up and each strike a great ringing blow on the mysterious sides of the dome.

"You see it?" John Sunlight asked. "You feel it?"

"Dah, soodar," Civan said.

"Yes, sir," said Titania and Giantia, which was the same thing, only in English, not Russian.

John Sunlight thereafter felt much better, although there was no visible change in him. He knew now that he wasn't demented, or seeing something that wasn't there.

Two things were now possible: One, the Eskimos were lying for a reason; two, they were hypnotized. John Sunlight knew something of hypnotism, knew more than it was good for any man of his kind to know, and he soon satisfied himself the Eskimos were not hypnotized.

So the Eskimos were lying. Not lying – just not admitting anything. John Sunlight began breaking them, and he found that breaking an Eskimo was not as easy as doing the same thing to a white man or woman. The Eskimos had lived amid physical peril all their lives; their minds did not get afraid easily.

The Eskimos got no more food. Fuel for their blubber lamps was taken from them. So was their clothing, except for bearskin pants. Naturally, John Sunlight seized their weapons.

Six weeks passed. John Sunlight, all those off the icebreaker, fared well, grew fat.

The Eskimos kept fat, too.

That was mysterious. It worried John Sunlight. The Eskimos got nothing to eat and thrived on it.

It was a human impossibility, and John Sunlight did not believe in magic. He wondered about it, and watched the Eskimos secretly, watched them a lot more than anyone imagined.

His spare time John Sunlight spent trying to get into the Strange Blue Dome. He swung the sledge hammer against the blue stuff for hours, and bored away with steel drills off the ice-breaker, and shot a lot of

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steel-jacketed, high-powered rifle bullets against the mysterious material. The results – well, he would have had better luck with a bank vault.

The Strange Blue Dome became a fabulously absorbing mystery to John Sunlight. He kept on, with almost demoniac persistence, trying to get into the thing.

If it had not been for the Eskimos staying so fat, he might never have succeeded.

ONE night an Eskimo crawled out of an igloo and faded away in the darkness. It was not really dark all the time, this being the six-month arctic night, but they called it night anyway, because it was the time when they slept.

The Eskimos had been making a fool of John Sunlight.

He had watched them days and days. They were eating; they must get food somewhere. He had not seen them get it, and the reason was simple – a long robe of white arctic rabbit. When an Eskimo crawled away, the white rabbit robe made him unnoticeable against the snow.

This time, the Eskimo accidentally got a brown hand out of the robe.

John Sunlight followed the Eskimo.

He watched the Eskimo go to the Strange Blue Dome, stand close beside it; saw a great portal swing open in the dome and watched the Eskimo step inside, to come out later with an armload of something. The blue portal closed behind the Eskimo.

John Sunlight caught the Eskimo, clubbed him senseless. The stuff the Eskimo was carrying looked like sassafras bark – food. Compressed, dehydrated food, no doubt of that. But strange food, such as John Sunlight had never heard of upon this earth.

John Sunlight stood thinking for a long time. He took the Eskimo's white rabbit-skin robe. He put it on. He stood against the blue dome where the Eskimo had stood.

And the portal opened.

John Sunlight walked into the mysterious Blue Dome.

It was now almost too late for Doc Savage, even had he known of John Sunlight, to prevent what was written on the pages of the book of fate.

JOHN Sunlight vanished.

For a day, two days, a week, he was not heard of. Not for two weeks.

On the second week, he was still not heard of; but something incredible happened. Titania, Giantia, Civan, and some of the others saw an Eskimo turn into a black ghost.

The Eskimo who became a black ghost was the one who had vanished when John Sunlight disappeared and had not been seen or heard from, either.

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It was night. That is, it was darker night, because there were clouds. Titania, Giantia, Civan and the others were wondering what they would do for food now that the supply taken from the Eskimo was running low, and they were standing on a small drift and discussing it, when they saw the Eskimo running toward them.

Screaming made them notice the Eskimo. He was shrieking – screeching and running. He came toward them.

Suddenly, the Eskimo stopped. He stood facing them, his arms fixed rigidly in a reaching-out-toward-them gesture. His mouth gaped a hole. Incredibly still, he stood. He might have been an old copper statue which was greased.

The next instant, he might have been made of black soot. The change occurred instantaneously. One instant, a copper man; the next, a black one.

Then smoke. Black smoke. Flying. Coming apart, swirling away in cold arctic wind; spreading, fading, going mysteriously into nothingness.

There was no question about it. The Eskimo had turned into a black smoke ghost, and the smoke had blown away.

Now it was too late for Doc Savage. And John Sunlight had not forgotten the score he had to settle with Serge Mafnoff.

### Chapter 3. IS A DIPLOMAT DEAD?

SERGE MAFNOFF was an idealistic man, a fine citizen of the Soviet, and ambitious – all of these facts his superiors in the Russian government recognized. They kept a kindly eye on Serge Mafnoff, and shortly after he did his fine stroke of work by catching John Sunlight and sending him to Siberia, a reward was forthcoming.

Serge Mafnoff's reward was being appointed as an important diplomatic representative to the United States of America, with headquarters in New York City. It was a pleasant job, one an ambitious man would like; and Serge Mafnoff enjoyed it, and worked zealously, and his superiors smiled and nodded and remarked that here was a man who was worth promoting still again. Serge Mafnoff was very happy in New York City.

Then one evening he ran home in terror.

Actually ran. Dashed madly to the door of his uptown mansion, pitched inside, slammed the door. And stood with all his weight jammed against the door, as if holding it shut against something that pursued him.

His servants remarked on the way he panted while he was doing that. They told the police, later, how he had panted with a great sobbing fright.

It was interesting. And Serge Mafnoff had servants who liked to gossip. They gathered in the chauffeur's quarters over the garage, the most private place, and discussed it. They were concerned, too. They liked Serge Mafnoff.

Everyone liked Serge Mafnoff. He was quite a newspaper figure. A fine representative of the type and character of man the Soviet is trying to create, he was called.

Liking Serge Mafnoff made what happened that night infinitely more horrible to the servants.

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The house of Serge Mafnoff in New York City was one long popular with residing diplomats, because it had an impressive dignity and a fashionable location and other things that were desirable for a diplomat.

It was made of gray stone and sat, unlike most New York houses, in quite a considerable yard of its own in which there was neatly tended shrubbery. There were two gates. From one gate a driveway led around to the rear, where there was plenty of lawn and landscaped shrubbery and the two-car garage with the chauffeur's quarters above.

The other gate admitted to a walk which led straight to the mansion door. The house itself was generally square; had two stories and an attic, part of which Serge Mafnoff had walled off and air-conditioned for his private study. Behind the house was a sloping park which slanted down, unbroken except for two boulevards, to the wide, teeming Hudson River and the inspiring Palisades beyond.

Serge Mafnoff screamed in his study.

Every servant in the great mansion heard the shriek, and each one of them jumped violently.

The cook cut the forefinger of her left hand to the bone with the butcher knife, so great was her start. The finger leaked a thread of crimson for some time thereafter – which turned out to be important.

The scream brought all the servants running upstairs. They piled into the study. They stopped. It was impossible to believe their eyes.

Impossible to comprehend that Serge Mafnoff could have become a black man.

SERGE Mafnoff was all black. Not only his skin, his fingernails, his eyes, his teeth – his mouth was open in the most awful kind of a strangling grimace. All black. That evening he had put on pants and vest of a gray suit, and a robe the nationalistic red color of the Soviet. but these were now the hue of drawing ink.

A jet-black statue, standing.

The butler moaned. The chauffeur made a croaking noise. The cook's hand shook, and her cut finger showered red drops over the floor.

"Comrade Mafnoff!" shrieked the maid, who was a Communist.

The black statue turned to a writhing black ghost. Or so it seemed to the servants. The whole man – they knew it was Serge Mafnoff, because the features of the all-black statue had been recognizable as his – appeared to turn into a cloud of sepia vapor.

A black ghost, it was like. It swirled and changed shape a little, then came swaying toward them, a ghostly, disembodied, unreal monstrosity.

Straight toward them, it floated.

The cook screeched and threw more crimson over the walls and floor. But the chauffeur snatched a pair of heavy pliers out of his hip pocket and hurled them at the black horror.

The pliers went through the thing and dented the plaster of the opposite wall.

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Then, suddenly, impossibly, and before their eyes, the black thing silently vanished. It did not spread; it seemed to fade, disintegrate, go into nothingness.

"I killed it!" the chauffeur screamed.

Then the only sound in the room, for long moments, was the frightened rattling of the breath in their throats. The cook's hand dripped.

They were looking for some trace of Serge Mafnoff. Hurting their eyes with looking. And seeing nothing.

"I – I couldn't – have killed him," the chauffeur croaked.

"Ugh!" the butler said.

They were all primed for the next shriek. It came from downstairs, a man's voice in a long peal of imperative supplication and terror.

The cook barked out something hoarse, and fainted. She fell directly in the center of the door, just inside the attic den which was Serge Mafnoff's study.

The other servants left her lying there and raced downstairs to find out who had given that last scream, and what about.

There was a second bellow, just about the time all the servants, excepting the unconscious cook, reached the ground floor. This whoop was out in the back yard, and the whole neighborhood heard it.

Out into the back yard dashed the servants to investigate. They didn't know what they expected to find. Certainly it wasn't what they did find. Which was nothing.

Nothing at all. Only dark, cold night, and the gloomy clumps of shrubbery, which was evergreen and hence unaffected by the fact that the time was winter. Crouching black wads of bushes, and the sounds of the city—honking of automobile horns, a distant elevated, and the bawling of a steamship down on the Hudson.

They searched and searched.

Then they told the police about it. The police told the newspapers, who printed a great deal about the affair.

Doc Savage read the newspapers regularly.

### **Chapter 4. BRONZE MAN ATTACKED**

NOT everybody in the world had heard of Doc Savage. But too many had. Doc Savage – Clark Savage, Jr. – had of late been trying to evade further publicity, and he had an understanding, finally, with the newspaper press associations, with some of the larger newspapers, and with most of the fact-story magazines extant. They weren't to print anything about him. They were to leave his name out of their headlines.

Now, if anyone heard of Doc Savage, it would be by word-of-mouth only. "Haven't you heard – Doc Savage has invented a cure for cancer, they say." The surgical and medical skill of Doc Savage was probably his greatest ability. "I hear that new wrestler from Czechoslovakia is a human Hercules, built something along the lines of Doc Savage."

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

The physical build of Doc Savage got attention wherever he appeared, for he was a giant, although so well proportioned that, seen from a distance, he resembled a man of ordinary proportions.

Talk, talk – there was always plenty of talk about Doc Savage.

"I hear the Man of Bronze has invented an atom motor that could drive the Queen Mary across the Atlantic with a spoonful of coal." They called him the "Man of Bronze" because of the unusually deep-tan hue which tropical suns had given his skin. They – their talk – attributed fantastic inventions to him. Conversation made him a superman, a mental colossus.

Really, Doc Savage was a normal fellow who had been taken over by scientists as a child and trained until early manhood, so that he was rather unusual but still human enough. He had missed the play-life of normal children, and so he was probably more subdued, conscious that he hadn't gotten everything out of life.

Talk, talk – it attributed all kinds of fantastic doings and powers to Doc Savage.

But it was only talk. Nobody, for instance, listening to it, could find out exactly where Doc Savage was at a given time. No enemy could listen to the gossip and get enough real information to lay a plan to kill the Man of Bronze.

His enemies were many. They had to be. Because his life work was an unusual one. That was why he had been scientifically trained; he had been prepared from childhood, in every possible way, to follow a career of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers, even in the far corners of the earth.

A strange career – his father's idea. His father who was no longer living. His father had located a fabulous source of gold in the Central American mountains, realized such a wealth should do good, and had trained his son, Clark Savage, Jr. – Doc Savage – to use the wealth to do good. Also to use it to right wrongs.

This was the real Doc Savage, who found it safer not to be too well-known.

Doc read the newspaper account of what had happened to Serge Mafnoff. The bronze man often spotted unusual wrongs that could stand righting, from reading the newspapers.

Doc Savage did not know, as yet, about the man waiting in the lobby downstairs, or the other men looking at books in a near-by bookstall.

DOC Savage was impressed by the Mafnoff thing.

He was so impressed that he did something which he only did in moments of great mental or physical stress; he made a strange, exotic trilling sound, a note that was created somehow in the throat, and which had a low quality of ventriloquism that made its vibrations seem to suffuse the entire surrounding atmosphere. The sound was often described as being as eerie as the song of some rare bird in a tropical jungle, or like the noise of a wind through an arctic ice wilderness.

There was nothing spooky or supernatural about this sound. Doc had acquired it as a habit in the Orient, where the Oriental wise men sometimes make such a sound deep in the throat – for the same reason, approximately, that the rest of us say, "Oh-h-h, I see. I see, I see-e-e," when understanding dawns.

Doc Savage had been seated at a great inlaid table in his reception room. He stood up quickly. Through the windows – this was the eighty-sixth floor of one of the city's tallest buildings – an inspiring view of Manhattan was visible.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Doc passed through a huge library crammed with scientific tomes, and entered a laboratory so advanced that scientists frequently came from abroad to study it. The bronze man picked up a microphone.

"In case you wish to get in touch with me," he said into the mike, "it is my intention to investigate the Serge Mafnoff story which is on the front pages of the newspapers this morning."

What he said was automatically recorded, could be played back at will. It also went out on the short-wave radio transmitter.

Doc Savage had five assistants in his strange work. Each of the assistants kept a short-wave radio tuned in on Doc's transmitter wave-length as much as possible.

The bronze man then rode his private speed elevator to the lobby.

He was instantly noticeable when he stepped out in the lobby. Not only because of his size. There was something compelling about his carriage, and also about his unusual flake gold eyes – calm eyes, fascinating, like pools of flake gold being continuously stirred.

THE man waiting in the lobby noticed Doc instantly. The man had been loitering there for hours. He was a short man, blond, with a face that looked somehow starved. His story was that he was a process server lying in ambush for one of the skyscraper tenants. When he told that, he spoke with a pronounced Russian accent.

The instant he saw Doc Savage, this man stepped outside, hurried a dozen paces to the door of a small bookstore, entered – and walked right out again.

Several men who had been pretending to browse over books in the store, followed him. These men began getting in taxicabs.

Taxicabs always waited in a long string before the skyscraper, because it was a good stand. The bookstore loiterers took the first four cabs, and these pulled away from the curb. This left the fifth cab in the line as the next one up.

The fifth cab was the one they wanted Doc Savage to take. Driving this machine was a vicious-looking, black ox of a man.

Doc Savage had walked out of the building by now.

Having accomplished the job to which they had been assigned, the bookstore browsers and the fellow who had claimed to be a process server strolled away.

Doc got in the planted cab.

"Drive to the Hudson River water front," the bronze man directed quietly.

He had a voice which gave the impression of being infinitely controlled, a voice that could do some remarkable things if necessary.

The cab rolled among the high buildings, passed through the less presentable West Side tenement section, and neared the rumblingly busy street which ran along the Hudson. Here, it stopped for a traffic light.

The window between driver and passenger was open.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Doc Savage reached through this. He took the black oxlike man by the neck.

"That was an ambitious trick you tried to pull," the bronze man said quietly.

He squeezed the neck, trained fingers finding the proper nerve centers. The black ox fellow kicked around violently just before he became senseless.

DOC Savage got behind the wheel, shoving the unconscious passenger over to make room. He kept a sharp lookout around about while doing this, but saw no sign of more trouble. No cars following. As an afterthought, he got out and examined the taxicab.

The bronze man's powers of observation had been trained from childhood, and he still took almost two hours of complicated exercises each day, aimed at developing his faculties.

He had to notice little things – like a man wheeling suddenly and walking from a skyscraper lobby when the bronze man got out of an elevator – if he wanted to go on living.

He saw, under the cab floor, lashed to the chassis, a thick steel pipe which was closed at both ends.

Doc snatched the unconscious man out of the cab, carried him, and ran away from the machine. This was a one-way street. He kept in the middle, so as to stop any cars that might enter. But it was a little-used street, and no cars came.

He waited.

The explosion was terrific. Doc stood at a distance from the cab, but the blast jarred him off his feet anyway.

The cab came apart, flew up in the air, some of the parts going so high that they became small. A deep hole opened in the street itself. Fragments of pavement went bounding along the street. After the first slam of the concussion, there was a ringing of broken glass falling from windows all over the neighborhood.

Doc Savage went away from there in a hurry with his prisoner. He had a high honorary commission in the New York police force, but there was nothing in it that said he didn't have to answer questions.

It was obvious, of course, that the bomb under the cab was attached to a time-firing device which was probably switched on when the driver took his weight off the cushions.

No doubt the idea had been for the driver to stop somewhere and go in a store to get something, leaving Doc in the cab to be blown up.

Doc Savage carried the captive around the block, north two blocks along the Hudson water front, and reached a warehouse. The sign on this warehouse said:

### HIDALGO TRADING COMPANY

It was an enormous brick building which appeared not to have been used for years. It was Doc Savage's Hudson River hangar and boathouse.

Doc carried the captive into the warehouse, closed the doors, put the man down on the floor and did things with his metallic fingers to the man's spinal nerve centers. The pressure which was keeping the fellow helpless could be relieved by these chiropractic manipulations.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Doc went through the man's clothing while he was reviving, found nothing except a flat automatic pistol. The dark ox of a fellow sat up. He batted lids over eyes that resembled peeled, hard-boiled pigeon eggs.

"Didn't I come to the end of the chain with a bang?" he muttered.

THAT was the first warning. In the case of this man, it was either one of two things: He was too stupid to be scared; or he had a brain that could control his nerves and make him wisecrack under circumstances such as this.

"Who are you?" Doc Savage asked calmly.

The man did not answer at once. He stared at the bronze man steadily. When he did speak, it was not to answer the question.

"They say no one has ever fought you successfully," he said slowly. "I begin to believe that – looking at you now."

Doc noticed the man's rather strong Russian accent.

"A tkooda vy pree–shlee?" Doc asked.

"Yes. I don't doubt that you would like to know where I come from," the man said. "But let's speak English."

He frowned at the giant bronze man, and could not keep a flicker of terror from his eyes. "You spoke that Russian with no accent at all," he muttered. "They say you can talk any language in the world."

Doc said, "We are not discussing what you have heard. The subject is – why did you try to kill me?"

The man shook his dark oxlike head. "We're discussing," he said, "whether I had better talk – or tough it out."

"Talk," Doc said.

"Threatening me?"

"No." Doc said quietly. "It is becoming apparent that you are not the type of man who can be frightened readily."

The remark – it was merely a statement of truth as far as Doc Savage was concerned – seemed to shock the prisoner.

His big white teeth set in his lips, and unexpected horror jumped briefly into his eyes.

"You don't know John Sunlight," he croaked.

Doc watched him. "John Sunlight?"

The man swallowed several times and forced the terror out of his eyes.

"No, no – you misunderstood me," he said. "I said: 'You don't know, so you lie.' What I meant is that you are trying to kid me along, telling me I'm brave. It's a build-up."

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Doc said, "Why did you " and the man hit him. The fellow hit hard, and he was strong. But the bronze man got his shoulder up, and the fist hit that instead of his jaw. Then he fell on the man. They stormed around on the floor; the man began to scream in agony.

"Why did you try to kill me?" Doc repeated.

"My name is Civan," the man began.

CIVAN sat up on the floor, inched back a few feet from Doc Savage, and felt over his bruises, wincing as his fingers touched the places that hurt. Two or three times he peered at the bronze man, as though puzzled and trying to fathom where such incredible strength came from.

"I was the strongest man in my part of Russia," Civan said stupidly.

Doc said, "Why try to kill me?"

"The man with the long nose hired me to do it," Civan said.

"Who?"

"Eli Camel was the name he gave me," Civan said. "He was a tall man, bowlegged, as if he had ridden horses in his youth. He had a high forehead, a mouth with no lips. And there was his nose, of course. It was very long, and kind of loose on the end, like an anteater's nose."

Doc Savage had never heard of an Eli Camel who had a long nose. But then, he had never heard of many men who might want to kill him.

Voice unchanged, Doc said, "What did this Eli Camel want to kill me for?"

"He did not say," Civan said. "He just gave me twenty thousand dollars, and I agreed to get rid of you. Then he sailed for South America yesterday."

"What about those other men – the ones who saw to it that I took your taxicab?"

"I hired them."

"Who are they?"

Civan shook his head. "I won't tell you. They're not important. They're just men I hired to help me."

Doc Savage did not pursue that point.

"Eli Camel of the long nose, sailed for South America, you say?" Doc asked.

"Yesterday."

"What boat?"

"The Amazon Maid."

"That is all you know?" Doc asked.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"That's all."

Doc Savage went to the telephone. He knew there was a steamer on the South American run named the Amazon Maid; he knew what line owned her. He called their offices. When he explained who he was, he got service without delay.

"Yes," the steamship line official told him. "A man named Eli Camel sailed yesterday on the steamer Amazon Maid for South America."

"Radio the captain of the Amazon Maid," Doc Savage directed, "and learn if the sea is calm enough for me to land a seaplane alongside his vessel and be taken aboard."

"We'll do that."

"I'll call you for the information later," Doc said.

Civan stared at the bronze man. "You're going after Eli Camel?" Civan demanded.

"What does it sound like?" Doc asked quietly.

DOC Savage went next to a shortwave radio transmitter receiver outfit – he had them scattered around at almost every convenient point, for himself and his associates used that means of communicating almost exclusively.

"Monk," Doc said into the microphone.

The answer came in a squeaky voice that might have belonged to a child or a midget.

"Yeah, Doc," it said.

Doc Savage spoke rapidly and in a calm voice, using remarkably few words to tell exactly what had happened, and to give Monk instructions.

"Hold on!" Monk squeaked. "Let me get this straight. You started out to investigate this Serge Mafnoff mystery?"

"Yes."

"And this guy Civan tried to kill you, and you've caught him, and he's in the warehouse hangar now, and you want me and Ham and Johnny to drop by and pick him up?"

"Exactly."

"Doc, do you think there's a connection between the Mafnoff thing and this attempt on your life?"

Doc Savage did not answer the question. That was one of the bronze man's peculiar habits – when he did not want to reply directly to a query, he simply acted as though no question had been asked.

"Pick up this Civan," Doc said, "then go on out and investigate the Mafnoff mystery."

"Um–m–m," Monk said. "Where'll you be, Doc?"

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

At that point, the other telephone – there were several lines into the place – rang, and Doc said, "A moment, Monk," and answered the other instrument, listened for a time, said an agreeable, "Thank you," and hung up.

"Monk," the bronze man said, "the line that owns the Amazon Maid just called and said the sea was calm enough for a plane to land alongside the steamer and be lifted aboard with a cargo boom."

"Oh!" Monk said. "So that's where you're going – to get that Eli Camel who hired this Civan."

Doc asked, "You will be here shortly, Monk?"

"Shorter than short," Monk said.

This terminated the radio conversation.

Doc Savage tied Civan securely with rope and left him lying in the middle of the hangar floor, lashed to a ring embedded in the concrete.

The bronze man walked to a seaplane. A number of aircraft stood in the hangar, including a small dirigible, but the ship he selected now was small, sturdy, and designed for landing on bad water, rather than for speed or maneuverability in the air.

He started the plane motor, taxied out on the river, fed the cylinders gas. The craft got up on the step, lifted into the air and went droning away and lost itself in the haze over the Atlantic Ocean.

Civan lay on the hangar floor and swore long strings of very bad Russian words.

## Chapter 5. THE UNWILLING IDOL

MEN do things because of love. Always. Without exception.

Some men love to work, so they work; others love the things money will buy, so they work to get the money. There are men who love to loaf, and loaf. Slaves did not love to be beaten, so they worked in order that they wouldn't get beatings.

Doc Savage's five assistants loved excitement and adventure, and that bound them to the bronze man.

"Monk" particularly. Monk's looks were deceptive. He was one of the world's greatest industrial chemists when he took time off from his adventuring to putter around with test tubes and retorts. He looked rather like something that had been dragged out of a jungle tree recently. Startling near as wide as he was tall, with arms longer than his legs, too much mouth, small eyes, a furry, coarse reddish hair, he looked like a large ape.

"You look," said Ham, "like something an expedition brought back."

"It don't worry me," Monk grinned.

"I'll bet it worried your mother," Ham grinned.

"Ham" was Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, who practically supported the fanciest tailor in the city with his patronage, who carried an innocent-looking black cane which was really a sword-cane, and who was also admittedly one of the cleverest lawyers to come from Harvard.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"Listen," Monk said, "you keep on ridin' me, and I'll take you by the neck and shake a writ, a petition and a couple of torts out of you."

"Any time" – Ham glared – "you gossoon!"

If these two had ever spoken a civil word to each other, it was an accident.

They drove past Radio City, and picked up Major Thomas J. "Long Tom" Roberts, who had been hired as consultant on an intricate problem having to do with television. They found a group of eminent electrical engineers staring at Long Tom Roberts in amazement.

No one would stare at Long Tom because of his looks. He was a scrawny fellow with complexion ranging between that of a fish belly and an uncooked mushroom. So they must be admiring his brains. They were. Long Tom had just pulled an electrical rabbit out of a hat.

Monk, Ham and Long Tom arrived at the warehouse on the Hudson water front, drove their car inside, got out and listened in amazement to Civan's swearing. None of them understood Russian. But they could tell that Civan was doing some very good work with words that were unlikely to be in the Russian dictionaries.

When Civan ran dry, they read a newspaper account of how Serge Mafnoff, the diplomat, had apparently turned into a black ghost and vanished.

"Very mysterious," Long Tom commented.

"I believe I'm going to like looking into it," Ham remarked.

"Then I won't like it," Monk said contrarily.

FIRST, they settled the question of what to do with Civan.

"Drown him," Monk suggested. "Tie Ham to him for a weight. Throw 'em in the river."

"That's very funny," Ham sneered. "I'll bet I come nearer solving this mystery than you do."

"You see what I mean," Monk told Long Tom. "Ham's opinion of himself is heavy enough to hold them both under water."

They compromised by taking a hypodermic needle from an equipment case in the warehouse hangar, and injecting a harmless chemical concoction in both of Civan's legs and both his arms. They waited several minutes until the chemical took effect.

Thereafter, Civan could not move his arms or legs. He could only talk, and he did so, giving detailed opinions of them. Monk picked Civan up and sat him in various places, and Civan remained there; he could not stir. He sat stiffly, resembling an ugly image made out of dark meat.

"Kind of like an unwilling idol," Monk commented. "Only a little noisy."

They loaded Civan in their car and drove uptown to the home of Serge Mafnoff, vanished diplomat. Their credentials got them through the ring of police guards around the place.

"How much have you learned?" they asked the police.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"Are you gonna start that, too?" the cop demanded sourly. "Then we are to take it you're mystified?"

"Look around," the cop invited. "We're always willing to learn. We'll watch."

They questioned the servants. They got a bloodcurdling, hair-curling description of the black ghost which Serge Mafnoff had become. Nothing else.

They pulled on rubber shoes and entered the attic study where the mystery had happened. The room was about thirty feet long, a little over half as wide, with a large gable window at each end, and small doors on each side. These doors admitted to the unused part of the attic, windowless and dark.

"There's been rats and mice running around here." Monk poked a flashlight beam over the rafters and sills in the unused part of the attic. "You can see their tracks in the dust."

"Yes," the cop said. "We found mouse and rat tracks, too."

"Your tone," Monk said sourly, "insinuates that I'm not gonna find anything you haven't."

The cop grinned. "I've always heard Monk Mayfair was a whiz," he said. "I'm waiting around to see a whiz working."

Monk did nothing to justify the cop's expectations in the attic study. In fact, they succeeded in confusing the issue a trifle. This happened when Monk put the pliers – the same pliers the chauffeur had thrown through the black ghost of Serge Mafnoff – under a microscope.

"Huh!" Monk squinted at the pliers. "That's strange." He took a file and rasped a nick in the pliers, then looked through the microscope at them again. "Yep," he decided. "I was right."

"Right about what?" Long Tom asked.

"The metal of these pliers," Monk said, "is strangely crystallized."

The cop said, "What do you mean – crystallized?"

Monk addressed the chauffeur, asking, "Have you been in the habit of using these pliers regularly?"

"Sure," the chauffeur said. "They're my favorite pliers."

"Do any hammering with 'em?" Monk inquired.

"Of course."

"Look," Monk said.

He tapped the pliers with his file, and they broke into several pieces. It was as though they were as brittle as glass.

"Why, that's funny!" the chauffeur gulped.

They turned up nothing else in the attic study, so they shifted attention to the scream which had been heard behind the house. First, they gave the back yard and the alley a thorough search. But all they got out of this

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

was a good deal of exercise at squatting and peering.

"Blast it!" Monk complained.

The cop said, "I'm still waitin' for you guys to do somethin' to live up to your reputations."

When they stood inside the house later, and the cop was not with them, Monk confided to Ham, "That cop is gettin' in my hair, goin' around makin' cracks. He's beginnin' to think I'm stupid."

"The cop probably can't help it," Ham said, "after looking at you?"

"I'm gonna show 'im up!" Monk squeaked. "He can't make a rmonkey out of me!"

"If he'd put you in a tree," Ham said unkindly, "I'd hate to try to tell the difference."

Monk grumbled, and stalked around peering in unlikely places for clues. He was in tile kitchen when the cop came up to him.

"Look," the cop said, "I'm gonna have to help you out a little, whiz."

"You don't need to bother

"We found this," the cop interrupted, "in the back yard."

The article the policeman presented was a novelty pencil, a combination of pencil and tiny flashlight, and the clip which was designed to hold it in the pocket had been broken off close to the barrel. The clip had not come unsoldered; it had broken off.

"None of Serge Mafnoff's servants admit owning it," the cop explained. "And it didn't belong to Mafnoff."

Monk took the pencil with bad grace. "I'll examine it for fingerprints."

"We've already done that," the cop said, "and found none."

"I'll do it scientifically," Monk said.

Monk had little confidence in the pencil as a clue; he carried it carelessly as he went back and joined the others, and he was thoroughly astounded when Civan gave a violent croak, pointed his popping eyes at the pencil.

They had set Civan on the floor, where he'd remained helpless, but occasionally quite noisy.

"That pencil!" Civan ejaculated. "Where did you find it?"

"The cops found it in the back yard," Monk replied. "What about it?"

Civan said, "If I wasn't in this too deep to help myself, I wouldn't tell you. But I saw Eli Camel with a pencil something like that. Hold it closer."

"Eli Camel was the man who hired you to kill Doc, eh?" Monk asked, and held the pencil close to Civan's eyes.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"Yes," Civan said. "That's Eli Camel's pencil."

Monk exploded, "Then Eli Camel was probably the man who screamed in the back yard here."

"Right," Civan agreed. "And now he's on the steamer Amazon Maid bound for South America."

Monk squatted in front of Civan and asked the man quite a number of questions, but added nothing to the plain fact that Civan knew this pencil had belonged to Eli Camel, the mysterious man with the long nose.

Monk was much pleased; he permitted himself to gloat. "Now I'll show that cop I'm not as dumb as I look," he chortled. He went looking for the cop.

Monk found the cop gaping in admiration at him.

Ham was saying, "The man you want is named Eli Camel. He is tall, bowlegged, has a high forehead, a long nose. And he is on the steamer Amazon Maid headed for South America.

"You learned all that?" the cop gasped.

"You bet," Ham said.

"Amazing!" the cop exclaimed delightedly

The cop then looked at Monk and sniffed.

"If you had lived up to your reputation, short-and-hairy," he said, "you'd have dug up something important, like Mr. Ham Brooks, here."

Monk glared at Ham.

"Glory hog!" Monk howled. "You knew I was tryin' to impress this cop!"

This was the beginning of a wrangle of some duration between Monk and Ham.

SEVEN other policemen were guarding the Serge Mafnoff diplomatic residence, the guarding consisting of turning back curious people who had read the newspaper stories and wanted to have a look at the house, and possibly play amateur detective.

Two officers stood at one end of the street, two at the other end; one was stationed at the northern extremity of the alley, one at the southern extremity, and the seventh watchman roved over the grounds.

They were surprised when two large touring cars rolled up, stopped, and a group of men alighted. The newcomers wore plain blue suits, and had rather grim faces. Their spokesman confronted the cops.

"We're special plain-clothes men from the district attorney's office," he growled. "We're to take over here."

"But – "

"The D. A. isn't satisfied with the progress you've been making on this," the newcomer snapped.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

There was never a great deal of love lost between the regular police and special detective squads. In this case, the uniformed cops were secretly enthusiastic about the idea of turning the Serge Mafnoff case over to specials. They were glad to pass the buck. The case was a lemon, utterly baffling.

"Luck be with you," the uniformed cops said, and betook themselves away.

The leader of the "special plainclothes men from the district attorney's office" beckoned his men together. His whisper was a hasty hissing.

"Them cops will find out we lied to 'em," he said. "We've got to move fast."

"Can't move too fast to suit me," a man muttered.

"Get Civan," the leader snapped. "Rescue him. That's the most important. Then wipe out these three Doc Savage aids."

"Rescue Civan," a man repeated, "then croak the Savage helpers."

Now that they all understood, they separated, quickly taking up positions at various points around the grounds of the Serge Mafnoff residence.

Inside the house, Monk was still lambasting the dapper lawyer, Ham, but the homely chemist was beginning to run out of breath.

"You know what a lawyer is?" Monk yelled.

"I'm not interested," Ham said.

"A lawyer," Monk roared, "is a guy who persuades his client to strip for a fight, then runs off with the client's clothes!"

Monk always bellowed when he got excited. Normally, his voice was a mouse among voices, but when he became agitated, or got in a fight, his howling was something remarkable.

Monk stopped for breath.

And all light disappeared.

## Chapter 6. THE GRIM BLACK WORLD

ALL light disappeared. Nothing else quite described it, although it might have been said that the Serge Mafnoff house and its immediate surroundings abruptly and inexplicably became trapped in intense blackness. One moment it was a sunlight day, moderately bright; the next instant everything was blacker than black.

Ham's first thought was that Monk had hauled off and knocked him cold, and that the blackness was unconsciousness.

"You hairy hooligan!" he yelled.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

He heard his own voice, so he knew he wasn't senseless.

"Has something grabbed you?" Monk demanded.

"Shut up," Ham said, embarrassed. "Can you see anything?"

"No." Monk said. "That is, I can see black."

They could all see black, and nothing else. They lifted their hands before their eyes, and discerned not the slightest vestige of their presence. Their first involuntary impulse was to try to feel of the blackness, for it was so intense that it seemed solid; but it wasn't, for their fingers touched nothing more tangible than air.

Then their eyes began stinging.

"It's some kind of black gas!" yelled Long Tom, the electrical wizard.

But that was wrong, because they smelled nothing and tasted nothing.

Monk let out a frightened howl. He had remembered something – remembered the way they had been told that Serge Mafnoff had turned into a black ghost of a figure.

"Maybe we've turned into them black ghosts!" Monk shouted.

The terror of that held them spellbound – until Civan laughed. It was an ugly, delighted, much-relieved laugh that tore across Civan's lips.

That laugh was the wrong thing for Civan to do. Probably he couldn't help it. But it shocked Monk, Ham and Long Tom back to a grip on common sense.

"Grab that guy!" Long Tom yelled.

Monk sprang upon Civan. "I got 'im!"

Ham said, "We better lock the door. I don't know what this is about, but I –"

Ham never would have spoken another word, then, except that he wore a bulletproof undergarment of alloy chain mesh. Doc Savage and all his men wore them habitually, for they were light enough not to be uncomfortable. They were also knifeproof.

A knife blade struck Ham's chest, skidded on the chain mesh, ruining his expensive coat and vest. Ham grabbed the knife-wielder's wrist, held it tightly, twisted and turned. An arm broke. The attacker started screaming, and kept screaming almost continuously.

Fighting was suddenly all through the room. Fist blows, the gr-r-it! of knife blades striking chain mail, and shots. The shots were deafening.

A voice crashed out in Mayan.

"Gas masks," it ordered. "Put them on!"

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

It was Doc Savage's voice. Mayan was the little-known language which Doc and his men spoke – almost no one in the civilized world spoke it besides themselves – when they wished to communicate without being understood.

There was no time to be astonished that Doc Savage had turned up in the middle of this weird, black melee. He had a habit of appearing unexpectedly, anyway.

THE gas masks they carried were simple: Gas-tight goggles, spring-wire nose clips, and breath filters something like overgrown police whistles, which they held in their mouths. They were effective enough, providing you didn't snort off a nose clip, or get a filter knocked out of your mouth or down your throat. The goggles were nonshatterable, however.

Doc Savage called, "Where is Civan?" in Mayan.

Monk took out his breath filter long enough to say, also in Mayan, "Here."

Doc went toward Monk's voice – and straight into violent turmoil.

The assailants, apparently every one of them in the room, had charged toward Monk's voice. Probably because it was so distinctive. When Monk said something in a fight, there was no doubt about who said it.

Monk barked painfully – hit or kicked. His breath filter clinked against a wall. Monk fell down. He felt a powerful wrench on Civan, so Monk let Civan go. He thought Doc had taken the man. Monk was plenty willing to turn him loose; he wanted to fight.

There was no more shooting. But there was everything else. Blows. Furniture breaking. Someone tore the rug up with a ripping sound and plunged with it, upsetting people.

Doc Savage broke anaesthetic gas grenades. The stuff was extremely potent and abrupt; it would make a man unconscious, almost invariably, in less than a minute. But it didn't this time. It had absolutely no effect, except that Monk stopped howling and hitting and went to sleep, falling heavily.

The assailants wore gas masks, evidently.

They wore more than that, Doc began to have an ugly suspicion. His fight efforts were too futile. His senses, his muscles, were trained. He should be able to fight in the dark as well as the next man.

The attackers apparently could see in the blackness! And Doc couldn't. Nor his men. Doc Savage plucked the breath filter from his lips and ordered, "Get into the next room, quick!" without taking gas-charged air into his lungs. He put the filter back.

He got down, felt, and found Monk. He dragged Monk to the door of the next room.

Long Tom and Ham were already in the next room. Doc joined them. They banged the door, and Doc found a key and turned it.

"Upstairs," he said taking the filter out of his mouth briefly.

They rushed across the room, through a door, found the stairs. Up these, they went. Behind them, there was a crashing as the locked door was caved in.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

At the top of the first flight of stairs, Doc said, "Go on." His men went on. Doc flipped a small high-explosive grenade down the stairs. He wore a padded vest which was mostly pockets to contain the gadgets.

Came a crack of an explosion. Crashing and splintering was mixed in with the blast. And the lower half of the stairs came to pieces and fell down.

A considerable number of bullets came lip the stairway during the next three or four minutes. Then the strange attackers went away.

After a while, it was suddenly daylight again.

Daylight brought stillness. It just had to. What had happened was so eerie, so impossible, that it left an aftermath of shocked awe.

Sunshine slanted in through the windows. Somewhere out in the shrubbery, a bird emitted a frightened cry. In the distance, city traffic still rumbled, and farther away there was a ghostly, undulating whining noise. Police sirens.

The walls of the room in which Doc Savage stood were papered blue, the ceiling was cream, the carpet was very dark blue and the furniture upholstered in plush. Monk lay on the floor at Doc's feet and snored. Around about was some debris which had flown up from the blasted stairs.

Doc held a long, thin, telescoping periscope at the door, and saw no one was now at the foot of the stairs. Lower half of the stairway was a complete wreck, scalable only with a ladder.

Long Tom and Ham were peering cautiously around an upper landing, where they had taken shelter. They came down.

"I thought you hid Civan!" Ham exclaimed.

Doc Savage shook his head slightly. "Our own lives were more important."

"But – "

"They could see in that blackness," the bronze man said. "They concentrated on rescuing Civan. Then they were going to turn their attention to getting rid of us. We got away just as they started the last."

The tension of shocked awe subsided. Ham and Long Tom began to think of rational questions.

Ham pointed at Monk. "Is he hurt?"

Considering how the two quarreled, Ham's anxiety over Monk was surprising.

"He got some of the anaesthetic gas," Doc explained.

"Oh!"

Ham felt of his own person for damage. He groaned at the rip in his expensive suit. "You haven't had time to go to the Amazon Maid, Doc."

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

The bronze man shook his head slightly. "The Amazon Maid story was a gag."

"Gag?"

"To send us off on the wrong trail."

"How did you figure that?" Ham demanded.

"Civan," Doc said, "was too eager to explain about a long-nosed man named Eli Camel, and the Amazon Maid. Moreover, his tongue slipped once – he mentioned someone named John Sunlight."

"John Sunlight?"

"The unknown quantity, so far," Doc Savage started mounting the stairs toward the attic. He explained. "Instead of flying to the Amazon Maid, I watched this place from a house across the street, to see what would happen."

Doc Savage reached the attic, looked out of the windows. They gave the best available view of the neighborhood. There was no sign of their late assailants; they had fled successfully.

THEY brought Monk up to the attic, administered a stimulant, and when the fogging effects of the anaesthetic gas had been knocked out of the homely chemist's brain, he sat up and made noises, then asked a question – the question uppermost in the minds of Ham and Long Tom.

"What was the black?" Monk demanded.

They all looked at Doc Savage; if there was to be an explanation, it would have to come from the bronze man. Monk, Ham and Long Tom were utterly at a loss.

Then they stared in amazement at the bronze man. His face – they had never seen quite such an expression on his face before. It was something stark. Queer. They could not, at first, tell what it was; then they knew that the bronze man was feeling an utter horror.

"Doc!" Monk gasped. "What is it?"

Doc Savage seemed to get hold of himself with visible effort. Then he did a strange thing; he held both hands in front of him and made them into tense, metallic fists. He looked at the fists. They trembled a little from strain.

Finally he put the fists down against his sides and let out a long breath.

"It cannot be anything but what I think it is," he said.

His voice had a hollowness. Such a macabre quality that the others were too startled to put questions. They had never before seen the bronze man this disturbed.

They knew, now, that he would not answer questions.

They watched him pick up the fragments of the pliers which had broken in such a brittle way when Monk tapped them with the file.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"Microscope?" Doc asked.

Monk's pocket magnifier had remained miraculously unbroken. He handed it over, and Doc examined the bits of shattered steel.

"Crystallized," he said. Which also seemed to be what he had expected.

Next, he gave attention to the unused part of the attic, the portion that was dark and windowless.

"Just mouse and rat tracks in there," Monk volunteered.

The bronze man examined the "mouse" tracks closely, and gave the homely chemist a shock.

"Some of the rat tracks," Doc pointed out, "are impressed in the wood."

"Huh?"

"They were probably made by small pieces of metal driven into the underside of boards, the boards having been laid on the rafters. Probably the metal bits were to disguise the fact that boards had been laid on the rafters for someone to stand upon."

Monk swallowed as he digested this. "You mean – somebody hid in there?"

"Apparently."

Doc Savage went next to the entrance of the attic study, where his interest centered on the crimson stains, now dried, left by the Mafnoff cook, who had fainted, they understood, when the shriek was heard downstairs.

There were two sets of the dark stains.

"Two stains," Doc remarked, "indicate the cook might have been moved while unconscious."

Monk eyed the stains, one in front of the door, the other to one side, until Doc's meaning dawned on him.

"Hey!" Monk exploded. "Somebody was hiding in the attic. The scream downstairs drew the servants away. Whoever was in the attic fled, moving the unconscious cook out of the way."

Ham said, "But why go to all of the trouble of moving the cook?"

"Perhaps the one who fled was carrying a heavy burden," Doc said slowly.

They could not get him to elaborate on this remark.

## Chapter 7. BIG WOMEN

THE police came; so there naturally had to be extensive explanations, with much of the explaining devoted to making the police comprehend that the whole chain of events had happened. If there had been a shooting or a stabbing, the police would have accepted the fact that a crime had been committed. But this case was unusual. It was incredible. A noted diplomat, Serge Mafnoff, had vanished under – since he had apparently turned into

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

black smoke – impossible–to–believe circumstances. A stranger with a Russian accent – that was Civan – had come to Doc Savage and tried to kill him.

"Wait a minute," the police captain said. "Why'd they try to kill you?"

"That can be part of the mystery," Doc said.

The attack on the Serge Mafnoff home to rescue Civan – the police could grasp that. But they couldn't grasp the strange blackness that had clamped down on the neighborhood; it was as bad as Serge Mafnoff turning into black smoke. It was impossible, it couldn't have happened, and there must be a catch somewhere.

Doc Savage left the representatives of the law with their headache. The bronze man, Monk, Ham and Long Tom went to their cars. They had two machines – one that Doc had driven, and the automobile used by his three men.

All three associates, it developed, wanted to ride with Doc and discuss the mystery.

"But someone has to drive the other car," Doc reminded.

"Let the gossoon do it," Ham suggested, pointing at Monk.

"We'll draw lots," Monk said promptly, which was wasted effort, because when they drew, Monk lost anyway.

Monk seated himself grumbly at the wheel of the second car, and drove all alone in the wake of Doc Savage's machine. Because the mystery they were embroiled in was so fantastic so far that it completely confused him, Monk decided to keep his mind off it by thinking about something else. He thought about Ham. He tried to dope out a new insult to throw at Ham.

Ham was proud of his Harvard background, his membership in certain exclusive clubs. He often boasted to Monk that he was one of the Four Hundred.

"Four hundred!" Monk snorted. "He comes nearer hem' one of the fifty–seven varieties."

Thinking up verbal spears to stick in Ham was always an absorbing pastime with Monk. He grew completely occupied with the avocation. He paid no great attention to following the others; they were all enroute back to headquarters, anyway.

Monk fell behind and entirely lost sight of the other machine containing Doc, Long Tom and Ham.

On a very deserted street, a shabby old sedan suddenly cut in front of Monk's car, and the result was a resounding crash. Both machines came to a stop.

MONK craned his neck.

"Blast women drivers!" he grumbled. "Er – that is" – he took another look to see if the woman was pretty, and she wasn't – "yeah, blast 'em!"

Monk's car was one of Doc Savage's special machines, body of armor steel, wheels of puncture–proof sponge rubber, and it had not been damaged. The other car had not fared so well.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Not one woman, but two got out of the other car. They came striding toward Monk's machine, looking apologetic.

"Gosh!" Monk said.

He was seeing two of the biggest women he had ever glimpsed in his life. Not fat women – big! Two Herculean females, not badly proportioned, but built with at least a triple or quadruple measure of everything.

"Woe is me!" Monk gasped, and hurriedly rolled up the bulletproof glass car windows.

However, when he heard the two feminine titans saying how sorry they were, he rolled down one window.

"We're awfully sorry," one female tower said.

"You bet we are," the other added.

Their voices were distinctly feminine, but as might be expected, had tremendous volume.

"Well," Monk said, "of course your car suffered the most –"

One big woman reached suddenly and got Monk by the hair. She held him.

"Search 'im, Giantia," she said.

The other female tower went through Monk's pockets, slapped the places where men generally carry guns. Monk's squawking and writhing didn't seem to bother her.

"Nothin' on 'im, Titania," she said.

Giantia released Monk's hair, simultaneously giving him a shove in the face. This skidded Monk over to the middle of the seat. One giantess got in on Monk's left, the other on his right, and they closed the car doors.

Monk howled, "Now, look here

Both big women put their arms around Monk, but they weren't hugging, exactly. They were squeezing. Monk heard his joints cracking, felt his breath whistle between his teeth and thought his eyes were going to pop out. When they released him the argument was all squeezed out.

"We used to wrastle a bear in one of our acts," Giantia said. "So we know how to handle you."

Titania looked at Monk speculatively.

"Only you're more like a baboon," she decided.

Monk felt of his neck tenderly.

"I can see I'm gonna like you two," he muttered.

Giantia started the engine, backed up, turned and drove away. It was evident to Monk that the two remarkable big girls intended leaving their own wrecked machine and taking him somewhere.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"What's the idea?" he asked fearfully.

Giantia said, "We're gonna make you tell us where we can find John Sunlight."

"John Sunlight?" Monk questioned. "What's that? Some guy's name?"

"Don't kid us," Giantia thundered.

"No," Titania rumbled, "don't kid us. We saw you goin' around takin' care of Civan. We know you're one of his pals."

"Shut up," Giantia roared. "We'll tell you when to talk. And you'll talk then, plenty."

"I bet," Titania boomed, "that he knows John Sunlight grabbed our little sister Fifi and is holdin' her to make us keep our mouths shut."

"Sure," exclaimed Giantia. "I bet he knows it all. I bet he knows about the Strange Blue Dome, an' everything. Betcha he knows we only promised to throw in with John Sunlight's an' help him so we could get back to New York an' take care of little Fifi."

Monk started off to do some roaring of his own.

"Fifi be danged – "

He got a slap that made his ears sound as though they contained steamboat whistles.

"Don't you talk that way about Fifi!" Giantia thundered.

"Dad blast my kind of luck!" Monk grumbled.

AS a driver, Giantia belonged decidedly to the Barney Oldfield school. When the speedometer needle got below fifty, it seemed to bother her. Monk was confronted with amazement as he watched speed cop after speed cop let them go by, with never an attempt to halt them, or even to follow. Then he remembered that the car carried the special Doc Savage plates which entitled the machine to make its own speed laws.

The destination seemed to be no particular place – just any remote spot where there was a thick growth of concealing trees. Monk began to have a grim suspicion that they were seeking a locality where his screams of agony would not be heard.

"There has been a little mistake," he ventured uneasily.

"Your mistake," Titania said, "was in being born."

"Judgin' from his looks," Giantia added, "there was a mistake somewhere."

Monk squirmed and debated mentally over the things he could do. Jumping out of the car was certainly not one of them, since the machine was now doing seventy-five.

"I'm one of Doc Savage's crew," Monk explained earnestly.

The two giantesses were puzzled, but not impressed.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"Doc Savage – never heard of him," Titania said.

Monk swallowed this pill of surprise. Persons who had not heard of Doc Savage, at least through rumor, were becoming scarce.

"Who is he?" Giantia demanded.

There was a subject on which Monk could wax eloquent. He had a sincere admiration for the bronze man – which very fact probably saved him a great deal of grief on the present occasion. His sincerity was expressed in his voice so effectively that Giantia and Titania were impressed. They stopped the car.

"Now tell us that again," Giantia ordered.

"Doc Savage," Monk said, "is a man whose business is shooting other people's troubles. He was trained from childhood for the job. I know it sounds queer. But it's a fact."

Monk waved eloquent. He had a bill of goods to sell, and he suspected it was rather imperative that he sell it. Ham, the silver-tongued lawyer-orator, could have taken lessons from Monk's speech to the two Herculean women. Monk left out very little. Doc's scientific training, physical ability, his five assistants – Monk touched on it all with an earnestness that was completely effective.

"Strong man, eh?" Titania muttered, with an unmistakable gleam of interest.

"Yep," Monk said. "How big did you say?" Titania asked.

"Bigger than you are," Monk assured her.

Titania sighed. "You know," she remarked, "I've never met a man I could fall – er – that is, a fellow who is as big as I am."

Monk took a deep breath. "Doc," he said, "has never been able to find a girl quite his own equal, either."

Doc would probably exile him for that remark, if the bronze man ever found out about it.

Titania and Giantia were obviously intrigued. They exchanged glances which Monk had no trouble reading correctly.

"Maybe," Titania said thoughtfully, "this Doc Savage is the man to rescue Fifi from John Sunlight."

"He sure is!" Monk exclaimed quickly.

"We know all about this John Sunlight and the Strange Blue Dome, and everything," Giantia said.

"Doc will sure be glad to get the information," Monk declared earnestly.

Giantia stopped the car, turned it around, and headed back toward New York City.

"You tell us where to go," she ordered Monk.

MONK was expecting a sensation when he ushered Giantia and Titania into the presence of Doc Savage, Ham and Long Tom. He was not disappointed. Ham sprang up and dropped the sword cane.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"What's this?" Ham gasped.

"Little present I brought you," Monk explained. He felt of his neck, which still ached. Then an idea hit him. He nudged Giantia and Titania, called their attention to Ham.

"When we rescue Fifi," Monk said, "you want to watch this shyster, Ham. He's a lady-killer from way back."

Giantia strode to the astonished Ham, gave him a shove, and Ham sailed back and fell over a chair.

"That," Giantia said, "is just a sample of what you'll get if you make one single sheep eye at Fifi."

"Wuh-wuh – " was the best the astounded Ham could do.

Giantia and Titania suddenly lost interest in Ham. They were looking at the Man of Bronze. They stared, not exactly with their mouths open, but with almost its equivalent.

Doc Savage wore tan trousers and a matching tan shirt which was open at the neck, and the effect of his metallic figure seemed unusually striking. His vitality, strength, size, and the quality of unbounded power which was somehow a part of his personality, were impressive.

Giantia glanced at Monk.

"You ain't the liar I thought you was," she said.

Monk performed introductions – Ham retreated to the other side of the reception room and acknowledged the introduction from that safe distance – and Titania and Giantia were left with nothing to do but stare at Doc Savage, which they proceeded to do with enthusiasm.

"Your accent indicates you have been speaking Russian recently," Doc Savage said.

There were some slight indications that already Giantia and Titania were beginning to make him uncomfortable. Women made Doc uncomfortable rather easily.

Monk said, "Doc, these two young women know all about this infernal mystery. They know all about Civan, and some guy named John Moonbeam

"John Sunlight," Titania interrupted.

"Suppose they tell us about it," Doc suggested.

Titania nodded. "It's a long story. It began in Russia where – "

" – where we got mixed up in a spy racket, were caught, and sent to Siberia," interposed Giantia, who seemed anxious to do any talking that was to be done to Doc Savage. "We were sent to Siberian exile, where we – "

" – we met John Sunlight," put in Titania, who seemed to have the same idea about monopolizing any talk with the bronze man. "John Sunlight organized an escape from the Siberian prison camp aboard – "

" – aboard an ice-breaker," interpolated Giantia. "And– "

"Shut up, Giantia!" said Titania. "I'm telling it."

"Shut up yourself," ordered Giantia. "I can tell it as well – "

Doc put in quietly, "Perhaps if we closed the windows, there would be less noise to interfere."

Since the headquarters was located on the eighty-sixth floor, there was ordinarily not enough noise to interfere in the least with a casual conversation, but just now there was an unusual amount of uproar. Doc Savage stood for a moment at the window listening. His interest was caught.

A plane was flying slowly over New York City at an altitude of at least two thousand feet. It was a ballyhoo plane – one of the type that had a great aerial loud-speaker, or probably a battery of them, mounted in the cabin, their openings downward. Such a plane could fly a mile in the air and someone speaking into a microphone aboard it could make words heard by an entire city.

A ballyhoo plane over New York City was an unusual sight. There was an antinoise ordinance against them.

This one was talking.

"This is Fifi," it kept saying over and over. "Giantia and Titania, please do not tell Doc Savage anything."

It was a woman's voice.

## **Chapter 8. QUEST FOR FIFI**

THE idea of a ballyhoo plane flying over the city, warning someone not to talk to Doc Savage, was preposterously fantastic. Yet effective, too. More effective than newspaper advertisements, or any other quick way of giving warning.

Doc whipped the double soundproof windows shut. But he was too late.

"What was that?" Titania shouted. She flung the windows open again.

Giantia jumped to the window, too. The two big women listened.

"This is Fifi," said the voice from the sky. "Giantia and Titania, please do not tell Doc Savage anything."

Giantia and Titania stared at the ballyhoo plane with stark intensity, and horror came over their faces.

"Fifi!" Titania gulped. "Fifi's voice!"

"John Sunlight has her in that plane!" moaned Giantia.

They stood there, listening as if hypnotized, until the plane reached the far side of the city and banked around and came back. The ballyhoo craft was sweeping back and forth, covering the entire metropolis.

Doc said, "Go ahead with the story of John Sunlight." Giantia and Titania looked at him with their lips tight.

"We can't tell you anything now," Giantia said hoarsely. "John Sunlight would kill Fifi," Titania added.

It was plain they had no intention of continuing with any story. Fears for their little sister's safety had silenced them completely.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Doc turned to Monk. "How much did they tell you before you got here?"

Monk scratched his head.

"Not much, Doc," the homely chemist admitted. "They did say somethin' about a thing they called the Strange Blue Dome."

"The what?" Doc's face became frozen metal.

"The Strange Blue Dome," Monk explained. "Or so they called

The homely chemist stopped speaking, swallowed. For Doc Savage had spun, and flung into the library.

The bronze man snapped the library door shut behind him, then did nothing more exciting than stride to one of the great windows and stand stiffly, staring into the hazy northern sky. Doc's sinew-cabled arms were down, as rigid as bars, at his sides, and his powerful hands worked slowly, clenching and unclenching.

He was doing something that none of his men had ever seen him do before. He was taking time out to get control of himself.

Had his men seen, they might have guessed the reason. They were clever men, each one a headliner in his chosen profession. Probably they would have realized that Doc Savage knew more about the Strange Blue Dome than any of them dreamed he knew.

Monk, Ham, Long Tom – none of Doc's men had ever heard of any such thing as the Strange Blue Dome.

But Doc knew of it, obviously. Knew so much about it that he was shocked more profoundly than his men had ever seen him shocked before, by the mere mention of the Strange Blue Dome in connection with this mystery.

Strangest of all, Doc Savage seemed to be blaming himself for what was happening.

DOC went back into the other room.

"Ham," he said, "you and Long Tom watch these two women, Giantia and Titania."

Ham had no liking for that task. He gulped a hasty, "But

"Monk and myself are going after that ballyhoo plane," Doc said.

"Aw, O.K.," Ham grumbled.

Monk grinned derisively at Ham, touched his hand to his forehead in a boy-am-I-laughing-at-you gesture. Then Monk followed Doc Savage into the big laboratory. They wended through long tables laden with intricate glass and metal devices. Many cabinets stood filled with chemicals.

Doc opened a wall panel, disclosing a steel barrel several feet in diameter. There was a door in this, which he opened. He stepped through into a bullet-shaped car which was wellpadded, and traveled through the steel barrel, driven by compressed air. When Monk got in, there was little room to spare.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Closing hatches, Doc pulled levers which tripped the air pressure on. There was a shock, a whining noise, and the vibration of great speed. Then they were jammed against the lower end of the cartridge-like ear as air cushioned it to a stop. Holding devices clicked and a red light came on.

Doc and Monk stepped out in the bronze man's Hudson River water-front hangar boathouse.

Monk ran for the plane which stood nearest the water, sprang in, got the propeller turning over.

"Hey, Doc!" he yelled. "Ain't you comin'?"

Doc Savage said, "You go after the ballyhoo plane alone, Monk."

Monk didn't understand why Doc wanted to remain behind. But he was not displeased. The prospect of chasing the ballyhoo plane, maybe an aerial dogfight, intrigued Monk.

"Keep your radio cut in," Doc called.

Monk's arm shot up to acknowledge that. He gunned the plane down into the water. The craft was an amphibian. When it got close to the big doors, it cut a photo-electric-cell-and-beam device, which caused the doors to open.

Monk's plane scudded across the river, and was in the air about the time the hangar doors were closing.

Doc Savage was already in a car in the hangar. He kept a car in the hangar for emergency use, and it was one of his fully equipped machines.

The car had, among many other gadgets, a very good radio direction-finder. A finder that could cover the entire band of ether wave-lengths. Doc turned the tuning dial slowly, changed wave coils, kept on tuning. Carrier wave after carrier wave was picked up as a violent hissing.

Finally Doc picked up a transmitter which seemed to be sending nothing but at intervals of two or three minutes an apparently meaningless combination of dots and dashes.

The bronze man took a careful bearing on that station.

He started the car, drove furiously, covered about half a mile, and took a second bearing on the transmitter which was sending dot-and-dash combinations.

Doc watched the ballyhoo plane as he took this second radio bearing. The plane was a distant bumblebee against the sky. Another bumblebee – Monk's ship – was wheeling around it.

The ballyhoo plane changed its course in obedience to the dot-and-dash signal on which Doc was taking bearings.

The bronze man made his small, characteristic trilling sound briefly. It had a satisfied quality. His surmise had been correct – his suspicion that grew out of the fact that Fifi's voice, from the ballyhoo plane, was repeating the same words over and over.

Doc drew bearing lines on a scale map of New York City. The lines crossed in the section immediately below Forty-second street. He drove for the spot.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

ONLY at street intersections could Doc Savage see Monk's plane and the ballyhoo ship. At other times, high buildings hid both craft.

Time after time, Monk flew around the loud-speaker ship. Doc was anxious about that, at first. But Monk was cautious; he did not get too close to the strange craft. This jockeying went on for minutes. Then it appeared that Monk had surrendered caution, and was flying very near the other ship. Monk's plane was on the opposite side; it seemed to blend with the ballyhoo craft, and then

A splattering volley of dots and dashes came from the radio transmitter which Doc was tracking down with the direction-finder.

Instantly, the ballyhoo ship exploded. Doc saw the flash, a flash that jumped in all directions; it was like looking at a distant mirror which had unexpectedly reflected sunlight into his eyes. The flash faded; Doc watched the smoke. It might have been from an Archie shell. Then came the blast sound, a distinct concussion, despite the distance. And echoes followed, bouncing around among the skyscrapers like thunder.

Then Monk's plane appeared. It had been safely beyond the other ship; only the distance had made it seem close.

Doc tuned the radio to Monk's wave length.

"Damaged any, Monk?" he asked of his own transmitter mike.

"Startled out of six years' growth," Monk's voice stated shakily. "You know what, Doc?"

"There was no one in the plane," Doc said. "It was being flown by a radio robot. The girl's voice was coming off a record that was being repeated. And they exploded a bomb in the plane with radio control."

"You must be a crystal gazer!" Monk said.

His distant plane spun down in the sky and swooped in toward the Hudson River.

Doc Savage reached the spot where, as closely as he could judge, the radio-control transmitter had operated. He tried to tune it in again. It had been shut off. That was not so good; the plane might have been controlled from any building within a block.

Doc Savage made a quick survey of surrounding buildings, their height, their position with reference to the spot where the plane had blown up in the sky – a smudge of dark smoke still marked that point.

One tall building – it had to be that one. It was the only roof that offered a view of the spot where the plane had exploded.

Doc Savage drove away two blocks, parked, and got his make-up case from under the rear seat.

THE bronze man, getting out of the car some minutes later, was a large dark-skinned man with artistically long black hair, nostrils with an almost negroid flare – the celluloid nostril inserts did not hamper breathing and added a remarkable touch – and a nervous habit of twitching his lips.

Doc carried a leather tool bag which was worn.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

He walked into the lobby of the building he suspected, saw no one there, entered an elevator when it arrived, and said, "Top floor."

From the top-floor corridor, a door gave into a flight of stairs that led up to the roof. The door to the stairway was open, and a man lounged there, obviously a guard. He was a thin dark man.

The lookout stared at Doc narrowly.

The bronze man walked up to the fellow, dangling his worn tool bag prominently.

"Have you noticed any peculiar smells?" Doc asked.

The other scowled.

"You've got me there, buddy," he said. "Smells."

Doc said, "I am making a building inspection."

"So what?"

"You don't understand," Doc explained patiently. "There is a chemical firm on a lower floor of this building, and it is possible that a leakage of chemicals occurred. The chemicals form a gas, and it might have risen to the upper floors, following the elevator shafts. In such a case, it would be noticed here, or on the roof. Have you noticed anything?"

"Not a thing," the man said sourly.

He spoke with a strong Russian accent.

"Very well," Doc said. "The gas may not have reached this high yet. Or there may not even be any gas at all as yet."

The bronze man then walked, swinging his tool bag and whistling, to the stairway, opened the door, stepped through and left the door ajar a crack. He made tramping sounds with his feet so that it would appear he had gone on down the stairs.

Out of the bag he took a gas mask, which he donned. Then he took a gallon jug of villainously colored liquid from the bag and poured it on the floor.

He waited fifteen minutes, approximately. There was a strong draft up the stairs and through the door, and through the stairs that led up to the roof. The liquid Doc had poured on the floor slowly turned into gas and was swept up to the roof.

After the fifteen minutes were up, he went investigating.

There was one man asleep in the top-floor hallway.

There were six men and a girl asleep on the roof.

The girl was very small, very pretty – if you liked the kewpie-doll type.

## Chapter 9. LOST WOMEN

DOC SAVAGE had a way, as those who knew him put it, of walking up and taking death by the beard. And not only getting away with it, but in unexpected fashions all his own, of leaving the old man with the whiskers and scythe wondering just whether he had been treated with disrespect.

But Doc's working methods were not as reckless as they appeared. He knew this strange trade which he followed; he had received years of training for it, and he carried with himself always an astounding number of scientific gadgets calculated to cope with emergencies.

Whenever possible, he tried not to do what was expected of him.

There was a portable radio transmitter of some power standing on the roof. In a case beside it was the additional mechanism necessary to make an ordinary radio into a plane control.

Doc freed Fifi – she was bound and gagged – and left rope and gag lying on the roof.

Doc carried the men from the roof to the top floor hallway, and put all seven of them in the freight elevator, which operated automatically and thus did not have an operator.

Next, Doc carried Fifi down and put her with the others. He had no doubt that he was carrying Fifi.

He locked the door leading to the roof, then sealed it with a bit of chewing gum. Not ordinary gum, exactly. This would turn white when he touched it with a drop of chemical; and if it didn't turn white, he would know it was different gum.

Fifi had the cutest form of any small girl Doc had ever seen. Short girls are usually spread out a bit.

The bronze man got down to the alley, got his car around there, got his passengers loaded into it without attracting anyone's attention. He drove toward his headquarters.

Fifi slipped over and her head rested against his shoulder. She was the type of little thing that could look delicious when she was sleeping.

Doc's car traveled quietly, and did not take long to reach the high building which housed his headquarters. The machine rolled into the private basement garage.

He loaded in seven prisoners into the speed elevator. Then he put Fifi in.

Fifi seemed, if anything, smaller and more exquisitely pretty. She looked like trouble. She looked like nothing else but trouble.

Doc piloted the elevator and his load up to the eighty-sixth floor and got out. He began unloading.

Neither Ham nor Long Tom came out to help him.

Suddenly concerned, Doc Savage hurried to the door, opened it and went into the reception room. He stopped, stared about in astonishment.

Two thoroughly angry bulls might have put the place in the shambles he saw before him. Two bulls – it was

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

hardly likely one could have done as thorough a job.

Ham and Long Tom were skinned, lacerated, contused. They had black eyes, were minus some hair, and their noses leaked crimson. Another expensive suit had been ruined for Ham.

The two were also bound and gagged.

DOC untied them.

"Titania!" Ham yelled.

"Giantia!" Long Tom shouted.

"They got away!" they groaned in chorus.

Doc Savage's metallic features did not change expression, which was a tribute to his self-control.

Titania and Giantia had been going to tell everything about John Sunlight, the instant they knew their sister Fifi was safe. Well, Fifi was safe; she would have no more than a slight headache when she recovered.

"How did it happen?" Doc asked quietly.

"They saw that plane explode – the plane Monk was after," Long Tom muttered.

"And they went wild," Ham added ruefully. "You never saw such a performance. They landed on us before we knew what'd happened. Insisted we had gotten Fifi killed. They thought she was in the plane, you know. Well – that is – anyhow, they got the best of us."

"They left," Long Tom explained, "swearing they were going to join John Sunlight and help him get you, to pay you back for causing Fifi's death in the plane."

Ham stood up, felt of himself, ran to a mirror and got a good look at the damage which had been done to his garments. He made a croaking noise. He loved his clothes as if they were his children.

Another hideous thought hit Ham. Monk – if Monk heard of this, the homely ape would have the time of his life kidding Ham. And he was certain to hear of it. Ham's groan was so loud it sounded like a honking.

Doc Savage said nothing more on the subject of the two giantesses escaping. He never criticized his crew for errors or shortcomings. The bronze man made mistakes himself.

Mistakes – his metallic face settled into the grimmest of lines. Mistake! This whole thing was the result of a mistake he had made. A horrible error. He had not told them that as yet, but the fact had taken shape in his own mind, and was there whenever his thoughts relaxed, to torment him like a spike-tailed devil.

In grave silence, the bronze man carried the captives into the laboratory. Ham and Long Tom helped him.

Before the job was done, Monk put in an appearance with an aviator's helmet and goggles perched on his bullet head. He listened as Long Tom told what had happened. Then Monk looked at Ham and roared with mirth.

"You look like an accident goin' someplace t' happen!" Monk howled.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"At least," Ham said unkindly, "I don't look and act like something six months out of a jungle."

Monk scowled. "Listen, shyster, my ancestors came here on the Mayflower."

"It's a good thing," Ham sneered. "The country has immigration laws now."

They did not notice Doc Savage closing the laboratory door. And later, when they tried the door, it was locked, and although they called out, the bronze man returned no answer from within.

They sat down in the reception room to wait, puzzled.

DOC Savage preferred to work alone whenever possible. This did not grow out of an overconfidence in his own ability, nor did it mean that his aids were inefficient. They were not; they were highly intelligent, if unusual fellows, and of enormous assistance at times. But Doc still liked to work alone when he could. There were things that one man could do better.

It takes an army to fight an army. But sending one scout out to locate the enemy is the sensible way.

The effects of the gas would wear off shortly, if the prisoners were left alone. But Doc did not leave them alone.

He gave each one of them, Fifi included, a treatment with truth serum.

Truth serum, at the best – and Doc Savage had done considerable work toward developing the stuff, as had Monk – was not always dependable. It functioned by causing the patient to lapse into a coma, so that the mind exercised no conscious control over the will. When the subject heard a question, put insistently, the impulse was to answer it, and the dulled will power was unlikely to interfere.

Fifi was the type of character most susceptible to truth serum, so Doc began his questioning with her.

Fifi knew absolutely nothing of value.

Doc went to work on the others.

He kept questioning them for almost an hour

And when the bronze man unlocked the laboratory door, there was an expression on his face which shocked his men. It was a stricken look – one of such intensity that it was startling, for Doc Savage so rarely showed his emotions.

"Doc!" Ham gasped. "What –"

The bronze man shook his head.

"We haven't much time," he said. "You might help me."

They carried the men prisoners out, one at a time, and put them in the speed elevator.

Monk maneuvered himself into carrying Fifi.

"Not a bad little number," he said admiringly.

"Keep her here," Doc said.

Monk burst out in a big wreath of grins.

Ham complained, "That ugly clunk is havin' all the luck – "

Doc said, "Ham, you and Long Tom stay here. Be ready for a call."

They nodded, puzzled. The strangely set expression on his face deterred them from asking questions.

Doc Savage got a larger make-up box out of the laboratory. He took also two equipment cases.

Then he lowered the prisoners to the basement garage, loaded them in the car, drove back to the building where he had captured them, and managed to return them to the roof, still without being noticed.

The prisoners lay limp and snored where he placed them. He put the thin dark one at the foot of the roof stairs. He scattered the others over the roof, near the radio plane control, where he had found them.

He emptied another bottle of chemical on the roof. At once, the air became filled with a reeking odor which certainly smelled like a chemical vapor potent enough to overcome men.

Doc Savage then left the roof.

## Chapter 10. WAR LORDS

THE first John Sunlight man to sit erect on the roof looked around himself in a dazed way. His next act was an impulsive glance at his wrists, as though he expected to find handcuffs there. He began shaking his head.

"Hey!" he yelled. He shook the limp form nearest to him.

The shaken man groaned.

Doc Savage's skill with drugs was highly developed; he had calculated the combined dosages, in proportion to the bodily resistance of the men, so closely that they were all reviving at approximately the same time.

Half an hour saw them all on their feet, stumbling around, asking each other foolish questions. Then the man came crawling up from the stairs.

"Gas!" this man gasped. "Gas that came from a chemical firm downstairs. The fumes musta got us!"

"How'd you know that?"

"There was an inspector come around just before I keeled over."

A man rubbed his forehead bewilderedly. "I kinda feel as if somethin' happened to me when I was unconscious," he mumbled.

"What?"

The man tried to think, gave it up finally. "Nothin', I guess," he said.

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Which was as near as any of them came to imagining that they had been taken to Doc Savage's headquarters, had talked under the effects of truth serum, and had been returned.

"Where's the girl?" one yelled suddenly.

She wasn't there, obviously.

"She must 'a' failed to get as much gas as we did, and crawled off," one man decided.

They saw the ropes and gag lying where the girl had been. But no girl. There was a furious rush in search of the girl, and when it netted them nothing, they were uneasy.

"John Sunlight ain't gonna like this," seemed to be a general consensus.

They conferred, holding their heads, which ached splittingly, and decided there was nothing to do now but take their radio outfit and leave. They did this. Their cars were parked in a near-by side street.

They drove north for over an hour along the bank of the Hudson River, then parked their cars at a wharf near the water's edge.

There was a speedboat tied to the wharf. Into this, they climbed. It carried them out on the river, and toward an island.

The island was mostly stone, although there was enough soil to support a few trees. The island was crowned by a house.

Crowned – there was no other word for it. Nothing else quite described how the house sat on the peak of the island, or described the house itself. The structure was like a crown, round, with four ornamental spires, one at each corner, and windows which, due to the reflections of afternoon sun from their colored glass, resembled jewels.

Of course the house could have been called a fortress, too. But not at first glance. The machine guns mounted inside the windows were not visible at any first glance.

The house might have been termed a spot for a quick get-away, as well. But to realize this, it was first necessary to know that the big boathouse on the south held a fast plane, as well as a hundred-mile-an-hour speedboat.

John Sunlight did not believe in taking chances.

JOHN Sunlight sat on a deep chair which was covered with a rich purple velvet cloth. He wore a matching set of purple velvet pajamas and purple velvet robe, and on the forefinger of his right hand was a ring with a purple jewel.

John Sunlight had very few changeable habits, but one of them was his fondness for one color one time, and perhaps a different one later. Just now he was experiencing a yen for purple, particularly the regal shade of the color.

The man could go in for colors like a male movie star, and still be dangerous.

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He did not look dangerous as he listened to his men tell him they had been gassed on the building roof, and had awakened to find the girl, Fifi, gone, and that nothing else had happened to them – except that they hadn't succeeded in blowing up anybody with the bomb plane.

John Sunlight never looked dangerous.

"That is too bad," he said.

He resembled, with his thin aesthetic face, a dreamer of a poet who had listened to an editor turn down one of his rhymes.

"Too bad," he said. "You will have to be punished."

The terrified uneasiness which jumped over the faces of the gas victims at this was a tribute to the grisly qualities of the innocent-looking, tall, thin man before them. There was something hypnotic about it. He had not touched them, had not ordered them shot or even beaten.

"Put them each in a separate dark room of the basement," John Sunlight said. "After they have been there forty-eight hours, I will talk to them."

One of the men made a croaking sound. John Sunlight had done that to him once before, put him in darkness for a long time, then came and talked to him. And the talk of John Sunlight, spoken quietly and steadily, had contained such a combination of horrors and obscenities, ghastly implications and frightful verbal statements, that the man remembered he had been a gibbering wreck of terror for many hours afterward.

An impartial observer would have called John Sunlight's method a form of hypnotism.

The horrified gas victims were led away.

JOHN Sunlight was thorough. Attention to details, he had long ago learned, is important. Overlook a seed, and it may grow into a great tree of thorns.

He consulted a Manhattan directory.

"Why," he said mildly, "there is no chemical firm registered as being in that building!"

He got on the telephone. He could speak English with almost no accent at all, so he made out fairly well with a deception that he was a Federal agent.

"Yes, do," he said.

Soon a voice said, "This is the Eureka Products Chemical House."

"What address?" John Sunlight asked.

The address given was the proper one.

"Did you have an accident there today?" John Sunlight inquired.

"Why, yes," the other said. "Some gas got loose in the plant, but as far as we can tell, it did no damage. We were afraid that it would rise to the upper floors, and cause people to become unconscious. However, the gas

is harmless, unless one has a very weak heart."

"Thank you," John Sunlight said.

"Thank you," said the voice.

The voice was Long Tom. His thanks were sincere. He was still a little breathless from rushing around, warning the telephone people that there was a chemical firm in the building, in case anyone asked, and using his electrical skill to get a telephone connection in the building in a hurry. He hoped he had fooled John Sunlight.

He had.

John Sunlight was deceived, but he did not put the telephone aside at once, because he had another call to make.

"Hello, Baron," he said pleasantly, "I wonder if you could arrange to hold an immediate consultation with me?"

The "Baron" was silent, cautiously considering.

"Is it dangerous?" he demanded.

"It is to avoid danger," said John Sunlight, "that I wish to see you. This is very important, Baron. One of my men will call for you immediately in a car."

Again, the Baron thought it over.

"All right," he said finally, in a tone that said he doubted very much if it would be all right.

THIS Baron was one of John Sunlight's "contacts." John Sunlight had many contacts, more than anyone would have believed. He was not a young man, and he had worked all his evil life toward one hideous goal; and he had made his arrangements as he went along, always with an eye to the future. John Sunlight's idea about his destiny on this unfortunate earth was far from being as changeable as his fancy for colors.

The Baron was a representative of a Balkan country. The secret representative. His position at home was high, but the work he did was of the lowest kind. He was the head of his nation's spy system; he also personally handled the purchase of information, or anything that would be of value to his vicious little government.

This Baron Karl – he was known as Baron Karl for short – was bosom buddy to the prime minister of his government, and the prime minister was as blood-thirsty and intolerant a tyrant as ever seized life-and-death control over an unsuspecting population. The prime minister had his eyes on his neighboring Balkan country, and he would willingly give the lives of a few hundred thousand of his soldiers to grab the other country.

The only redeeming feature about the situation was that the other Balkan nation was ruled by as vicious a rascal as either the prime minister or Baron Karl, who dominated the neighboring "democracy." The ruler was known to the world as the "playboy prince" because of his hilarious career. But what the world didn't know was that he was a bloodthirsty, power-hungry kind of weasel, and the first throat he wanted to cut was the neighboring "democracy" of the prime minister and Baron Karl.

Fortunately, the two countries, armed to the teeth, had so far been too evenly matched for either to risk a war.

But if anything gave either a balance of power, there would be a war at the drop of a hat.

No one knew that the so-called playboy prince had landed in New York yesterday. He was traveling incognito. Very much incognito.

This playboy prince was the next man John Sunlight called.

"I'll have my car call for you in about an hour," John Sunlight said.

John Sunlight made several other telephone calls and appointments. Each of these was to a representative of a government which wanted above all things to have the power to whip somebody else in a war.

Baron Karl arrived at six o'clock. It was getting dark around the island.

### Chapter 11. ARCTIC RENDEZVOUS

BARON KARL was a smooth customer. He even wore a monocle. And, of course, the best of clothes. He was quite a hand with the chorus girls.

In the "revolution" in his country, it was rumored he had personally shot to death some fifty or so political enemies, having them brought, one at a time, to a dark little room under the castle. When he wished, he could look and act like a candy salesman. But when he relaxed, and was his normal self, he was so much like something made out of snake flesh that even his boss, the prime minister, didn't like to be around him socially.

Baron Karl sat with military erectness in the stern of the motorboat which brought him out to the island, and made rather a distinguished figure. He gave the island and its castlelike house a glance of approval. It looked like a safe place. As a matter of fact, his own castle in his native land was along the same order.

"Sometimes I think," he remarked, "that this John Sunlight is destined to be history's greatest evil genius."

He thought along that line while he was being led up to the castle. Like all evil men, he liked to think that other persons were worse than himself – and in the case of John Sunlight, he was eminently correct. Baron Karl was only a menace to a pair of small Balkan nations, whereas John Sunlight was a menace to practically all humanity.

Baron Karl made a little speech when he met John Sunlight.

"I salute again," he said, "the man who has inherited the qualities of the Erinyes, the Eumenides, of Titan, and of Friar Rush, with a touch of Dracula and Frankenstein."

"Those were very bad people," John Sunlight said dryly.

Baron Karl peered sharply at the other, a little apprehensive lest he had angered John Sunlight. He was afraid of the man.

"Let us call you a genius," he said, "and I say that sincerely. Er – may I sit down?"

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He sat in a comfortable chair, crossed his legs, and dropped his candy salesman manner. He was ready to get down to business.

"What do you want?" he asked.

John Sunlight was blunt. "I wish to make an appointment to meet you at a point north of Hudson Bay in exactly five days," he said.

The stooge for one of Europe's worse tyrants looked startled. "Hudson Bay – you don't mean the Hudson Bay in Canada?"

"Yes. Our meeting place is near the Arctic Circle."

"You're crazy!" Baron Karl exclaimed. "Why, it's still winter up there. It's cold."

"Only about fifty below zero," John Sunlight said.

The other shook his head. "Meet you in the arctic? Not me! Particularly not unless you explain why."

John Sunlight did not lift his voice.

He said, "This is very, very important. On your meeting with me in the arctic will depend the future of your country."

"That is big talk," the European agent said dryly.

"Fail to meet me, and your country" – John Sunlight held up five fingers of one hand – "won't last that many months."

Baron Karl sat quite still and thought of the things he knew about John Sunlight, and of the whispers he had heard about the strange, terrible man. Baron Karl was given to quick, impulsive decisions. He stood up.

"I'll meet you in the arctic," he said. "Although I'm mystified."

ROYALTY visited John Sunlight's island in the Hudson at ten o'clock that night, which was two hours after Baron Karl had departed in an extremely puzzled state of mind.

Royalty was the playboy prince who had come dashing to America in secrecy and much haste.

The prince sat in the launch and pouted as the boat ran toward the island. He was a large young man, and his personal opinion was that he was handsome. The newspapers called him "dashing." What they meant was that the things he did were dashing. Or sappy. It depended on how you looked at such things as drunken chorus girls bathing in champagne tubs on the royal table.

He had a mouth made for pouting, large wet-calf eyes, and in a few years, if he kept putting on weight, he would look like a large brown worm.

"My cabinet," he told John Sunlight peevishly, "advised me to come, as your message requested."

He'd filled his cabinet with the coldest, cleverest rogues in his country, and he had gumption enough to take their advice.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"One week from today," John Sunlight said, "I want to meet you at a rendezvous near the Arctic Circle, north of Hudson Bay."

The prince didn't like cold weather. He refused.

Then he listened to John Sunlight assure him that, if he didn't keep the appointment, his country wouldn't last – John Sunlight held up five fingers – that many months. The prince thought of what his cabinet advisers had told him about this weird man before him, and remembered that they had assured him that if John Sunlight said a thing was important, it was assuredly important.

"How do I get there?" he asked grumpily.

"By plane – secretly."

That was all, and the prince left. He was mad at himself, because he was royalty, and here he was taking orders from a man who had no royal blood whatever. He was taking the orders simply because he had heard enough about the man to make him afraid not to do as he was told.

He was puzzled. He had no idea why John Sunlight wanted him in the arctic.

As a matter of fact, the prince was not the only one who was puzzled. Andrew Blodgett "Monk" Mayfair was also baffled. And so was Theodore Marley "Ham" Brooks.

The two remarkable friends were stationed behind a bush on a cliff which formed a bank of the Hudson River opposite John Sunlight's island. Monk and Ham were behind the bush because they had received a radioed request from Doc Savage to appear there. They knew nothing more than that.

Monk and Ham had not seen Doc Savage since he had left headquarters with seven unconscious members of John Sunlight's gang. They did not know that Doc had taken the seven sleepers back to the same roof-top off which he had collected them. All they did know was that Long Tom had been left back at headquarters to watch Fifi. They weren't too happy about that. Fifi was pretty.

MONK had been prowling around, taking a brief look at their surroundings. The brush was thick, the night fairly dark, and Monk's mind was on Fifi.

When Monk came back to Ham, he grumbled, "I almost lost my way."

"You never had a way," Ham said unkindly.

Monk continued to think of exquisite Fifi being guarded by Long Tom.

"Thank heavens, Long Tom ain't got a way with 'im, either," the homely chemist said heartily

Starting to sit down in the darkness, without having his mind on it, Monk had a rock roll under his feet, and he fell heavily.

"O–o–h!" he croaked. "I hit on my crazy bone!"

"Oh, dear," Ham said solicitously. "Your whole skeleton must hurt."

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Monk was feeling around for a stone, entering vague ideas of seeing whether it would bounce off Ham, when the shadow of a boulder beside them seemed to grow much larger. There was no perceptible sound; the boulder shadow just seemed to grow mysteriously.

"Doc!" Monk gasped.

Doc Savage's quiet, controlled voice came from the shadow which had grown.

"Did you bring equipment cases?"

"I'm sitting on them," Ham said. "Doc – where have you been? What became of the seven unconscious men? What –"

Doc said, "The seven revived on the roof, under circumstances which made them think the whole thing was an accident. They are now on that island you can see yonder. Fortunately, they did not see me following them."

"Oh! Then –"

"John Sunlight is on the island," Doc Savage interposed gravely. "It is up to us to raid the place and seize him."

They picked up the equipment cases – these were of metal, waterproof, shockproof, with handles for convenient carrying – and crept down the face of the cliff to the edge of the Hudson River.

Doc Savage stopped and gave a solemn warning.

"John Sunlight," the bronze man said, "is probably as complete a fiend as we ever met. He is extremely clever."

Monk spoke for himself and Ham. "We don't scare easy," he said.

Doc knew that. But he wanted to impress on them the need for caution – and success.

"Baron Karl does not scare easily, either," Doc said. "Baron Karl is the representative of a small war-hungry European government. Neither does the playboy prince scare readily."

"I've heard of them two guys," Monk admitted.

"They were enough afraid of John Sunlight that they came from Europe to see him, the moment he demanded it," Doc Savage said.

Monk peered in astonishment at Doc Savage.

"How come you know so much about what's been happenin' on that island, Doc?" he muttered.

## Chapter 12. ISLAND RAID

MONK'S problem was solved shortly. Doc Savage opened one of the equipment cases they had brought, extracted diving "lungs" and they donned these. The devices—nose clips, breathing tube that ran to a chemical

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purifier pack, would enable them to remain under water for hours, if necessary.

They weighted themselves by carrying a rock under one arm, an equipment case under the other, and waded into the river.

Doc wore a luminous wrist compass. He consulted this until they reached the island, then turned the luminous compass face against his wrist, so it would not betray his presence in the darkness.

They climbed silently from the water and crouched in a river-worn pocket in the stone. Above them was a low cliff, standing limned in the faintest of light only at intervals, when it was touched by the beam from a distant navigation blinker far up the river. The castlelike house must be beyond that.

There was a faint click as Doc opened an equipment case again, then other clicks, and Monk and Ham found telephone headsets thrust into their hands. They put on their headsets.

"Civan," they heard a voice saying, "you recall what Serge Mafnoff meant to me?"

There was something about that voice that caused Monk and Ham to shove out their jaws, although they had never heard it before.

"Serge Mafnoff was your greatest enemy," Civan's voice said.

"Exactly," said that other Voice, the hideous one. "And now I have another greatest enemy."

"Who?" Civan asked.

"Doc Savage," the other growled. "Civan, there is nothing I would rather do than stay in the neighborhood of New York and fight this Doc Savage to the finish. But it is not wise. I have other plans, and I do not want them ruined. Doc Savage might ruin them. Therefore, we are fleeing to the arctic."

"Yes, sir," Civan said.

"I have made appointments with the men I wish to do business with," the other explained. "They will appear in the arctic, one by one."

"I see," Civan said dutifully.

Monk and Ham bent close to Doc Savage, and Monk said, "Doc, who is Civan talking to?"

"John Sunlight," Doc Savage said.

"How – "

Doc explained quietly. "I managed to creep close to the walls and fasten supersensitive contact microphones to several of the windows. I did that as soon as I had trailed the men who thought they were gassed on the roof. It was impossible to get inside the house. He has every inch of the place under guard. For that matter, he has the entire surrounding river guarded by photo-electric-eye arrangements mounted in buoys. It would be impossible to approach unobserved in a boat."

Monk growled, "Ain't we wastin' time here?" He never liked to put off a fight.

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THERE was a guard at the head of the stairway that led up the last sheer few yards of rock to the castle front door. He was a dark man. He leaned on a rifle, and he was preoccupied with thoughts of the months he had spent on the ice-breaker in the arctic. He was recollecting some of the things they had eaten, and it had made him a little sick at the stomach.

"Beregeeles!" a voice ripped from a window. "Take care, fool! Don't you see that fire!"

The guard came to life with a start, saw a lurid-red glow of flames a few yards down the trail, and raced to the spot. The fire was not much. The guard pointed a flashlight beam, saw a smouldering cigarette stub at the base of the burned wedge. He fell to stamping out the flames.

"Somebody threw a cigarette into the brush!" he shouted reassuredly.

By that time, Doc Savage, Monk and Ham were inside the castlelike house. Doc had started the fire, but not with a cigarette. The cigarette was just trimming.

Doc went ahead. He whipped across a reception hall that was as large as some schoolrooms. Knocking open the door with quick silence, he went through.

John Sunlight was not inside.

Civan, however, was.

Civan ogled Doc Savage, let out a howl, and dived backward for a door. Probably Civan had never seen a figure quite like the one the bronze man presented. Doc Savage wore a bulletproof helmet gas-protector, a transparent globe of a thing made of tough glasslike composition, holding the bronze man's entire head. The rest of Doc's great form was enveloped in a coverall garment of bulletproof chain mesh, there even being mesh gauntlets.

Civan got through his door, got the door shut just as Doc hit it. The panel was dark, old oak, studded with iron, and it held.

Doc dropped a hand grenade against the door, got back. The grenade let loose. Rock and wood fragments hit his armor grittingly. He went through the smoke, found the door and part of the stone frame demolished.

The bronze man had a stout canvas sack slung from a shoulder by a strap. From it, he began taking gas bombs. He broke these on the floor.

The bombs contained a gas that would take effect through the skin pores. Only protection against it was an airtight suit – a garment such as the rubberized lining of Doc's alloy mesh armor.

Doc reached another door, this one also closed. He reached into the canvas sack and brought out an object resembling a small metal apple equipped with a vacuum suction cup. He stuck that against the door.

The device was one of the supersensitive contact microphones, and a wire ran from it to an amplifier in the canvas sack; and from the amplifier, wires ran to a headset which Doc wore inside the helmet.

The mike picked up voices beyond the door.

John Sunshine said, "Don't fight them, you fool! Get the men out."

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"Yes, sir," Civan barked.

Doc Savage threw small switches quickly, disconnecting his headset from the sonic amplifier and connecting it to a tiny microwave radio "transceiver" that had half the bulk of an ordinary shoe box. He spoke into a tiny mike mounted inside the transparent helmet.

"Monk! Ham!"

The two acknowledged over their own transmitter almost instantly.

"Get out of the place!" Doc ordered.

Monk howled, "But Doc, we've just started – "

"Out!" the bronze man rapped.

He retreated himself, and overtook Monk and Ham at the outer door. They went – as fast as they could in the darkness – down the path.

Behind them, the castle jumped off the top of the island.

MORE properly, most of the island tip went up, and took the castle with it. The blast seemed to knock the rocky earth down a foot, shove it sidewise – or maybe it was the impact of air against them that made the earth seem to shift.

Amid the castle sections, sheet flame stood or lunged. The flame sheets seemed to shove the walls and rooms apart, push them outward. The debris came showering down the steep slope, making a shuddering rumble.

Doc seized Monk and Ham, yanked them down in the narrow trench that was the path. They lay flat. Boulders flooded over them like water, and bounced on to land with splashing violence in the river. Smaller stones and earth settled on them until they were almost covered.

Toward the end of the holocaust, Monk made a remark.

"That John Sunlight," Monk muttered, "must like to destroy things."

With that comment, and without having seen John Sunlight as yet, Monk drew as true a word picture of the man's character as probably could have been drawn.

Doc said, "Down to the boathouse!"

They started leaping and sliding for the boathouse at the water edge.

It was then that the night suddenly got darker. Everything went intensely black. It had been a dark night without stars, but there were lights from distant houses, and lights on the river. Now these vanished.

Monk got out a flashlight – he and Ham both carried the canvas knapsacks – and thumbed the light switch, but nothing happened.

"My flashlight's broke!" Monk barked. "Ham, use yours – "

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Ham said, "I'm trying, but it won't light – "

"The lights will do no good," Doc Savage said quietly. They knew then; they had half guessed it anyway. The black! The eerie, incredible, impossible darkness that had enveloped Serge Mafnoff's mansion. It was here now.

They stood silently, gripped by awe in spite of themselves. And in that quiet, they were aware of a faint hissing in their radio headsets, a low windy noise, something close to static, but still different.

Doc Savage removed his transparent helmet. The thing would keep out sound as well as bullets. He listened.

From the river came another noise. This one might have been steam rushing. But it was a silenced airplane motor.

Monk and Ham took off their helmets, listened also.

"Doc!" Monk exploded. "That motor – that silencer – "

The homely chemist fell silent.

"Go ahead and say it," Doc suggested.

"It sounds like the type of silencer you use on your planes!" Monk exploded.

Doc Savage, instead of answering, made for a brief interval the small, exotic trilling sound that was his peculiar habit when mentally disturbed. The trilling was low, indescribably vague.

After that, they went down to the boathouse, and they could tell that it had contained a plane – probably the plane they had heard take off from the river.

The lights of distant houses, the lights on the river, were suddenly visible. The black had gone away.

### **Chapter 13. ADONIS AND BEAUTY**

DOC SAVAGE'S trained eyes picked up the stabilizer light of a plane, far away in the sky. It was soon lost.

And as thoroughly as that airplane light vanished, so did all trace of John Sunlight, Civan, Giantia, Titania and all the rest of the Siberian convicts.

The island was a wreck; at least, the top part of it was. People who had heard the explosion came from miles up and down the river, and some of them put out in boats to investigate, while the others maneuvered their automobile headlights around so that they pointed at the island.

Doc Savage and his two men put on their hoods, and waded down the bottom of the river half a mile, came out unobserved, and went on back to their skyscraper headquarters.

Long Tom had been doing some investigating in their absence. This was at Doc Savage's suggestion.

"I've been talking to Moscow on the telephone," Long Tom said, "and I have learned – "

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"Moscow – Russia?" Monk demanded.

"Of course," Long Tom said. "The Soviet orneials furnished me with descriptions of the convicts who disappeared from that Siberian camp. There is no doubt but that John Sunlight's men are the same crowd."

"Well," Monk said sadly, "they got away from us."

"Where did they go?"

Monk looked at Doc Savage. The homely chemist had been told by Doc that John Sunlight had made appointments in the arctic with at least two men – Baron Karl and the young European ruler known as the playboy prince.

"Where was that meeting to be, Doc?" Monk asked. The bronze man shook his head.

"I never did hear the exact spot," Doc Savage said quietly. The calmness of his tone belied the importance of his words.

"You mean," Monk exploded, "that we're completely at a loss as to where John Sunlight went?"

"Yes," Doc agreed.

Monk groaned. "Blast it! Then we're stymied! We're out of luck!"

At this juncture, there was a plaintive feminine appeal from the library.

"What about poor little me?" was this helpless inquiry. Long Tom made a face. "Ugh!"

"Whatcha mean – ugh?" Monk demanded.

"That's little honey lambkins," Long Tom explained. He made another face. "Fifi."

"You don't like Fifi?" Monk asked incredulously.

"Listen," Long Tom said sourly, "all the time you guys were gone, I kept trying to add things up so this mess would make sense. Every time I came to Fifi, I added a zero."

"No appreciation of feminine pulchritude," Monk declared, and started in to comfort Fifi.

Ham put his hands in his pockets.

"It seems strange," he said unkindly, "that our friend here, the homely gossoon, should drop everything and go comfort Fifi."

Monk stopped, scowled, and pointed at Ham's pocketed hands.

"It ain't any stranger," he sneered, "than the sight of a lawyer with his hands in his own pockets."

Monk then stalked on in to comfort Fifi.

Ham, glaring, hurried to help with the job.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

DOC Savage seated himself at the great inlaid table in the reception room, with three telephones close at hand. He called the central telephone office, and placed, in quick succession, a series of transatlantic telephone calls.

At last as the world knew, Doc Savage worked at his strange career of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers, aided only by his five associates, of which Monk, Ham and Long Tom were three.

The two remaining members of the group of five were Major John "Renny" Renwick, the engineer, and William Harper "Johnny" Littlejohn, the archaeologist and geologist. These two were at present not in America.

Renny was in France, serving as consultant in the construction of a number of new flying fields designed for highspeed modern transport planes. Johnny was in Egypt, opening up another Pharaoh's tomb which had just been discovered.

Doc Savage consulted Renny and Johnny by long-distance telephone, and requested they make inquiries about the past of a man known as John Sunlight.

Next, Doc contacted the foreign representatives of a famous world-wide private detective agency. Doc had organized this agency. Its real work was to gather information for the bronze man. When not doing that, the agency did a very profitable business along regular private detective lines.

Doc put the private detectives to learning what they could about John Sunlight.

"John Sunlight is working on some kind of a plan," Doc explained. "If I can learn enough about his character, I may be able to guess the nature of his plan."

There was a lapse of time while Renny, Johnny and the private detectives worked.

Doc trusted his private detectives implicitly. And for a strange reason. Doc trusted each private agent because each one had once been a vicious criminal.

Whenever Doc Savage captured a crook, he sent the fellow to a strange institution in upstate New York, a place Monk and the rest called the "college." At the college, the crook underwent a delicate brain operation which wiped out all memory of the past, after which the patient was trained, taught to hate crime and criminals. The private detectives were all graduates of the college.

Reports began coming in from Europe by transatlantic telephone.

John Sunlight, it seemed, was more rumor than man. An evil rumor, a name that was whispered from mouth to mouth in the circles of international intrigue. The agents had found men who feared him, and would not talk. Many of those. But here and there they had unearthed a scrap of real information.

"You say," Doc Savage said, "that John Sunlight has always been hungry for power?"

"And money," the European agents explained. "It seems that he always believed that if he had money, he could get the power."

All the reports seemed to agree on that angle.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Renny and Johnny, having made inquiries of their own – they both had high government contacts in the countries in which they were working – verified the point about John Sunlight being hungry for power over men.

"That," Doc Savage said, "helps a great deal."

Long Tom, frowning at Doc in the New York headquarters could not see where the bronze man had learned much of value. Monk and Ham were interested in Fifi, but they could not see where Doc had learned so much, either.

Doc, however, seemed satisfied.

"Now," he said, "we find a king."

"A king?" Long Tom exploded.

"A king incognito."

THE playboy prince of European royalty – the newspapers called him the "former playboy prince" because he was now a king – would have greatly enjoyed his incognito visit in New York, except for one thing.

He did not relish having to fly into the arctic to keep an appointment with John Sunlight.

Tomorrow he would have to take off by plane for the arctic, and in the meantime, he intended to enjoy himself. His idea of enjoyment was a series of night clubs, where he spent money furiously and drank himself loop-legged. He made a thoroughly disgusting spectacle of himself, and managed to indulge in repeated fights. That is, he started repeated fights. It was up to his bodyguards to finish them.

He'd brought his bodyguards from home. Two of them. They were big men, one a little larger than the other. They were obviously tough. Their hides seemed to be made of the same stuff as well-worn riding boots. They had enormous, scarred fists, and their faces were somewhat like the wax casts in museums labeled, "Head of a Prehistoric Cro-Magnon Man."

The fight in the Wacky Club was about typical of several the roistering prince started. Except that one small thing happened which was different, and queer.

It began when the prince spanked a showgirl. He liked to spank them. He thought it great fun. But in this case, he got hold of some young fellow's girlfriend. The prince was too intoxicated to notice the difference, and wouldn't have cared, anyway.

The girl's boyfriend knocked the prince over a table. The two hideous bodyguards sprang onto the boy-friend, knocked him down, began kicking him horribly. Someone unshaped a chair over one bodyguard's head, but it didn't seem to bother the fellow.

There was quite a bit of hullabaloo, before the night-club attendants dragged the boy-friend out and got things quieted down, taking pains that the police were not called.

When the prince revived, he at once demanded a drink.

He was handed a drink instantly. One of the waiters in the night club did the handing, and the prince gulped the drink down at one swallow. Then the prince got up and cursed his bodyguards and threw bottles at them,

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

and they took the abuse with stupid patience, because this mouthing, drunken fool was their king.

So far there had been nothing particularly queer about the incident.

The queer thing happened when the waiter drifted over and tapped on a door which gave into a private dining room. The door opened a crack.

"I gave 'im the stuff in his drink," the waiter said.

A bank note promptly came through the door. It was a fifty-dollar bill. The waiter picked it up and went away, well satisfied.

The private room had a window that opened into an alleyway.

THE prince was staying, naturally in the city's most flamboyant hotel. He had the finest suite, and he had ruined most of the furniture in his wild orgies, and the hotel management was going to be heartily glad when he was gone, even if he had promised to pay for the ruined furniture.

The following morning, the prince awakened feeling badly. His conscience wasn't bothering him. It was his body. It ached, and judging from the taste, a cat had slept in his mouth.

He snatched a water carafe and smashed it against the door.

"Adonis!" he snarled.

"Adonis" was one of the two evil-faced bodyguards.

The fellow appeared, shuffling and kotowing at every other step.

"Shut the damn windows!" the prince screamed. "The room is full of fog!"

The bodyguard shut the window, then stood looking uneasy and changing feet.

"May this humble one speak, sire," he asked fearfully.

"Speak about what?"

"There is no fog in this room, sire," the bodyguard got around to explaining.

The prince did some cursing, and threw a telephone at the bodyguard. Then he got a little frightened, for it became obvious that there was really no fog. He could hardly see; the objects before him were discernible only as hazy presences.

He called a doctor.

"You must have got hold of some bad liquor," the doctor said. "Your eyesight is temporarily impaired."

"You blasted fool," the prince said. "Do something."

The doctor explained stiffly that he could do nothing; it would just have to wear off.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

The prince broke up some furniture, smashed a few pictures, and became resigned, if not pleased.

"Beauty!" he howled.

"Beauty" was the other bodyguard.

The prince heard someone approach, and there was a rather unpleasant gurgling noise.

"Talk up, you fool!" the prince yelled.

The voice of Adonis said, "May this lowly one advise you of an unfortunate fact."

"Eh?"

"Beauty had his throat hurt last night," Adonis said fawningly, "and now it seems he cannot talk. But he is here and ready to serve you, sire."

The prince was delighted; he had that kind of a mind. He roared mirthfully, and forgot for a few seconds his own lack of eyesight.

Then he fell to whining and complaining and swearing.

"I've got to take off for the arctic today," he grumbled. "And here I cannot see!"

"Sire, you cannot go," Adonis said.

The idea of a vassal bodyguard telling him what he could not do enraged the prince.

"Get my clothes on me!" he snarled.

They got his clothes on him. Then they led him down to a taxicab, and the prince told the driver where to go.

"Newark Airport!" the prince ordered.

The cab drove for a long time – but it did not go to Newark Airport. It went, instead, to a smaller field on Long Island.

The cab went to the other field principally because Beauty sat in the front seat – and Beauty was holding a large pistol against the ribs of the taxi driver.

THE prince got out of the cab cursing the fact that he could not see.

"Is the plane I ordered here?" he yelled peevishly.

"Yes, sir," said a crisp voice.

"Who're you?"

"I'm the pilot," the crisp voice said.

"You have plenty of fuel?"

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"Yes, sir."

"Get me in the cabin, then. And take off."

"Where do you wish to fly to?" the crisp voice asked.

The prince said, "I'll tell you that, you fool. It's a latitude-and-longitude figure."

"Very well, sir," the voice said.

No doubt the peevish prince would have been rather astounded had he known that the crisp voice he was hearing came from the hideous lips of the fellow he had been calling Adonis.

They got in the plane, and it took off.

The prince was spared further surprise by not realizing the plane was being flown by the creature who had been making the croaking noises, the one he had called Beauty.

As a matter of fact, only the prince, Adonis and Beauty were in the plane as it flew northward.

The prince was a complaining, quarrelsome passenger, and when he was not abusing Adonis, he insisted on drinking, or howling obscene tunes at the top of his lungs.

Later, Adonis went forward to see how Beauty was making out with the flying.

"Doc," Monk, who was Beauty said, "I don't envy you the job of takin' care of that thing back there."

"He has given me the latitude and longitude of the place where we are to go," Doc, who was Adonis, said, and wrote the figures on the chart board. "Think you can find the spot, Monk?"

"Swell!" said Monk in a squeaky voice. "Now I'm in favor of dumpin' 'im overboard."

"No. We'll continue to be his bodyguards."

Mention of the word "bodyguards" seemed to arouse a bit of musing recollection in Monk's mind.

"Doc, I guess the two real bodyguards are arrivin' at our college about now," he said thoughtfully. Then he grinned. "I'll never forget what a job we had knockin' 'em senseless when we called 'em to the door of the prince's suite last night."

"The chemical we had the night-club waiter put in the prince's drink had exactly the effect we hoped for," Doc said. "There is not much chance of his recognizing us."

"I don't think he'd recognize us anyway, considerin' how we're disguised to look exactly like Adonis and Beauty."

"Probably not."

Monk flew in silence for a while. Then he sighed.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"What burns me up," he complained, "is the idea of Long Tom and Ham followin' in another plane – with Fifi."

"Fifi will be left in some little town upstate," Doc assured Monk. "She will be safe there."

LATER, a plane piloted by Long Tom, with Ham and Fifi as passengers, was circling a tiny landing field near a small town in Vermont.

Ham had been making headway with Fifi.

"Landing!" Fifi exclaimed. She gave Ham's arm a squeeze. "You didn't tell me we were going to stop anywhere."

Ham took off and put on the natty aviator's helmet which he wore.

"Er – I – we – " he said. "Well – it's not my idea."

"Aw – tell her we're leavin' her at a little hotel here!" Long Tom snapped.

"Oh, but I don't want to be left!" Fifi gasped.

She gave Ham her most toe-curling look.

"You don't want to leave Fifi, do you?"

"Er – it may be too dangerous up north," Ham said weakly.

"But you're going!" Fifi pointed out.

"That's different," Ham said.

"Aw – throw her out!" Long Tom flung in disgust.

Ham patted Fifi's arm, scowled at Long Tom. Ham enjoyed having kewpie-doll girls hanging onto him.

The plane landed.

And Fifi changed her tactics. She showed an unexpected bullheaded streak.

Fifi screamed, "Listen, you two! I'm going along! I want to help my sisters! Now get this: You leave me behind and I'll tell John Sunlight what you're doing

Long Tom glared at her. "You want me to fan your skirts with a frying pan?"

Fifi glared right back at him.

"I'll trade John Sunlight information about you for the release of my two sisters!" she shouted.

"You don't know where John Sunlight is!" Long Tom yelled.

"I'll advertise in the newspapers!" Fifi screamed. "I'll broadcast on the radio!"

"Women and trouble!" Long Tom groaned.

He tuned on the short-wave radio and contacted Doc Savage.

"Doc," he said, "Fifi has turned cocklebur."

"How is that?" Doc asked.

"The nitwit says if we don't take her along, she'll trade information about us to John Sunlight for her sisters' freedom."

"That is bad."

"It's terrific," Long Tom said sourly.

"Bring her with you," Doc said reluctantly.

As Doc Savage made the decision, Monk groaned.

"That burns me up!" Monk complained. "The idea of Ham followin' in that plane – with Fifi."

"If we understood women, we might have argued her out of it," Doc said.

"Huh!" Monk said disgustedly. "That Ham understands 'em too well."

## Chapter 14. SPOT IN THE ARCTIC

THERE is something completely monotonous about riding in an airplane. Certainly it is fully as uneventful as a train ride across a Nebraska prairie, despite even the mental pastime in which the most seasoned air traveler finds himself engaging – the pastime being to pick out possible landing fields on the earth below.

In the case of the prince's plane flown by Doc and Monk – they managed to go on playing the parts of Adonis and Beauty – air travel became doubly monotonous because, from the time they left New York City's cloud-tickling spires behind, there was a blanket of haze over the earth that, at the height they were flying, made the wooded hills and rivers an unending gray blur which might have been anything.

The prince was as peevish as an ugly baby, and seemed satisfied only when they gave him his bottle – not milk – for if not satisfied then, he at least occupied himself only with thinking up loud, profane opinions of the kind of scheme that would let him, a king, get in a shape where, when he put his hands before his eyes, all he saw was a dark blur that might have been his hand or, as he expressed it, a dirty buzzard. Just why he referred to a dirty buzzard in that connection was obscure, unless it was simply he subconsciously connected the hands with something they had done in the past.

The plane seemed slow. Doc Savage and Monk were accustomed to the specially designed speed ships which the bronze man used. This was an ordinary type of craft, and comparatively clumsy, and conceivably not nearly as safe; but they had not thought it wise to substitute one of their own, because such a ship would have been distinctive enough to attract suspicion.

It began to get colder.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

They stopped twice and refueled, and it was very chilly, and there was snow on the ground at the last halt, where they took plane skis out of the cabin and fastened them to the landing gear. Hereafter, landings would have to be made on snow.

They flew on for hours, and Doc Savage knew they must be getting near the arctic rendezvous with John Sunlight.

Doc contacted Long Tom and Ham by radio.

The prince sat back in the cabin, but could not hear because the plane was so noisy.

"Long Tom," Doc said, "what is your position now?"

There was a "scrambler" here in Doc's plane, and another one in Long Tom's ship; one scrambler mixed up the voice until it was an unintelligible gobble, and the other unmixed it and made it understandable. That was so John Sunlight could not comprehend, in case he did tune in on them.

Long Tom's position proved to be approximately one thousand miles southward.

"Stay back about a hundred miles," Doc directed, "once you draw near the rendezvous. Land and wait for some word from us."

"O. K.," Long Tom said. "Maybe once we get down on the snow, Fifi will cool off."

"Fifi? What is wrong with Fifi?"

"Listen, Doc, that Fifi is a pain," Long Tom complained. "All she does is cuddle up against Ham and wail, 'Poor little me!'"

Monk heard that, and he was so indignant he forgot himself and snatched the microphone out of Doc's hands.

"Did you say Fifi is cuddlin' up to Ham?" he howled.

"Yes. And – "

"You tell Ham to cut that out!" Monk squalled wrathfully.

Long Tom evidently conveyed the order to Ham, because he came back to the mike in a moment with an answer.

"Ham says," Long Tom explained, "for you to go jump in a snowbank."

Monk collapsed and made strangling noises, opening and closing his hands as though he had his fingers around the neck of his favorite enemy. His agitation must have been considerable, because he came to the point of criticizing a Doc Savage tactic, something he rarely did – not because Doc couldn't take it, but because the bronze man's judgment was usually first-rate.

"Doc," Monk said, "why the dickens didn't we leave Fifi in New York?"

The bronze man had explained that before, but he expounded it again for Monk's benefit.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"Fifi," he said, "is our hold over her two freak sisters, Giantia and Titania, who are probably with John Sunlight."

Monk subsided, since only the future would show whether Fifi would be of any value.

THE prince grew worse. They hadn't thought that possible, but the prince demonstrated that it was. He howled and roared.

Doc Savage was kept very busy. Doc had to be the pilot as well as Adonis, the bodyguard. Monk had to be only Beauty, the other bodyguard, but that grew complicated when the prince began to express an insane desire to choke Beauty and see if that would bring back his voice.

Monk could not afford to have Beauty's voice brought back, because he could not speak Beauty's language.

"Where's that Beauty!" the prince screamed. "I'll beat a voice back into him."

Doc Savage said, using the imaginary pilot's voice, "I think we are approaching the landing place."

The prince jammed his face against the cold plane windows and swore at his inability to see.

"What is it like?"

Doc Savage scrutinized the terrain through the plane window. He saw an expanse which appeared to be nothing but pack ice covered by snow. A cold, white waste across which swirling ghosts of snow were carried by the wind.

Doc described what he saw.

"You fool!" the prince screeched. "This can't be the place."

"We are within fifteen minutes flying of the spot to which you have directed us," the bronze man explained. "I have checked the latitude—and–longitude figures carefully."

"Call me," the prince snarled, "when you reach the spot. I want you to describe what you see!"

Doc went back to the cockpit. Monk flew on. Monk had drawn a black dot on the chart, to mark the latitude and longitude of their goal, and a red line to indicate their progress. The red line had about reached the black dot, and Monk was wondering.

"This territory is all unexplored," he remarked. "Has been, for the last thousand miles."

Doc did not comment on that.

Monk had evidently been thinking about their chance of getting back, in case they had engine trouble, for he continued.

"This is about the most remote corner of the earth," he grumbled. "They talk about the polar seas being explored, but believe you me, that's an exaggeration. Nobody is supposed to have ever been within a thousand miles of this point."

Doc Savage was silent. His strange flake gold eyes were focused ahead rather intently.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"There," he said, and pointed.

Monk grabbed a pair of binoculars, knowing very well that his own vision was not equal to the bronze man's trained eyes. Monk focused the glasses, peered into the misty grayness that was the perpetual arctic daytime.

"Blazes!" he croaked.

He stood up and leaned forward in an effort to see more of the strange object he had sighted.

"What – what is that?" he gasped.

Doc said nothing. And in a moment, Monk emitted an astounded gasp, and sagged back on the cockpit seat.

"The Strange Blue Dome!"

FOR miles and miles in all directions the white waste looked absolutely barren – except directly ahead, where there was obviously an island.

The island seemed to be solid stone, with no bit of soil and no vegetation. Just a high, bald knob of stone. A mass of rock rearing up from the floor of the Arctic Ocean. It must be as solid as Gibraltar, for it stood firm against the ice pack. The ice had piled up against the island, and for leagues it was broken in great bergs. The floes had squeezed and piled one on top of the other, and the ice had lumped up in masses that were sometimes as large as factory buildings.

The Strange Blue Dome stood, a weird-looking thing, on the rock island.

It was like half a blue agate marble.

Like a marble that some fabulous titan had lost here in this unknown part of the globe, to become buried in stone and surrounded by fantastic ice.

It was strange.

Lying where it did, it should logically have been about the most completely lost thing upon the earth.

"Uh – I – well," Monk said. "Uh – that is – hmmm!"

He fell silent.

Then he looked at Doc Savage – stared at the bronze man's face at close range. And suddenly, he knew! He was positive. Doc Savage, not even Doc, could maintain composure in the face of such an incredible discovery as that queer blue thing yonder – unless Doc had known it was there.

"Doc," Monk said.

The bronze man did not seem to hear.

"Doc!"

The bronze man's eyes left the blue mystery.

"Doc," Monk said, "what is that thing?"

The bronze man was silent and grim-faced.

Monk suddenly seized Doc Savage tightly with both hands, and all the puzzled amazement came out of him in a shouted demand.

"You know what the blue thing is!" Monk bellowed. "What is it, Doc?"

Doc never answered.

Because the prince shoved his head into the pilot's compartment.

"I heard you!" he said loudly.

## **Chapter 15. HALF A BLUE BALL**

THERE was – Monk was a long time forgetting that moment – an interval when it seemed certain that their hoax was discovered, that all their careful planning had gone for nothing. Then:

"I sometimes talk to myself," Doc Savage said quietly in the pilot's voice.

Monk held his breath.

"Oh," the prince said. "I could only get a voice. The damned plane makes so much noise."

Monk began breathing again. It was all right. The prince was too stupidly drunk to fool them.

"What do you see below?" the prince demanded.

"There is a rocky island," Doc said quietly enough. "And on the island is a strange-looking blue dome."

"A blue dome?"

"It seems a very queer thing to find in the arctic," Doc said.

The prince announced in a profane, inebriated voice that he didn't like queer things, and the thing he liked least of all was the fact that he had come here without knowing why he was doing it.

"Land!" he ordered.

"Very well," Doc said.

Monk itched to ask a legion of questions, but the prince stood close, and he dared not speak.

Completely flabbergasted, Monk examined the blue half-sphere. The plane was dropping now. The ice waste, the solid rock island, the blue mystery, seemed to swell as they came upward. The berg pinnacles appeared to grow. It was startling. The pack ice was even more formidable than it had appeared from a great height.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

It occurred to Monk again that this was as inaccessible a spot, probably, as existed on earth.

"You had better get back in the cabin," Doc told the prince, "and fasten your safety belt. Have your bodyguards help you."

Monk helped the prince back into the cabin, doing his best to seem like two men. Handling the prince was about like handling a warm worm, Monk thought.

Then Monk went back to the cockpit and stood by for the next move in their plan.

HE watched the island. Snow covered most of it, and in places there was ice; obviously it was no spot for a landing, except along the southern edge, where there was a level area where the snow looked deep and level – a smooth white stretch which terminated against a ridge of high, broken pack ice that had jammed up against the island.

The plane leveled, skimmed the gleaming ice fangs, swung past the blue dome – Monk was made breathless by the queer shimmering luster of the thing – then the craft dipped for the level area of snow.

There would be no room to spare. But the less room the better, for what they had in mind.

The plane skis touched. The craft landed fast: Too fast Doc knew that; he deliberately had too much speed.

"Monk!" he rapped.

Monk knew what to do. He jerked his fascinated gaze off the blue dome, dashed back to the rear, then came rushing forward again, doubled low so he could not be seen from outside. He had a bundle – a strange man-shaped bundle.

Monk slapped the bundle in the spare pilot's cockpit seat.

The plane slid on across the clearing. It climbed up the side of an ice pinnacle, moving slowly now. It slid sidewise, turning. One ski runner snagged. The plane went over, a wing buckling.

The craft dropped down behind an ice ridge, somewhat of a wreck.

Monk snatched the prince, dragged him out of the door. He pulled behind him one of Doc's equipment cases of metal.

Doc wrenched at a tab overhead in the pilot's cockpit. He tore the tab off. Gasoline burst through from the tanks in a flood that soaked the cabin.

Standing in the plane door, Doc struck a match, tossed it. With a low whoop, flames enveloped the plane interior. Doc bounded backward, but not before he was singed enough to make it convincing – the fur burned off around his parka hood, his bearskin trousers scorched and smoking.

Doc gestured at the case.

Monk let the prince drop in the snow, carried the equipment case to a snowdrift near by, made a hole with great haste, and buried the box. Monk used his hands to scoop great banks of snow over the case, then went back to Doc.

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"Our nest egg," Monk whispered, "is all planted."

Fire devoured the plane with roaring greed. In the cockpit particularly, it burned and blackened the long bundle which Doc had left there – a fake thing made of beefsteak, imitation bones of composition, enclosed in a pilot's flying suit.

They had to have some way to account for no pilot getting out of the plane.

THE prince showed further that he was a spineless, cruel fool. The roaring flames scared him, and he ran away, or tried to, clawing at an ice ridge and slipping back, screaming all the while.

"Adonis!" he screeched. "Beauty!" Then: "Where's the pilot?" he wanted to know.

"The pilot did not get out," Doc said, using the voice of the bestial Adonis.

"It serves the clumsy so–and–so right!" the prince gritted. "I hope he burns to death."

A moment later, Civan appeared.

Giantia and Titania were with Civan. So were some others. But no John Sunlight.

Their coming gave Monk a vast start; he had no idea from whence they came.

They came in haste, plowing in the snow, slipping on ice where it was bare. They had guns, big revolvers with mechanisms that would not freeze and become useless in this cold, as automatics sometimes did. The guns went back into clothing when Civan recognized the prince, and gave the word.

They got the odor coming out of the burning plane. There were also faint cries for help coming from the plane now.

"The pilot's burning to death!" Civan bawled.

"Let him burn!" the prince snarled.

After a while, the low, awful cries that seemed to come from the plane were no longer audible.

Doc Savage was a skilled ventriloquist, and he had done a very good job putting the cries for help into the plane; but he did not believe in pushing his luck too far, and anyway, it was about time they thought the pilot had burned to death.

Civan looked over the damage.

"Kakoi srahm!" he said. "What a shame! It was a good plane."

He gave Adonis and Beauty a close inspection. They did not look at all like Doc Savage and Monk Mayfair to Civan. They looked like two tough lads with whom it might be a good idea not to be found alone.

"Who are these cookies?" asked Civan, who could speak American slang with a Russian accent.

Adonis and Beauty were not supposed to be able to speak any English, and they murdered their mother tongue when they spoke it. They merely glared at Civan and made ugly noises.

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"They are my bodyguards," said the prince sharply. "Take me to John Sunlight!"

Civan turned and walked back the way he had come. The fact that he slipped almost at once and fell flat on his back did not improve his dignity, but seemed to do no harm to his disposition. It developed that progress on the ice was likely to be a succession of spills, none of them expected. The prince cursed every time he fell down, and struck his bodyguards.

"Oh, boy!" Monk said. "What can that blue thing be, anyway?"

Monk did not say this out loud, but Doc Savage was lip reader enough to catch the words, even though Monk's lips looked stuffy and unnatural because of an injected chemical which produced a harmless form of swelling, and was infinitely better than internal padding of parafin or some other substance which might be discovered.

The bronze man did not explain about the blue dome.

JOHN Sunlight had covered his planes with white tents. That was why they had not been discernible from the air.

There was a wind of some force blowing, and the air was full of driving snow, and that had helped make the tents invisible.

The men seemed to be camped in white tents, fully a quarter mile from the weird blue edifice.

Covered planes, white house-tents, and igloos were located on the south side of the level, natural landing field in the arctic pack ice.

The prince was conducted into one of the tents. Civan made an effort to prevent the two hideous bodyguards from sticking with the prince, but he got a shove that sat him down in the snow for his pains.

"They cannot understand English!" the prince said indignantly.

John Sunlight sat in the largest of the white tents. He had caused a block of ice-bard snow to be cut and brought into the tent, and he had spread a polar bearskin over this to make a seat.

Doc and Monk stared at John Sunlight in astonishment. The prince would have stared, too, only he couldn't see.

John Sunlight wore light duck trousers and a white silk shirt which was open at the neck. Tropical attire! And yet it must be thirty below zero outside. A warm day in the arctic for this season. But still thirty below.

John Sunlight was not unaware of the effect. He liked effects. Probably his whole weird, macabre life was devoted to getting them.

"Sit down," he said politely. "And do only one thing – do not ask questions about the blue dome."

Then the placidity left his dark poetic face and burning eyes, for he could see that something was wrong with the prince's eyesight.

"Your eyes!" he rasped. "What is it?"

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The prince said a great deal that was uncomplimentary about the brand of liquor served in New York.

"H—how long will you be blind?" John Sunlight demanded.

"About twenty—four hours more, the doctor thought," the prince explained.

John Sunlight was not pleased, but there was nothing he could do about that.

"You will have to wait," he said grimly, "until your vision has returned."

"Wait? Wait for what?"

"My demonstration."

The prince was befuddled. Why he had come to the arctic was still a complete mystery to him, and he had come only because his ministers at home had told him anything in which John Sunlight was involved would be important.

"Demonstration?" the prince repeated. "What kind of a demonstration?"

"You must see it to appreciate its value," John Sunlight said.

"See what?"

"The thing," John Sunlight said, "for which you and your government are going to pay me ten million dollars."

## Chapter 16. SNOW TRICKS

THAT was all the satisfaction the prince got. He yelled and swore, and John Sunlight gave him liquor to quiet him. Usually John Sunlight could quiet men without using outside means, either liquor or a club, but in this case the prince couldn't see John Sunlight.

You had to see John Sunlight to appreciate him.

The prince was shoved into a tent, Doc and Monk were shoved in with him. This was not to their liking, and they started to come right out of the tent.

A guard put the muzzle of a rifle close to their noses and wagged it.

"In the tent you stay," he growled. "And if you go near the Strange Blue Dome, you'll get plenty dead. Savvy?"

Doc and Monk sat down on polar bearskins. There seemed to be nothing else to do for the time being, and it was bitterly cold.

The prince howled and sang, and swore for a while, then fell over in a stupor, and they rolled him up in more bearskins.

Doc and Monk began talking with their hands.

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"This is insane business," Monk fingered.

"Not so crazy," Doc replied. "John Sunlight feels safe this far from New York City."

They were skilled in use of the finger alphabetic system used by deaf-and-dumb persons.

"But what's he doing here?" Monk demanded.

"Making arrangements to sell something to various European nations, it would appear," Doc responded.

"Doc, that blue dome – " Monk did not go any farther into this at the moment because there was an interruption. Giantia and Titania came into the tent. One carried a kettle of what seemed to be hot stew, and the other had cups and a pot of hot coffee. Steam from the warm food boiled around the two big women.

"Cooks!" Giantia grumbled.

"Here!" Titania snapped, and shoved the food at Doc and Monk.

Evidently the large ladies were not satisfied with their lot. They looked Monk and Doc over with distaste, but no fear. The two big women seemed to have infinite confidence in their own ability to handle any situation. No normal women could have looked at Doc and Monk – in the kind of disguises they now wore – without feeling frightened.

Suddenly, Doc straightened, looked interested in something outside, and cupped hands to his ears. His pantomime was plain; he meant that he had heard something outside, very faint, and he was listening.

It was perfectly natural that Titania and Giantia should also listen.

There was, at the moment, a lull in the arctic wind. A voice drifted to them. It was a voice that could be unmistakably identified as belonging to John Sunlight.

"GIANTIA and Titania," this John Sunlight voice said, "are fools. They do not know their sister, Fifi, is safe and in the hands of Doc Savage's men."

There was a mumbling answer, no words distinguishable. Both voices seemed far away, reaching the tent only through some freak of the lulling wind.

But Giantia and Titania were staring at each other with the most stark shock that Monk had ever seen.

"Fifi – alive!" Giantia croaked. "But she was in that ballyhoo plane. Doc Savage blew her and the plane to bits."

Titania said, "I – " then went silent, for the John Sunlight voice was going on.

"As long as the two fool women think Doc Savage got their sister killed," the voice said, "they will work with me. They may be useful."

The voice cackled delightedly.

"I've even made them think," it ended, "that Doc Savage blew up that ballyhoo plane. They don't know there was a radio-controlled bomb in the plane, and that Fifi wasn't even in it – that her voice was coming off a

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phonograph record."

That was the end of the John Sunlight voice, for the arctic wind had started to blow again with whining chill.

Giantia and Titania stood and stared at each other in incredulous amazement. Delight – it had soaked in that Fifi was alive – leaped over their faces, and Titania opened her mouth, doubtless to emit a yell of joy. But Giantia stopped her by clapping a hand over her mouth.

"Fool!" Giantia hissed. "Do you want him to know we've learned the truth?"

Titania subsided. She assumed an expression of grim purpose.

"I'm gonna break John Sunlight's back with my two hands!" she gritted.

Giantia shook her head warningly. "Sh–h–h. Too risky. I don't think we could get away with it."

"Then what'll we do?"

"I don't know," Giantia said. "We'll think it over. But one thing sure – we'll do something."

The two huge women stumbled out of the tent.

Monk waited until they must be well away. Then rolled over close to Doc Savage.

"Doc," Monk breathed, "that was as nice a job of voice imitation and ventriloquism as I ever saw."

"It should do no harm, at least," Doc admitted. Which was probably as close as he ever came to admitting that he considered he had done a difficult piece of work rather well.

Monk still had the Strange Blue Dome on his mind.

But again he was sidetracked off that subject. He listened. Then he threw a quick glance at Doc Savage, half suspecting the bronze man might be imitating this new sound. But obviously he wasn't.

"A plane!" Monk muttered.

Then abrupt anxiety seized him.

"Maybe it's Ham and Long Tom!" he croaked. "Maybe they misunderstood instructions and have come on here!"

THE arriving plane did not carry Ham, Long Tom and Fifi.

It carried Porto Novyi – that was the man's name, although his name wasn't important, since this was the only time he stood out particularly in the grim scheme of things. The rest of the time, he was just another harpy in the pack of soul-snatchers. Porto Novyi was a squat, wide man who had not been a Siberian convict, and had not been on the ice-breaker. He was a free-lance pilot, a swashbuckling daredevil who fought in wars for hire, or did any other kind of flying that paid well.

Neither laws nor human rights meant much to Porto Novyi. He was scared of only one man in the world, and that was John Sunlight. There was probably not a living person he would not have double-crossed for money

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

– except John Sunlight.

The plane swung down and landed. It was a slim ship of remarkably advanced streamlining. It was painted a color which camouflaged it against the sky; it could hardly be seen from the earth when it flew at any considerable height. Moreover, the two motors were scientifically silenced.

Flying two miles up in the sky, this plane could be a ghost.

Porto Novyi bounded out of the plane. He was excited. He ran, a roly-poly figure in flying furs, to the tent occupied by John Sunlight. He even neglected to give the blue dome thing his accustomed number of puzzled looks.

John Sunlight looked sharply at the pilot.

"Did something happen to Baron Karl?" John Sunlight demanded.

The aviator shook his head.

"I took Baron Karl to a Montreal airport," he said.

John Sunlight still looked concerned. Baron Karl had been here to the arctic rendezvous, and John Sunlight had put on a demonstration of what he had to sell, and everything had gone off well.

Baron Karl had seemed satisfied. Enthusiastic, in fact. That was important. John Sunlight needed ten million dollars from Baron Karl's government. He needed, of course, infinitely more money than that – for what he had in mind. But ten million of it was to come from Baron Karl's government, and it was imperative that nothing should interfere with that.

Baron Karl had promised to buy what John Sunlight had to sell.

So it was Very essential that Baron Karl remain satisfied.

"I landed Baron Karl at Montreal," the pilot repeated. "He was enthusiastic about your proposition."

John Sunlight frowned. "Then what," he demanded, "are you worried about?"

"A plane," the flier growled.

"Plane? What's wrong with that ship you're flying? It's the best

"I don't mean that one," he growled.

"You – "

"I refer to the plane," the flier said, "which is resting on the snow about a hundred miles south of here."

John Sunlight looked dumbfounded.

"But I know of no such plane!" he exclaimed.

"That's what I was afraid of," the pilot agreed.

John Sunlight got up and took a quick turn around the tent, his feet causing the frozen snow under the tent floor to make squeaking noises. It was bitterly cold, and he had been putting on a show, going around in light trousers and thin silk shirt, pretending not even to notice the chill.

But now he forgot himself and gave a violent shiver. He shook, in fact, until he all but fell down. Then he got control of himself and glowered. It always aggravated him to have his control on himself slip.

"It will be dark soon," he said. "Judging from the clouds it is going to be as dark as night before long."

Porto Novyi looked up through the misty grayness at the dark clouds gathering on the southern horizon and climbing up into the sky like stalking animals.

"As dark as night," the pilot agreed.

"We'll drop some men off by parachute," John Sunlight said, "and have a look at that mysterious plane. You marked the location exactly, did you?"

"I can take off blindfolded and find that plane," the flier said, "because it's standing beside an open lead in the ice, the only Open water I saw for a thousand miles."

### **Chapter 17. DELILAH**

LONG TOM and Ham were finding it comfortable waiting beside the open lead in the ice.

The open "lead" meant open water – a crack where the ice pack had spread apart, leaving a narrow, salty lake which had not frozen. Long Tom and Ham had landed on this water, after first looking it over to make sure there were no floating ice blocks. It was the only suitable landing place they had been able to find. So they had come down, although the spot was too close to a direct line to the southward for their liking.

Their plane was a type that could land on water, snow or earth.

The cabin was snug, and readily kept warm. Moreover, they wore special arctic gear which Doc Savage had developed – garments that were chemically heated.

The plane stood on the ice. They had driven it up there with the motors, and it was poised for a quick take-off, should the ice lead threaten to close, or should they get a call from Doc Savage.

Fifi was pouting. She had turned out to be consistent with her pouting, and it aggravated Long Tom, although Ham didn't seem to mind. Ham, indeed, seemed to enjoy listening to Fifi's complaining.

Just now, Long Tom was listening to Ham tell Fifi what a sweet, pretty, brave, patient little creature she was.

"Ahr-r-r!" Long Tom said disgustedly.

He got out of the plane. Wind caught his clothes and shook them, and the snow particles stung his face. He walked around the plane, to make sure that no light was showing from the shaded windows.

It was intensely dark; the clouds that had been hunched in the south, now turned the whole sky black. The small waves in the open lead made slapping noises. From time to time, there was a long nimbling grunt as the ice floes cracked; sometimes the ice made gunshot reports, a characteristic of freezing floes.

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Long Tom felt along the side of the plane for a wire. He found it. But an instant before, just as he came near the wire, there was a whining sound inside the plane.

The wire was spread in a huge circle around the plane, in the same fashion that cowboys spread a rope around their bedrolls when they bed down on the range, thinking to keep away the snakes. But this wire was more efficient.

The wire was a capacity burglar alarm; if anyone came near it carrying a rifle or some piece of metal of like size, a delicately balanced electrical field around the wire was disturbed, and carefully adjusted apparatus in the plane would give an alarm.

Satisfied the alarm was operating – the machine pistol Long Tom carried in an armpit holster was metal enough to set it off – the feeble-looking electrical wizard climbed back into the plane. That capacity alarm was his pet; he had an infinite amount of confidence in the thing.

They were just deciding to go to sleep when the buzzer whined again.

HAM and Long Tom went into action as if a starting gun had fired. Ham sailed into the cockpit, grabbed switches. The big motors – chemical heaters had. kept them warm – exploded into life.

Long Tom landed spread-legged in the center of the cabin, knocked another switch. This ignited flares. The flares had been planted in the ice near the plane; they were high on light, collapsible rods, and reflectors threw the light away from the plane, kept it from blinding those in the craft.

A glare as white as the sun spread hundreds of yards in all directions from the plane.

The white blaze disclosed three fur-clad figures. They were about seventy-five yards distant. Friends? No. That was soon settled. Down they went; their rifles came up. And jacketed bullets began hitting the plane.

The lead slugs made big drumstick noises, but did not come into the plane, because its cabin was alloy-armored.

"Take off!" Long Tom yelled.

Ham barked, "There's only three of

"Take off!" Long Tom roared. "I don't like this!"

Ham fed the engines gas.

Long Tom picked his machine pistol out of its bolster, used the muzzle to prod open the lid of a firing port in the plane cabin. He latched the pistol in single-fire position. He shot. The gun noise was not big, but the sound its bullet made was astounding. The slug was high-explosive. A cloud of ice flew up in front of the three riflemen.

Long Tom shot again, this time at one of the men. This second bullet was a "mercy" slug; it would cause unconsciousness without doing much damage. But apparently he missed with that one.

The third shot, he put in front of the trio. This bullet hit and became a cloud of black smoke.

That was how the supermachine pistol charge alternated – one explosive, one mercy, one smoke barrage.

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The plane tore its runners loose from the ice, wallowed forward like a duck, splashed into the water.

"We'll lay 'em out from the air!" Long Tom yelled. "But first, we gotta find out what this means!"

The plane scudded along the lead. The water was black, heaving, ominous in the light. But it was good enough for a take-off.

Good-enough water, but the plane never made it. The reason it didn't was a bomb. A bomb that fell from a plane which came down in a silent dive. The bomb was almost a direct hit.

A geyser of water climbed, the plane almost in the middle of it. The plane wings folded downward like a sick bird. Then the plane seemed to complete a convulsive jump, and fell over on its back.

Porto Novyi, war pilot for money, was good at his trade.

Water gushed into the plane cabin. The bomb had opened a rip in the side.

"Help!" Fifi screeched. "Help! Help!" And she went off into senseless, hysterical shrieking.

Ham and Long Tom fought to get the girl to the plane door, to get the door open. The door on that side had jammed. They tried the other. Water pressed against it; then they got it open and water jumped in with a great gurgling whoop, and mauled them around in the cabin.

They fought back to the door, hung to its edge, pulled themselves – and Fifi – outside. The plane was under, sinking. The water felt incredibly cold, for they had been warm and comfortable in the plane. It chopped at them like a million knives, that water.

It seemed frozen ages before they got to the surface.

THE three men with rifles were standing on the edge of the ice. One lifted a rifle, and the bullet, hitting the water beside Long Tom's head, sounded as though a firecracker had gone off.

"Hold it!" one of the riflemen shouted. "Savage isn't there!"

No more bullets bit. The men with the rifles gestured, shouted.

There was nothing to do but for Long Tom and Ham to swim to the men, hauling Fifi. She screamed and tried to climb on top of them. She fought them madly.

Overhead, the plane came diving back. Its superbly silenced motor made a noise only a little greater than the wind. Satisfied, the pilot made another circle, then came down in a landing glide toward the open lead of water. That plane, too, was equipped to land on ice, snow, water, or earth.

"Come out!"

The rifleman who gave that order was Civan.

Climbing out of water onto slick ice was hard work. Long Tom and Ham, knowing how it was done, threw their arms up on the ice, and waited for the quick cold to freeze the fur of their garments to the ice. Then they got themselves out and dragged Fifi onto the ice.

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Fifi kicked and struck at them, cried at the top of her Voice.

"Stop that!" Long Tom gritted.

She paid them no attention.

"You little idiot!" Long Tom hissed. "You made us bring you along!"

She kept on squealing.

Civan growled an order. One of the two riflemen went away and came back shortly dragging three parachutes obviously chutes by which the men had descended quietly from the plane.

The plane taxied up. A man out on the nose kept it from bumping the ice too hard, using a boat hook.

Porto Novyi, the pilot, put his dark, unpleasant face out of the cockpit windows.

"Are those flares about burned out?" he demanded.

"Just about."

Porto Novyi turned on his plane landing lights, and thereafter these illuminated the scene.

"Question them," Porto Novyi ordered.

"I'm running this!" Civan said.

Civan jabbed his rifle at Ham and Long Tom.

"Strip to your underwear!" he gritted.

Ham was cold, but he suddenly got much colder.

"We'll freeze!" he gasped. "You can't

"I'd love to see you freeze!" Civan snarled. "We'd all love to see you freeze. Strip!"

Ham and Long Tom got their soaked fur garments off, after which they knew they would freeze to death in, at the most, half an hour.

"Where is Doc Savage?" Civan demanded.

THAT, obviously, was a question that Long Tom and Ham could not afford to answer. They were actors enough not to glance at each other, not to give any sign that they were making up a story.

Turning slowly, Ham stood shivering and looking at the dark, squirming water of the lead. He did nothing but that for a moment. Then, suddenly, he fell to his knees and broke into realistic sobs.

"Don't take it so hard," Long Tom said miserably.

"I kuk—can't huh—help it," Ham sobbed.

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"What the hell is this?" Civan snarled.

"Doc Savage was in that plane," Long Tom gulped. "He was killed by the bomb."

This was an out and out untruth, but under the circumstances Long Tom did not feel like letting a lack of veracity trouble him.

"Doc Savage – dead?" Civan began to grin.

"Yuh – yes," Ham sobbed. Suddenly Ham sprang to his feet, and gave every indication of intending to spring upon Civan and the others in a grief–crazed rage. "You killed Doc!" he shrieked.

It was good acting, and Civan was convinced.

"All right," he said. "We might as well shoot them and finish off all the blasted trouble they've caused."

Long Tom, suddenly relieved, said, "Thanks."

"Thanks?" Civan was startled. "What for?"

"For shooting us," Long Tom said grimly. "I wouldn't care about being left to freeze to death. I figured that was about your caliber – so thanks for the shooting."

"Go ahead," Civan ordered. "Shoot them!"

Fifi screamed then. All her other screams were mere kitten mewings compared to this one. If there were polar bears within miles, they must have started running.

"No!" she screeched. "You – they lied to you! Doc Savage wasn't in the plane!"

Long Tom yelled, "Shut up – "

But Fifi was scared; she didn't see the slightest chance of going on living. She didn't know that Ham and Long Tom were gathered to leap backward into the water, and that they had other plans if that was successful.

"I can tell you where Doc Savage is!" Fifi screeched.

"Where?" Civan demanded.

Fifi was not too scared to bargain.

"You take me to John Sunlight," she gasped cunningly, "and I'll show him Doc Savage."

Civan said, "Take her in the plane!"

They boosted the cute little Delilah into the plane. Civan and the other two riflemen climbed into the craft.

"Hey!" Long Tom squalled. "You said you wouldn't leave us to freeze and

"I change my mind sometimes," Civan shouted at them.

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LONG TOM and Ham stood, in thin cotton underwear and woolen socks, on the ice, and watched the plane scud down the lead and take the air. The craft, once it was off, cut its lights; so that there was only the hissing of engine exhaust to mark its presence. Then that sound left, and there remained nothing but darkness and intense cold, the noise of waves slopping the ice, and the chill whining of the arctic wind that blew interminably, carrying a fine fog of snow particles that hit their naked skin and felt like needles.

In that chill darkness, in this lost waste, there was one thing that stood out with the staring certainty of death: The nearest civilization was thousands and thousands of miles to the south, and they were two practically naked men left alone.

"Swell!" Long Tom said.

"It could be worse," Ham admitted. "Say, if you hadn't given him that speech about not leaving us to freeze, I don't think he would have done this."

"Contrary, isn't he?" Long Tom remarked. He had a little difficulty with his speech, because his teeth insisted on hitting together.

"Let's get busy," Ham croaked, "before our teeth get knocked flat."

They walked, judging their directions carefully in the darkness, until they reached a drift of snow. They kicked into the drift, scooped with their hands, searched.

Hidden in the drift was the cache of equipment they had placed there against possible emergencies. Taking a leaf out of Doc Savage's book, they had overlooked no bets. They found the cache.

There was clothing, food, a tent, rifles, a sled. The sled could be covered with the tent, thus converting it into a boat with which they could cross open leads. There was a compass, sextant, for finding their way to a destination.

They dressed, then ran and jumped until their circulation was restored.

Best of all, there was a portable short-wave radio with which they could contact help.

The plane came back while they were setting up the radio. It dived, dropped a flare. The flare swung from a parachute, and stayed in the air a long time, and when it hit the ice, the plane dropped another one. The plane also dropped a few bombs, and sent down many bullets.

Long Tom and Ham eventually had to throw away their rifles and hold up their arms. Otherwise, they would have died.

The plane landed on the lead, and Civan came to confront them and cackle pleasantly.

"I got to thinking," Civan growled, "about the reputation this Doc Savage crowd has got. They didn't get that rep for nothing, I think. So we came back. Lucky for us, eh?"

Long Tom and Ham were loaded into the plane and tied hand and foot.

"You see," Civan explained, "we contacted John Sunlight by radio, and he says to keep you alive. We may be able to use you as hostages to keep this Doc Savage off our neck, if worse comes to worse."

Fifi whimpered in the cabin.

"I wonder if we shouldn't just shoot you and put you out of your misery?" Civan growled.

"But I'm going to show Doc Savage to you!" Fifi wailed.

One of the bullets Ham and Long Tom had fired up at the plane had damaged the wiring of one motor. It could be repaired, but it would take a little time.

Porto Novyi, the pilot, set about making the repairs.

## **Chapter 18. THE POISONED SEAL**

JOHN SUNLIGHT, having contacted Civan and the plane by radio, knew about the delay caused by the necessary motor repairs. He said pleasantly enough that he didn't mind. But he did. He spoke pleasantly, because he considered that his expedition had done a very nice piece of work. Wasn't Fifi going to show them where Doc Savage could be found?

Of course, the silly little fool of a girl wouldn't tell anybody but John Sunlight. She probably thought she could save herself in that fashion.

Fifi did not know John Sunlight very well.

John Sunlight took a walk over to the tent wherein slept the prince. He kicked the prince in the ribs, got him awake.

"Can you use your eyes yet?" John Sunlight demanded.

The prince did not relish being kicked in the ribs.

"I can see much better!" he snarled.

John Sunlight was pleased.

"In half an hour," he said, "I shall make my demonstration for you."

"You mean," the prince gritted, "that you'll show me why I made this crazy trip up here?"

"Exactly."

John Sunlight then walked out of the tent.

The prince, still rankling over being kicked in the ribs, rushed over and kicked Monk – Beauty – several times to relieve his feelings.

"I'll kick your voice hack into you!" he roared.

He had no success, but he felt better.

"Get out of here!" he screamed. "I hate the sight of your ugly faces!"

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Doc and Monk did not like the sight of the prince's face any better by now, and they were very willing to get out of the tent – providing the guard outside would let them. They scrambled out through the tent door – and confronted John Sunlight.

John Sunlight stood, a tall dark tower of a figure; he had given up his show of not feeling the cold, and had donned dark clothing and a black cape and an aviator's black helmet. He presented a picture that was not in any sense pleasant. He showed his teeth.

"Your master treats you roughly," he said.

He spoke these words in the tongue which Adonis and Beauty were supposed to use.

Doc replied. He spoke the tongue fluently, as he spoke many others.

"Our lot is not a bad one," Doc replied in the language. He used the illiterate form of the tongue, as Adonis might be expected to do.

"You have been with his highness long?" John Sunlight asked.

"A long time," Doc replied promptly.

He didn't know whether that was the correct answer; there had been no time to check on all details of the prince's two bodyguards

"Where were you born?" John Sunlight asked.

Doc immediately named a small mountain town in the prince's native land.

"I have heard of the place," John Sunlight said. Then he added, "Well, you will be out of the cold weather before long. Your master will probably start back at dawn. I shall send you all in one of my planes."

He walked away.

Monk breathed, "Doc, we could grab him now "No," the bronze man whispered. "We have to learn exactly what he is doing. We have to be sure. We suspect the truth, but we are not sure."

"O. K.," Monk said. "But this prince is gonna get strangled if I hafta bodyguard 'im much longer!"

Doc said, "We had better make a try for that equipment case."

"Want me to help – "

"You go get it," Doc said. "I will stay here and try to alibi your absence, in case you are missed."

DOC Savage watched Monk move away. The homely chemist was lost in the blackness of the brooding dark clouds almost at once, and the drifting snow covered his footprints.

There was no sign of the guard who had been watching the tent, and Doc wondered about what had become of the fellow. That mystery was not long being clarified.

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There was a sudden, frightened outcry from a near-by igloo. There was genuine horror in the voice. It was the guard.

The fellow had evidently gotten cold, crawled into an igloo to keep warm, and dozed off. John Sunlight had found him missing, and put men hunting for him.

Another guard appeared shortly. He had an electric lantern, and he was too concerned over the failure of the other guard not staying on the job to order Doc back in the tent.

"The poor fool," the new guard muttered. "He should have known better."

Evidently, he referred to the other guard.

Monk would be coming back soon. Something had to be done about that.

Doc began to sing. There was not much music in his singing, but there was volume – and sense, if one understood ancient Mayan, the language which he and his men used for private conversation. Over and over, he told Monk to be careful, to wait until a propitious moment to show himself.

Doc allowed plenty of time – time enough that he knew Monk was lying low, out in the darkness.

Then the bronze man took a coin out of his pocket and began to play with it. He tossed it high, and caught it, cackling like the half-witted oaf he resembled in his disguise.

Directly what looked like the inevitable happened. The coin flew over, hit the side of the tent, and skidded down into the snow.

Doc gasped, ran to look for the coin. The guard watched idly. When Doc beckoned him to help, the man came over on that side of the tent and began kicking around in the snow.

"Monk – your chance!" Doc called in Mayan.

He made it sound as if he were saying something disgusted about losing the coin.

When Doc found the coin and entered the tent, Monk was inside, looking innocent. The guard, thanks to the diversion, had not seen him return.

THE prince apparently had rolled up in his blankets again and gone back to sleep. He must be a physical wreck. It was not hard to believe. Doc shook him gently, and the dissolute fellow snored. He was asleep.

"Where is the case, Monk?" Doc breathed.

"It's cached in a snowbank about forty feet from the tent," Monk whispered. "if you could follow my tracks, you can find –"

"All right," Doc said. "You hold the fort down for a while now."

"But how you gonna leave? That guard

Doc used a sharp knife – he and Monk had not been searched – and opened a slit in the rear of the tent. He' opened it close to the floor, and after he crawled out, tied the canvas together again with a spare four inches

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

of shoestring. Monk, inside, placed bearskin sleeping covers against the spot, and it was temporarily unnoticeable.

Doc faded away quickly in the darkness, keeping low. He circled, and found, not without some difficulty, Monk's tracks. The wind was filling them rapidly.

It was only by bending low and watching the reflection of the tent guard's electric lantern that Doc was able to locate Monk's footprints at all. Once he had found them, he managed to help along the business of following the prints by utilizing the sense of touch.

Later, the bronze man located the equipment case which Monk had buried. Carrying it, Doc retreated a short distance, then opened the case.

Principal item in the equipment box was a portable shortwave radio outfit.

Doc spent ten minute's in a futile effort to contact Ham and Long Tom.

He was worried enough over that, after he had checked the radio and was sure it was putting out a signal, to make his strange, low trilling sound. He made it unconsciously, and the instant he realized what he was doing, he stopped. The exotic note had an unusual carrying power; he listened, but it was evident no one had heard.

Probably everyone but John Sunlight would have been astounded at what Doc Savage did next, and what happened as a result.

Doc concealed about his person such articles of equipment as he might need. There was nothing astounding about that, nor about the fact that he concealed the radio outfit in the snow again.

Next, the bronze man moved off in the darkness, crawling much of the time, and came to an igloo. It was an Eskimo ieloovegak – an igloo. Doc found the long tumid that was part of the igloo entrance, crept in, and moved past small food-storage igloos – called suksos – into the bigger room of ice-blocks where the Eskimos lived.

There were animal skins on the floor, the walls and ceiling had been darkened by blubber lamp soot, and around the smoke vent in the ceiling a swelling of frost had gathered. Almost circling the interior of the igloo was the ice-block shelf which served the same purpose for the Eskimos as the studio couch serves New York apartment dwellers.

A blubber lamp burned in the center of the igloo, giving off a dark worm of smoke. There were sleeping forms around the shelf.

Doc went to one of the sleepers, touched him.

"Aput," the bronze man said. "Do not be alarmed – I am Doc Savage."

Aput opened his eyes. He was a sturdy man whose face was ruttled by the years. He stared at Doc Savage unbelievably.

"Doc Savage!" Aput muttered. "You do not look – but it is your voice."

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

APUT was one of the group of Eskimos whom John Sunlight had found living on the rocky island of the Strange Blue Dome. Aput was one of those who had first looked John Sunlight in the eye and insisted they could not see any weird blue dome; that it didn't even exist. That had been, of course, a clever trick to further bewilder and confuse John Sunlight.

Aput was a venerable man, still a great hunter in spite of his years, and a man who was looked to for advice and leadership. He was not, correctly speaking, the chief, because this little group of Eskimos had no chief.

The Eskimo word angakocet better described Aput's position among his people. Aiigakoeet was the vernacular for "medicine man," which meant that Aput was a combined oracle and father-confessor, the man who had the most influence.

Aput knew Doc Savage very well – obviously. It was several moments before Aput recovered from his astonishment at seeing the bronze man.

"Clijino!" Aput muttered fervently. "Welcome!"

"Thank you," Doc Savage said quietly in the Eskimo tongue. "It moves me deeply to hear you make me welcome when it is plain that I have caused you much sorrow and trouble."

Aput shrugged, and got out of his sleeping skins, took Doc Savage's hand and shook it.

"We have been hoping you would come," he said. "Elarle! Indeed, yes!"

Doc saw that Aput had nothing to wear but a sealskin singlet.

"Your clothing?" the bronze man asked.

"This John Sunlight," Aput said, "took away our clothing long ago. It is to prevent our escaping. They count each bearskin and sealskin daily, so that we will not be able to make any of them into garments. We are given clothing to go out to hunt, and armed men go along; and after the hunting, our clothing is taken away again."

Doc Savage was grimly silent.

"When did Sunlight come?"

"Akkane," Aput replied.

The word akkane meant last year.

"THEY were on a great boat, a boat as big as a hundred urmiaks," Aput continued. "It was crushed in the ice. They come ashore. We take them food. But this strange dark one, called John Sunlight, got to want only to enter the Strange Blue Dome."

"That was bad," Doc said.

"Very bad," Aput agreed. "John Sunlight tried to starve us into telling him what the Strange Blue Dome was. We pretended to be very ignorant Eskimos."

"That was good," Doc said.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Aput smiled wryly. "We were doing as you told us. We were doing the thing for which you brought us here. We were following your orders not to allow anyone to enter the Strange Blue Dome."

"And to take care of what was inside the dome," Doc said.

Aput nodded. "Yes. But we failed. For John Sunlight watched one of us, and saw that the secret door opened when we came near it with the white rabbit cape. He seemed to guess how it operated – "

"John Sunlight," Doc said, "is clever enough to know all about magnetically operated relays and door-openers, particularly since he would have little difficulty finding the tiny, permanent magnets sewed in the lining of the white rabbit cape."

Aput was silent a moment. His face clouded with grim memory.

"This John Sunlight got into the 'Strange Blue Dome,' he said, "and thereafter weird and horrible things began to happen." Aput closed his eyes and shuddered. "There was the time one of my people turned into a black ghost of smoke and blew away."

"That happened to an Eskimo here?" Doc asked.

"Yes," Aput said, and shuddered again.

Doc Savage's metallic features went grave.

"John Sunlight was making a test," he decided.

"Test?" Aput was puzzled.

"You do not understand, Aput," Doc said quietly. "There are many mysterious and terrible things in that Strange Blue Dome. You would not understand them." The bronze man shook his head slowly. "Few people in the world would understand many of them. So it is too bad that a man with John Sunlight's type of mind had to discover the dome."

Aput's curiosity was sharpened.

"What were those things in the dome that you told us never to touch?" he asked.

"Things that the world was better off without," Doc said.

"I do not understand," Aput said.

Doc Savage patted the old medicine man's shoulder.

"If you found a seal that was poison, Aput," Doc said, "what would you do with it?"

Aput answered promptly.

"I would bury the poisoned seal," he said, "where none would ever find it."

Doc made a short, grim sound.

"That was my idea, too," he said.

He went on – he spoke quickly, for time was getting short – and advised Aput how to help when the fight against John Sunlight started. Aput said he would spread the word among his people to be ready.

## Chapter 19. DEMONSTRATION

WHEN Doc Savage – his Adonis disguise was holding up very well in the cold – crawled back into the prince's tent, he had hardly replaced the slitted canvas when there was a commotion outside. It meant that John Sunlight's men had come for the prince.

"Monk!" Doc breathed. "Ham and Long Tom did not answer my radio call."

Monk's mouth fell open.

"But what on earth could 'a' happened to 'em?" he gulped.

There was no time to discuss that, because a swarthy head shoved into the tent and said, "John Sunlight wants the prince."

The prince was still in his drunken sleep.

Monk winked slightly at the others, then gave the prince a terrific kick on the part of the anatomy most generally kicked. Monk sprang back, looked quite innocent as the prince awoke and turned the adjacent arctic air blue with profanity. Monk had been aching to kick the besotted prince.

They were not taken to a tent. Their escort led them to an igloo, a large one, made expertly of snow blocks well-frozen. Actually, there was one large igloo, and three more built against it, like a cluster of grapes with one big grape.

John Sunlight lost no time in getting down to business.

"I am going to tell you a story," he said.

The prince blinked stupidly. "Story?"

"It concerns an amazing man," John Sunlight said. "This man was

"Do I have to listen to your bragging?" the prince asked impolitely.

John Sunlight frowned, and looked as though he had made a mental note to raise his price to the prince an extra million dollars for that crack.

"This is not the story of myself," John Sunlight said coldly. "No one will ever know that story. This is another tale, a brief synopsis of the fantastic life of one human being. It is a story which illustrates to what extent a human mind can be developed."

"I'm not very interested," the prince said.

John Sunlight ignored the interruption.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"This man," he said, "was taken from the cradle, literally, and put into the hands of scientists, who were ordered to train the child. They did so. And the child grew into a young man who possessed a fantastic brain. People sometimes call him superhuman. But he is not that – he is only a scientific product."

"Humph!" the prince grunted. "About that demonstration" This scientifically trained young man," John Sunlight continued, "dedicated himself to a strange career. A career of aiding mankind and of increasing his own knowledge that he might help the human race. In other words, this young man continued to study–study–study–"

The prince shook his flabby shoulders impatiently.

"It sounds damned dry and uninteresting to me," he said.

John Sunlight's dark, poetic face remained composed.

"Study," he said. "Study–study–that was the young man's occupation in every spare moment. The most intense kind of study. Study that demanded solitude, no interruptions."

The prince shrugged, lit a cigarette.

"Solitude," said John Sunlight, "was what this unusual young man had to have. So he came here into the arctic, and found this island."

THE prince abruptly became interested. "Here?" he said.

"Yes."

"Say, who is this – this scientific marvel you're talking about?"

"Doc Savage," John Sunlight said.

The prince started violently. "Doc Savage!"

"You seem to have heard of him," John Sunlight said dryly.

As a matter of fact, the prince had heard of Doc Savage – and so had the rogues who composed his cabinet in his native land. A number of times they had discussed Doc Savage, and the possibility of the Man of Bronze appearing in their nation to attempt to remedy certain cruel malpractice on the part of the prince and his government.

Doc Savage had a habit of doing such things, they'd heard. And that was why a strict censorship had been clapped down on news that left the country. They didn't want the mysterious, almost legendary; Man of Bronze to learn too much about the succession of political assassinations in the land.

"I have heard of Doc Savage," the prince admitted. "Er – faintly."

John Sunlight smiled wolfishly. "I imagined you had."

The prince swallowed uneasily. "Doc Savage – you mean – " He scratched his head, worked his loose mouth around in several shapes, then got an inkling of the truth. "You mean that Doc Savage – he constructed that blue dome?"

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"The blue dome," John Sunlight said, "is the Fortress of Solitude."

"Fortress of – huh?"

"The Fortress of Solitude," John Sunlight said, "is the place which Doc Savage created so that he would have a place to do his studying in solitude."

The prince gulped and muttered, "That – it all seems fantastic."

John Sunlight nodded. "You must understand that Doc Savage is something of a fantastic person, a man who is many generations ahead of the day in scientific knowledge. This place here – this Fortress of Solitude – was unknown to the world. It was built by Eskimos under Doc Savage's direction, with materials brought in by a huge transport plane. The construction took a long time."

At this point, Monk Mayfair realized his mouth was hanging open, and he closed it. This story that John Sunlight was telling might sound fantastic to the prince; Monk, however, knew it was true. He had known the Fortress of Solitude existed. He had not known where it lay, or exactly what it was.

Doc Savage had never told. The bronze man simply disappeared from his usual haunts, sometimes for months at a time, and during these absences, it was absolutely impossible to get in touch with him.

When Doc came back from these absences, he explained simply that he had been at his Fortress of Solitude – and usually, too, he brought back some new invention, or the solution of some complicated problem of science or surgery.

The Fortress of Solitude!

Monk knew it must be a marvelous place. A great laboratory, probably. Monk, who was something of a chemical wizard himself, had often wished he could see what kind of a chemical laboratory Doc kept in the Fortress. It must be amazingly complete, undoubtedly the finest in existence.

An interruption shocked Monk out of his reverie. A plane! There was a plane circling in the arctic gloom overhead.

A man put his head into the big igloo.

"Civan and the others are arriving in the plane," he announced.

JOHN Sunlight gathered his dark-red cape around him. He had worn black earlier in the evening, but now he had changed colors again, and wore an impressive, bloody-red ensemble. It gave him the aspect of a satanic alchemist. He was probably aware of that.

"Bring Civan and the others here," he ordered, "as soon as they land."

He laughed then. A laugh that was a quick, ugly report.

"I want everyone in the plane here for my demonstration," he added.

The messenger went away.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"Now," John Sunlight continued, "I shall finish my story of Doc Savage and the Fortress of Solitude – which the bronze man thought no one would ever discover."

The prince licked his lips uneasily. He was learning for the first time that he was involved in something that concerned Doc Savage, and the idea was giving him a worse case of the jitters than he had ever gotten out of a bottle.

"For some time now," John Sunlight said, "Doc Savage has been following his unusual career. And in the course of it, he has captured a number of amazing inventions."

The prince's mouth fell open.

"Inventions," said John Sunlight, "which Doc Savage considered a menace to the world. Among these is the machine which through creation of an unusual type of concentrated magnetic field, stops atomic motion entirely."

Monk took a deep breath. A great many things were coming clear to the homely chemist.

John Sunlight said, "I'll explain about atoms." He took a one-cent piece out of a pocket. "This coin, for instance, is made of copper. And copper is made up of molecules. The molecules are in turn composed of atoms. And each atom is a nucleus of electrons. Just what the electrons are composed of is a matter about which science is not certain, but it is believed they are electrical in nature. At any rate, the electrons travel in gravitational orbits, with a good deal of space between them, somewhat like our solar system – the earth, the moon, sun and planets.

"In case," John Sunlight went on, "the motion of the electrons is stopped, the result is to all practical effects and purposes a complete disintegration of matter."

Monk swallowed. That stuff about molecules, atoms and electrons was straight stuff – so was the surmise about what would happen if electronic movement could be stopped. But, as far as Monk knew, no one had ever stopped it. Still, John Sunlight was continuing.

"Doc Savage perfected a device," he said, "which, by creating a magnetic field of superlative intensity, completely stops atomic motion, and results in the collapse of any matter in that field."

The prince wrinkled his bulbous forehead. "What is this leading up to?" he demanded.

"You read about Serge Mafnoff, the Russian diplomat?" John Sunlight demanded.

"I – " The prince looked stunned. "Look here, did – "

"He did. Serge Mafnoff was the victim of Doc Savage's death machine, as we will call it." John Sunlight moved his red cloak a little. "You see, I had a score to settle with Serge Mafnoff, and I also wished to call the world's attention to my mur – ah – death device."

At this point, the plane, which had been circling repeatedly, landed. It taxied up outside, its motors died.

"Excuse me," John Sunlight said.

He went out. He was gone about five minutes. Then he came back in.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Several of his men trailed behind, all carrying rifles. Along with them, they brought the prisoners – Ham, Long Tom and Fifi.

NO one happened to be looking at homely Monk at that instant. That was fortunate. Because Monk's self-control slipped; he couldn't help showing his shock at seeing Ham and Long Tom prisoners.

Doc Savage's metallic features remained inscrutable. Having failed to contact Ham and Long Tom by radio, he had half feared something like this.

"Line them up!" John Sunlight growled.

The prince looked at the captives, and was puzzled. He had never seen them before.

John Sunlight asked, "Where are Giantia and Titania?"

"They're in their igloo," a man said. "I looked a minute ago."

"Go and make sure," John Sunlight ordered. "They must not know that this sister, Fifi, is alive. They would turn on me. Later, we will take care of them."

The man left to see about Giantia and Titania.

"Now," John Sunlight said, "we'll proceed."

The prince put in peevishly, "Why not get around to the demonstration, whatever it is? This is getting me confused."

"You realize," John Sunlight said sharply, "that I have just described a scientific death machine to you."

"So what? I don't see –"

"War."

"Eh?"

"War, you fool. War."

The prince yelled, "Who you calling a fool? I'm a king; don't forget that!"

John Sunlight's grip on his patience slipped a trifle, and the snapping evil of the man showed in his eyes. He calmed himself.

"With this electron-stopping war machine," he said, "you can conquer your neighboring nation ruled by the prime minister whose agent is the Baron Karl. I believe you would like to do that."

A flash of greed jumped over the prince's dissolute face.

"That," he said, "is true."

"I'll sell you the war machine," John Sunlight said, "for eleven million dollars."

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"Eleven!" the prince ejaculated. "You said ten, earlier."

"I hadn't been insulted then," John Sunlight told him calmly.

Whatever the prince was going to say – it was obviously to be explosive – remained unuttered, because a man dashed wildly into the igloo. He was the fellow who had been sent to see about Giantia and Titania.

"The big women are gone!" he squalled.

JOHN Sunlight's poetic face became ugly. "I thought you looked into the igloo a few minutes ago?"

"They had piled up snow under their sleeping robes," the man groaned. "Made it look like they were asleep!"

John Sunlight yelled orders.

"Civan!" he howled. "Take four men with guns and begin hunting those women!"

Civan shoved four men out of the big igloo, and followed himself.

John Sunlight had been trembling a little. He was a nervous man, and when excitement came, he sometimes lost some of his control. He forced himself to become calm.

"Now," he said, "I shall– "

"If you think I'll pay you eleven million for anything, you're crazy!" the prince yelled.

John Sunlight looked at the poor sample of royalty, and being short-tempered at the instant, he did not mince words.

"Remember the newspaper stories about the mysterious blackness that appeared around Serge Mafnoff's house in New York City?" he asked.

"Yes," the prince growled. "But that

"That was another war machine," John Sunlight snapped. "The blackness was caused by a combination of short electrical waves, and high-frequency sonic vibrations, which paralyze the functions of the rod-and-cone mechanism of the optic nerves in eyes. In other words – a blinding ray."

"I –

"That, too, is a Doc Savage invention."

"I sold it," John Sunlight said, "to Baron Karl and your enemy, the neighboring nation. They will use it against you."

The prince blanched. His mouth worked, could not make words.

"You will have to buy the electron machine," John Sunlight said coldly, "to defend your country."

The prince looked around for a seat, and sagged to it.

"Damn you!" he gritted.

John Sunlight was satisfied. He jerked his head slightly. "Now we show the prince what happens when the electrons are stopped in a human body," he said. "I suppose we had better tie the victim."

John Sunlight slanted an arm at the huge, grotesque creature whom the prince had accepted as his bodyguard, Adonis.

"We will use that man – Doc Savage," John Sunlight said. "Fifi, he is the one, isn't he?"

"Yes," Fifi said. "That is Doc Savage."

## Chapter 20. MAD HOUR

THERE were a few occasions in his life when Doc Savage had been caught flat-footed. This was one of them.

He began doing things about it.

Rifles were coming up. Doc whipped forward. He made for John Sunlight.

But the strange poetic-faced man with the distorted mind was fast. He was faster than even Doc had dreamed. He pitched widewise, got behind some of his men, went on toward the snow hole that led into one of the smaller connecting igloos.

A rifle crashed. The bullet hit Doc's chest, and he would have died then, except for the bulletproof vest from the equipment case which he had donned. As it was, the slug tilted him sidewise.

Doc went on down, hit Ham and Long Tom's ankles. They toppled. Doc had a knife out of his clothing by then. His

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speed was blinding. He slashed, got Ham's wrists loose – Long Tom and Ham were bound with ropes.

Doc left the knife in Ham's hands, left Ham to finish freeing himself and Long Tom.

Monk had hold of a man now. The hairy chemist's great hands made the Victim scream. Monk lifted the fellow, slammed him against others.

Two men fell on Doc. They tried short-range clubbing with rifles. Doc rolled with them, all in a tangle. The bronze man was trying to reach the hole into which John Sunlight had gone.

Unexpectedly, John Sunlight came back out of the hole. He came fast, and an instant after he was through it, a gun blasted in the smaller igloo which he had just left. The bullet missed John Sunlight, but a man in the larger igloo screeched and started a jig, trying to plug a leak in his chest with his hands.

Titania came out of the small igloo. She had a rifle. Her huge sister, Giantia, was close behind, also with a rifle. They both shot at John Sunlight again. But he got out of the big igloo into the arctic night without being hit.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Giantia and Titania ran to their little sister, Fifi, and thereafter gave no thought to anything but protecting her.

Monk, Ham, Long Tom were all fighting now. Not a man was on his feet. They flailed around on the floor, and a gun banged now and then.

Doc got on his feet, turned around and around like a discus thrower, and slammed his two opponents against the ice walls of the igloo. They dropped back somewhat broken.

Then old Aput, the Eskimo, came through the igloo door like a greased brown bullet. He had few clothes, but he did have a short oonapik, the little hunting spear of his people.

Other Eskimos followed, some with oonapiks, others with only the small half-moon knives used in domestic work, called ooloos. They joined the igloo fray. There was no real need of Doc after that.

John Sunlight was outside. So was Civan, the pilot Porto Novyi, and Doc did not know how many others. But a score, at least. The men who had been on the Soviet icebreaker on which the convicts had escaped from Siberia. How many of those would turn against John Sunlight now was a question. Some of them, surely. Then there were the rest of the Eskimos – friends, but unarmed.

The odds were still terrible.

Doc dived into the adjoining small igloo into which John Sunlight had tried to get. His guess was right. The apparatus for stopping electronic motion – the machine that had killed diplomat Serge Mafnoff – was there. The powerful coils and tubes were heating. That took a little time. John Sunlight had evidently switched on the device.

But Giantia and Titania had been hiding in there, and had driven out John Sunlight.

The device operated from heavy high-voltage storage batteries.

Doc picked up a battery, smashed it down on the contraption; picked up the battery, smashed again. Crushed, broken, destroyed. Until finally the death machine was a hopelessly ruined tangle that would never function again.

It was not as mad as it looked. The scientific device, as remarkable as it was, had no great value as a weapon.

John Sunlight had been perpetrating a species of hoax on the prince. For the electronic-stopping machine would not work at a distance of much more than twenty feet.

When it had killed Serge Mafnoff, it had been hidden in the unused part of the attic. The marks on the sills had been left by boards on which the device stood when it killed. It had killed through the attic wall, for it was only where the magnetic and sonic beams met, their focal point, that the effect was obtained.

Having smashed the apparatus, Doc picked a single bar of steel – a permanent magnet – out of the mess.

Then he dived back into the larger igloo.

Fighting there was done. Victims were spread out on the floor, and Monk was dancing around, tying himself into knots in an effort to learn the depth of a cut he had received in the back.

"John Sunlight!" Doc rapped. "Get him!"

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

Old Aput, before Doc could stop him, shot for the igloo door, hit on his stomach, slidded. He must have gone out of many an igloo in a hurry in his time to become that skilled.

A rifle whacked.

Old Aput came sliding back in, just as fast, and when he stopped sledding, began trying to straighten out his right arm, which a bullet had broken.

"They wait with guns!" he yelled.

"Back wall!" Doc said.

They went to work on the rear wall. Ice blocks were thick. There was no time to chip. They hit the wall, Doc and Monk, who were strongest. They learned that ice could be like steel. Then the ice broke, a great mass of blocks toppling outward, and they landed in the snow and cold.

FOR forty yards or so, Doc and the others traveled with all their speed; and Doc covered the whole distance before some of the others made half of it. Then they were down behind an ice ridge.

Giantia and Titania had remained in the igloo with Fifi.

There was a crash. A grenade. The igloo jumped apart, blocks of ice flying.

Then Giantia and Titania came running and dragging Fifi. Guns snapped, but they made it, and got down behind the ice ridge with Doc and the others.

Doc lifted his voice.

"Turn against John Sunlight now," he called, "and you will be free of the fellow."

The bronze man's voice was enormous, a rumble that carried with the volume of a public address loudspeaker.

His words were for the benefit of those who had courage to turn on John Sunlight. And they had an effect. A rifle banged, and a man screamed.

A man – it was Porto Novyi, the pilot – set off a flare, banging it by its parachute from one of the plane wings. The glow ignited the fighting. Half a dozen men, or more, had turned on John Sunlight's group. They were fighting a strange kind of civil war of their own in the icy wind and drifting, flour-fine snow. Eskimos came running to join the fray.

Monk reared up and roared, "Boy, I ain't gonna miss this!"

"Upwind!" Doc ordered. "We have some gas grenades."

But the gas grenades did them no good. John Sunlight saw them running, guessed their intent, and shouted orders.

John Sunlight and his faction broke away and fled in retreat toward the Strange Blue Dome that was Doc Savage's mysterious Fortress of Solitude.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

IT was a chase, then. A wild, mad race, with death made of lead passing through the air, of hitting ice and glancing off with violinlike whining.

It was dark, the polar sky packed with clouds. That was why John Sunlight and his men managed to reach the Strange Blue Dome. Had there been light, they would have been picked off.

Doc, racing furiously, taking chances, saw the panel in the side of the Strange Blue Dome closing. It was shut when he hit it. He snatched the permanent magnet from a pocket. It was the magnet he had taken from the Death device. But it had no effect when he held it close to the door-opening mechanism.

Inside, they had jammed the door apparatus.

Doc whirled, met Monk and the others.

"Back!" he rapped. "Get way back!"

He was running with the words, going out across the stone island in what was apparently a senseless direction. Most of them stared at the bronze man in amazement. But Monk, making speed with his short legs, trailed Doc. He lost ground steadily, and began to think that Doc was going to continue out across the arctic ice.

But Doc stopped, and when Monk reached him, the bronze man was on his knees at the edge of the rocky islet. Doc was knocking snow aside with his hands, maneuvering the naked stone, obviously searching.

Monk watched. There was silence, except for his breathing, and the breathing of the bronze man. The steaming plumes of their breath blew away from their lips. Once, far out in the ice fields, there was a cannon report as a floe cracked.

Then Doc found what he was seeking. A crack, apparently. He began to lay the permanent magnet on various parts of the stone, as if he were using its attraction to work a combination.

There was a crunching, and a section of the rock flew up, lid fashion. Doc dropped into the aperture.

It was only a box. In it were two switches. Doc threw one of them.

Monk, knowing something was going to happen, turned his eyes toward the great dome of glasslike blue. He waited, seemingly an age.

Finally, "Doc, nothing – nothing – " he breathed, and couldn't find the words to go on.

"Gas," the bronze man said in a low voice. "It may work; may not. When the place was built, the gas was installed against such an emergency as this."

The bronze man suddenly looked weary and battered.

"The trouble was," he added, "the place was so remote that I got to thinking no one would ever find it. So I stored those infernal machines here. I should have destroyed them."

Monk said, "We've captured some pretty devilish scientific devices in our time."

"Yes, Monk," Doc said queerly.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

The strangeness of the bronze man's tone caused Monk to glance at him.

"Are all those contraptions in that blue dome, Doc?" Monk asked wryly.

"Every one of them," Doc said hollowly.

They waited. There was no sign of life from the arching blue half-sphere of the Fortress of Solitude.

Ham and Long Tom and the Eskimos, tired of waiting, moved back, some of them, and went to inspect the igloos and tents of John Sunlight's camp, searching for enemies, treating the wounded, and binding those who might offer resistance.

Later, Ham approached Doc Savage.

"The prince got his," Ham said grimly.

"Yes?"

"That grenade John Sunlight's men threw into the big igloo," Ham explained, "probably killed the prince instantly."

### **Chapter 21. WILL TERROR COME?**

THIRTY minutes later, Doc Savage opened the Fortress of Solitude.

They had to destroy a plane to do it. They sent the craft full speed against the side of the Strange Blue Dome – Doc Savage did this, selecting the spot, then leaping out of the racing craft – and the impact of the heavy motors smashed a hole large enough for them to crawl inside, one at a time.

Only Doc, Monk, Ham and Long Tom were allowed to enter. They wore gas masks. They had found the masks in John Sunlight's equipment.

Once inside, they saw senseless forms lying about, and knew the gas had been effective.

They had often wondered – Monk, Ham and Long Tom – what this Fortress in Solitude was like. They saw now, and it exceeded, if anything, what they had imagined.

Monk saw a chemical laboratory which, for completeness and advanced equipment, was far beyond anything he had ever seen, or expected to see. In America and abroad, Monk had a reputation as one of the greatest living chemists, particularly in advanced chemistry. But here, in this laboratory, he saw apparatus after apparatus so advanced that the nature of which he couldn't even grasp.

"Blazes!" Monk breathed in awe.

Long Tom, the electrical wizard, saw an electrical experimental set-up which took his breath. It made his fingers itch, drew him like a magnet. His own laboratory in New York City, and the one Doc maintained in the New York skyscraper headquarters, was a child's experimenting set, compared to this.

Ham, the lawyer, did not see any law books. Ham was no great enthusiast as a scientist.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

So it was Ham who wandered around gathering up the unconscious John Sunlight faithfuls, and passing them out through the hole in the side of the blue dome.

The construction of the dome, the strange, blue glasslike material of which it was made, did interest Ham. He asked Doc about that, and learned it was a form of glass composition which could be welded with heat, and which had strength far beyond that of true glass. The welding operation explained how the dome had been constructed without joints. The stuff had the advantage of being a nonconductor, which meant that it kept out the cold.

But construction details suddenly ceased to worry Ham. He ran to Doc Savage.

"Doc!" Ham exploded. "John Sunlight – he's not here!"

"John Sunlight – not here!" The bronze man sounded incredulous.

Then they searched. Searched furiously. Doc Savage, who knew every cranny of the Fortress of Solitude, went over everything repeatedly. He examined the prisoners, to make sure none of them was John Sunlight in disguise.

Then, with breathless intensity, they began a widespread search.

They did not find John Sunlight. They did not find his body.

It was Doc Savage who located footprints that must have been John Sunlight's. And by the tracks, they knew that John Sunlight had not entered the Strange Blue Dome with his men. He had gone around the Dome, and hidden in the snow. Then, when he saw his men had been defeated, he had fled.

John Sunlight's tracks led out across the arctic ice pack.

Doc Savage followed the footprints for two days, and came to a patch of frozen red gore on the edge of an open lead in the ice. There, beside the water, the traces showed that a monster polar bear had come out of the lead and attacked John Sunlight.

They found John Sunlight's rifle, a little of his clothing. That was all.

Standing there on the edge of the lead, wondering if they were faced with evidence that John Sunlight had finally died, Monk sighed deeply.

"I pity the bear that eats that guy," the homely chemist muttered.

Doc Savage spoke quietly.

"If John Sunlight is not dead," the bronze man said, "we may have something pretty terrible ahead of us."

They stared at him. "What do you mean, Doc?"

Then he told them something they had not known before.

"There were almost a score of deadly scientific devices stored in the Fortress of Solitude," he said. "They're gone."

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

That didn't quite soak in.

"You mean – "

"I mean," Doc said grimly, "that John Sunlight removed the death machines from the Fortress of Solitude and hid them somewhere. If he is alive, and recovers them – "

The bronze man turned away without finishing.

The pursuit party returned to the island with subdued spirits. They returned quickly – a plane came out for them. They could not help but wonder, and the wondering was not pleasant. Evidence that John Sunlight had been killed by a polar bear seemed conclusive, and yet

They landed on the island and guided the plane into a great hangar–room in the side of the Fortress of Solitude. It was from here that John Sunlight had secured his first plane, the craft in which he and his party had flown to New York. Doc always kept two extra planes on hand at the fortress, one a spare craft, and the other an experimental machine on which he tried out new aeronautical developments.

For the next three weeks, Monk, Ham and Long Tom flew over the arctic, searching vainly for some trace of a cache where John Sunlight might have hidden the death machines he had stolen from the Fortress of Solitude.

They never found a cache.

"What about the darkness–maker that John Sunlight sold to that Baron Karl?" Ham demanded one day.

"We will have to recover that," Doc said grimly, "as soon as we can."

There was one other problem they had to settle. Most of the value of the Fortress of Solitude lay in its existence remaining unknown to the world.

Many people now knew about it. The Eskimos did not count; they had always known, but they lived here and took care of the place. Doc had trained them for that, and they would continue, for they were well satisfied.

But the others

"They won't keep their mouths shut," Monk muttered. "Not every one of 'em."

Doc Savage was thoughtful. When all gathered for the next meal, the bronze man made a talk. It was probably the most compelling speech Monk, Ham or Long Tom had ever heard the bronze man make.

Doc pointed out that the whole experience, from the time the convicts escaped the Siberian prison camp was so terrible that their minds would be better off if all memory of the past was wiped away. Then he explained about his brain operation, guaranteed no one would die, and promised that all memory of the past would be gone. Incidentally, no one would recall the Fortress of Solitude, either.

He sold the memory–wiping operations en masse. It was such a good talk that Monk and Ham and Long Tom were almost impelled to join in.

"It's a swell idea – for Monk!" Ham said enthusiastically.

## FORTRESS OF SOLITUDE

"Why me?" Monk demanded.

"Rid your mind of the idea," Ham said, "that you're evolution's gift to the ladies."

Ham left Monk sputtering, and went away to make a little progress with Fifi. After all, Fifi had repented; and after all, Fifi was a very cute trick. Not to add that pretty soon she was going to be relieved of her memory. What more could a confirmed bachelor such as Ham look for?

The flies in the ointment – elephants in the ointment was more like it, Ham thought ruefully – were Giantia and Titania. Ham thought he'd better get on the good side of Giantia and Titania, before proceeding with Fifi.

Ham went looking for Giantia and Titania to discuss the matter.

Ham was minus a front tooth when Monk saw him next.

"What happened?" Monk asked.

"Giantia," Ham said ruefully, "cracked a smile."

"Huh?"

"My smile," Ham explained.

THE END