

# **THE HEADLESS MEN**

A Doc Savage Adventure By Kenneth Robeson

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# THE HEADLESS MEN

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### Chapter I. UNNATURAL HORROR

IF Needlenose Swenson had not encountered the drunk, the terror of the headless men might have run unchecked a good deal longer than it did.

Enough people died as it was. Even before the first corpse was known, there was horror where the headless death got its start. The thing wasn't known by that name at the time, of course; wasn't known at all.

But there was the feel of something awful in the long laboratory of Professor Norgrud L. Watts.

There was also something menacing in the type of men Watts had about the building. At a glance, they seemed to suggest the police records that they later turned out to have.

The first time that anything really unusual took place was early in the day that Needlenose Swenson encountered the drunk.

It was early fall. Needlenose was burning leaves out in back of the administration building. The Stumpp Electrical Co., in New Jersey, did not have an incinerator. Needlenose just raked leaves and rubbish together

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and burned them in a heap.

"Whew!" somebody yelled from a window. "Swenson must have got a dead rat in his rakings."

Then, some more observant person took a careful sniff of the smoke coming from Needlenose Swenson's pile of rubbish.

"Ain't there; seems to come from Norgrud Watts' laboratory," the observant worker whispered to his benchmate.

Norgrud Watts! That observation was whispered up and down the production lines in the Stumpp Electrical Co. Nobody knew what to expect of Watts. Nobody even cared to guess what might be going on. But they all talked, because they didn't like Watts and his experiments.

It is remarkable how some blatant fear can go on and mount without any official notice being taken of it. So many things that really are important can get put down as mere idle gossip. But the fear goes on, like steam boiled in a kettle with the lid tied down. If that lid blows off soon enough, often good can result.

In the Stumpp Electrical Co., it just simmered. That particular September night, employees avoided the laboratory of Norgrud Watts as they walked toward the big gates on Third Street. Employees who were not forced to go near, usually gave that long, gaunt building a wide berth.

There were too many rumors of unnatural horror that went on within that drab building. There were many, undoubtedly, which were without foundation.

But no one in that plant, as the workers left for home that night, had any idea of the horror that was to come with the men who had no heads.

As the last of the day force straggled out from the gates of the Stumpp Electrical plant, a sleek and powerful sedan crept up toward the factory. It halted a few feet from the main gate.

The man who emerged was huskily built. He was tall and lean and had the shoulders of a boxer. The jaw was too outthrust for the man to be called handsome. But his most remarkable quality was the color of his eyes. They were yellow; incredibly yellow.

The lean man was furtive in the quick twists of his shoulders. He peered into the main gate which still remained open. The vast yards were practically empty. Only a skeleton night force remained inside the plant. Soon they would close the gates and lock them until starting time the next day.

Yellow Eyes got back in his car. The motor growled in a powerful purr as he whipped the machine into the yard. As he turned, it could be seen that a passenger rested in the seat beside the driver.

A cop would have been suspicious had he been able to closely examine that recumbent figure. The man seemed to be sleeping. Obviously, he did not belong in the expensive sedan. His clothes looked as though they had been slept in for months. Half an inch of stubble decorated a chin that could not even be seen. He was unkempt and dirty. Probably a bum who might have been picked up from a gutter in the Bowery.

It turned out later that he had been picked up in just such a place.

The yellow-eyed driver roared his big car to the long rambling building so avoided by the employees of the electrical plant. A sign on the door said, "Experimental Laboratory of Dr. Norgrud L. Watts. Danger. Keep

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out."

Yellow Eyes grunted in what sounded like pleasure. He hauled his passenger to the ground.

That motion awakened the sleeper.

"Washa matter?" the bum demanded, waving his arms about wildly. "Washa wanna do now?"

An expression of contempt and brutality spread over the face of the driver. A low growl crawled from his throat. Then his fist flashed upward. There was a crack like the snap of a whip. The bum immediately resumed his sleeping position.

"Filthy drunk," the yellow-eyed one grated. Then the sound of leather crunching on gravel made him twist quickly around. With obvious haste, he hauled the bum through the door into the long building. In another second he was outside again, smiling at the attendant who ambled toward the sedan.

"Afternoon, Mr. Dedham," the attendant greeted him. "Take your car for you?"

Wings Dedham turned his most cordial smile on the attendant. Wings liked to be addressed with respect. He had grown accustomed to respect when he had been a famous transport flier. After that he had been a well-known radio technician for a major air line. But a set of stolen plans for a new substratosphere ship had cost Wings Dedham his job his job and all of his reputation. Wings had been grounded.

"Leave the car here," he said shortly. "I'm going to need it."

Yellow eyes glowed strangely as the grounded flier turned back toward the laboratory. They were not unlike the baleful eyes of a jungle cat about to spring upon its prey.

INSIDE the building, another figure had seen the unconscious drunk. At first, he had been puzzled. A man sleeping off a drunk in the corridor of Norgrud Watts' laboratory was not something he had expected.

The new arrival in the corridor wore a linen duster and a cap that said "Janitor." His most prominent feature was an astounding proboscis. It was just about the size and shape of a man's forefinger.

There was little question as to the merit of the nickname of Needlenose Swenson. The skinny, watery-eyed janitor also insisted on sticking that remarkable nose into everything going on in the plant.

Needlenose considered himself no end of a detective. He had books on it. Pamphlets were stacked in his room. Needlenose was waiting only for one sensational break to prove that he had entered a profession beneath him.

He did not at first think the drunk was connected with such an important event. He leaned over the bum in disgust. "Yah," he snorted. "Ay tank you go now."

He moved to grab the recumbent figure. The grating voice of Wings Dedham stopped him.

"Leave him alone, squarehead!" Wings snarled. "I'll let him sleep it off. You mind your own business."

Needlenose Swenson suddenly cringed as if the devil himself had descended upon him. He could scarcely

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bring his watery eyes to meet the baleful yellow ones that bore down upon him. Needlenose began to sweat. His hands shook.

His opinion of Wings Dedham was more than apparent.

"Yah," Needlenose muttered. "Ay go now."

He almost fell over his mop handle scuttling around a corner. Presently a door slammed at the other end of the building. Wings' yellow eyes narrowed. Then he grunted and picked up the drunk. He dragged him through a door in the middle of the corridor. It was quite an unusual door. Panel, jamb and casing were made of high-tempered steel. It was protected by double locks of very modern construction. Complete privacy for its occupants seemed to be a matter of no question at all.

BUT down the corridor there came a faint rustle. Needlenose Swenson crept slowly toward that steel doorway. Needlenose had told fellow workers that something evil was being concocted behind that steel door. As an amateur detective, he was certain that much was so.

Norgrud Watts and Dedham, he insisted, were brewing a witch's caldron in there that the world should discover. The thought of Wings Dedham made Needlenose shudder. Only the day before, he had seen the ex-flier brutally strangle a harmless dog. Then he had carried the dog into that secret room.

"Yah," Needlenose muttered softly now. "Ay tank now Ay find out for sure. Yah."

Needlenose crouched down before the door. About breast-high there was a tiny hole. Needlenose had borrowed a steel-cutting drill from the machine shops. Then, when a new generator tryout was making enough noise to cover him, Needlenose had made his hole.

He looked through it now. Almost immediately, what color he had drained from the janitor's skin. His jaw began to work strangely. Sweat dribbled from his receding chin. Bony hands clenched and unclenched. Needlenose Swenson began to tremble. He seemed transfixed by horror, unable to move.

The air in the corridor began to smell queerly. It became the pungent scent of ozone, as if a great electric arc were snapping overhead, scorching the atmosphere.

Suddenly, Needlenose Swenson began to sway. He clawed at his throat. His mouth opened and closed without sound. Then Needlenose found his voice. He began to scream. It was a scream that sent shivers up and down many spines in the electrical plant.

Nothing but stark horror could have brought forth such a scream.

Needlenose straightened up and started to run. At first his sole aim was to be somewhere else. Any place else, apparently, would do at the time. He heard the big steel door creak behind him. He dived into the first hiding place that he saw. It was a huge, lighted broom closet near the door.

Needlenose heard Dedham cursing in the hall. Then he heard the ex-flier's footsteps receding toward the steel door to Norgrud Watts' private laboratory.

"Watts, I'll get that squarehead this time!" Dedham growled.

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Needlenose perspired some more. He thought he was safe for the moment. He felt sure Dedham would think he had fled from the building.

But Needlenose Swenson was an amateur detective, not a scientist. He didn't know that the odd-looking lenses in the ceilings of all rooms in this building were there to catch him. Swenson didn't know anything about a television pick-up lens.

That was why he was surprised when Wings Dedham suddenly whipped open the door of the broom closet and sprang in with a snarl. Wings' bony fist slashed down viciously, crashed against the cowering janitor's head.

But fear does remarkable things to people at times. Fear has sometimes given one man the strength of ten. Amazing feats have been performed by men sufficiently influenced by fear.

Needlenose Swenson performed one now. Of course, Wings wasn't expecting it. But he didn't realize how much Swenson had seen; how great was his reason for fear. Needlenose tore into Dedham like a she-wolf cornered with her young. Dedham cursed, lost his balance. Needlenose didn't try to hit him. He butted the bigger man in the jaw with his head.

Then Needlenose Swenson made tracks. He put one foot down after another in quicker succession than he ever had before in his life. Behind him, Wings Dedham struggled to his feet. He seemed to hesitate for a moment; seemed anxious to go back to the mystery laboratory of Norgrud Watts.

Then Wings ground out an oath.

"Hell!" he grated. "I haven't got time."

With that cryptic utterance, Wings whipped out a heavy automatic and pounded after the fleeing janitor. Needlenose leaped through the door.

It was ironical that Dedham himself let his quarry escape. Not intentionally, of course. But Wings had left his car keys in the powerful sedan parked outside. Needlenose brushed against it, knocking a magazine out of the pocket of his flowing linen duster. Then Needlenose was in the machine, stamped on the starter.

The car was moving before Wings reached the door. Dedham blasted with the big automatic. The gun roared in the early-evening air. Round holes jumped into the windows of the fleeing sedan. One slug parted the janitor's hair sidewise. But Needlenose roared toward the Pulaski Skyway and the shortest cut to New York.

"Yah," he muttered to himself. "Ay tank now Ay go see Doc Savage."

Behind him, smoking automatic in his hand, Wings Dedham stopped cursing for a moment. His foot tripped on the magazine Needlenose had dropped getting into the car. Wings picked it up.

"The Life of Doc Savage," the periodical was titled. "Some keys to the bronze man's amazing physical and mental development."

Wings Dedham's face went suddenly white. His jutting jaw seemed instantly to sag.

"Cripes!" Wings muttered under his breath. "We can't let that happen. Why "

Wings whirled then and raced to a phone booth in the laboratory building. He locked himself in, frantically

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called a number. He talked to himself as he waited for his connection.

"Savage!" he muttered. "He's the one guy big enough to stop us. He and them five stooges'll have to be bumped if the big guy gets wise!"

At that moment a voice growled over the wire to Wings. Dedham did all the talking from then on.

"The squarehead must be wise," he rasped. "I think he's heading for Doc Savage. Send some boys out to both tunnels and all the ferries. Someone else cover the tube trains. That guy must not get to Doc Savage!"

NEEDLENOSE SWENSON tore along the highway. All his life he had wanted a really good excuse to call on Doc Savage. Every course in crime detection he had ever read, spoke of the amazing feats of the man of bronze.

And Swenson had heard dozens of persons discuss Doc Savage.

"Doc Savage is a philanthropist," one friend had told him. "Doc gives away hundreds of thousands of dollars to worthy causes. But he does it anonymously so no publicity will result. Doc hates publicity."

"The bronze man was trained from childhood to fight for the oppressed," another had said. "His life is dedicated to undoing wrongs in the four corners of the earth. He metes out justice to evildoers and helps those in trouble."

That Doc Savage was a mental marvel, a scientific wonder and a superman in strength, any newspaper reader knew. Needlenose Swenson had read all about that. Doc Savage was the one human being in the world whom Swenson worshiped.

"Yah," Swenson said to himself. "Ay wonder yust what Doc would do if he vas me now?"

It may have been that thought which spurred Swenson to mental activity beyond his normal grasp. He made one of the few quick decisions of his life.

"Yah," he grunted. "Ay tank dey look at toonel. Ay go to airport."

Temporarily, Needlenose Swenson had probably saved his own life. He headed toward Newark Airport. Needlenose had a friend there who had a plane. The friend took passengers for short rides at two dollars a head. There was little airport activity now with most of the major lines transferred to LaGuardia Field at North Beach in Queens. Needlenose hoped his friend would be there and not too busy to do a favor.

He tooted the machine into the vast air field at a breakneck rate of speed. The cop who frantically tried to wave him back to a parking field, nearly got run over for his trouble. Needlenose had a one-track mind. And that track was very busy.

He recognized the small monoplane of his friend and raced toward it. If he hadn't almost run into the shuttle transport plane arriving from New York, Needlenose probably would not have noticed the passengers disembarking from it. As it was, he was stopped and forced to step out of his car.

The passengers disembarking from the transport had come in from the West. One of them nearly took Swenson's mind off the horror with which it was filled.

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"Gosh," he exploded. "Ay tank that is somet'ing."

"That" definitely was something. Just the right height. Curves where they should be. Hair like a sunset. Eyes of a shade popular with painters of tropical waters. The sway of her hips even stirred the lethargic breast of Needlenose Swenson.

"Golly," he muttered. "Ay tank " Then Needlenose practically choked.

Recognition came to him in the exact instant that she gave directions to a cab driver.

"Drive me," she said in a clear, firm voice, "to the Stumpp Electrical Co."

Needlenose groaned aloud. Off the screen, the glamorous Lynda Ladore was even more beautiful than on. But what made Needlenose groan was the memory of a newspaper gossip column many months before. That had been before Wings Dedham had been disgraced and grounded; when Wings was still an important and romantic figure in aviation.

"Rumor has it," the column had stated, "that Lynda Ladore and the redoubtable Wings are more than just pilot and passenger."

Needlenose Swenson was torn. He yearned to rush over to Lynda Ladore and warn her that death lurked in the Stumpp plant. But Swenson's single-track mind reasserted itself then. He had to get to Doc Savage. He suddenly realized that he could not be sure this beauteous creature was not in league with Dedham and Norgrud Watts.

It is problematic whether Needlenose Swenson would have lived longer had he yielded to his primary impulse. Things like that are difficult to determine.

But at any rate, Needlenose found his friend and shortly took off for New York.

## Chapter II. ONE HEADLESS MAN

THE offices of Clark Savage, Jr., were on the eighty-sixth floor of one of New York's tallest skyscrapers. In fact, they occupied the entire floor space at that level.

It was well known that persons in genuine trouble could contact Doc Savage or one of his aids at any time. Doc never took pay for his efforts in solving the problems of others. And sometimes, in fact quite frequently, Doc's efforts took him to the four corners of the earth. The bronze man had a secret source of wealth that few persons knew about. He had only to broadcast on a certain wave length at a certain hour of the day. If he did that, a mule train of gold would start immediately for the coast of a certain Central American nation.

Doc's offices consisted mainly of a large outer office, a huge laboratory equipped with devices and materials that would have astounded top-flight chemists, and a library that housed learned tomes on a large variety of subjects.

A tableau was being enacted in Doc's outer office that fall evening that would probably have surprised most people. A something that apparently had escaped from a zoo, lolled in a huge leather-upholstered chair.

On closer inspection, it could really be seen to be a man. But the distance removed from simian sources was

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startlingly small. Monk, otherwise Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, was better nicknamed than named. When he scratched his nubbin of a head and grinned, he looked as if he had just leaped down from a tree.

Everything about Monk from his low, wide brow to the rusty stubble that covered his entire body belied the fact that he was really one of the world's foremost industrial chemists.

Monk was arguing as usual with a faultlessly dressed man, another of Doc's aids, familiarly known as Ham. The fashion plate's real name was Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks. He was known as one of the keenest lawyers ever turned out by Harvard.

It was when the argument was reaching its heights the argument was about Ham's pig, called Habeas Corpus, and Ham's pet ape, called Chemistry when the photoelectric cell indicator announced the approach of a visitor.

THE action of the indicator automatically closed all inner doors to the reception room.

Momentarily, Monk forgot his quarrel with Ham. Visitors who might affect Doc Savage, came first. Monk strode to the door leading to the elevator shaft and opened it.

"Ay bane want Doc Savage," the voice told Monk.

"What do you want Doc for?" Monk demanded.

"My name is Swenson, I come from New Jersey," Needlenose informed him. "They is killing people there."

That is absolutely all that Swenson would tell the hairy chemist. Obviously, Needlenose did not think anyone who looked like Monk, could be intelligent enough to trust with a secret. Monk grunted in annoyance and led Needlenose Swenson into the reception room. He indicated the big leather chair and strode to the desk in the center of the room.

Inset in the glass top of the huge walnut desk was a flat, oblong section of a slightly different hue. Monk pressed a button and looked into this. An image at once appeared on the glass. The device was an improved inter-office television outfit that Doc had perfected.

It enabled Doc and his aids to converse and see each other as they did. The images thrown up were different from those of ordinary television. True colors met the eye in such realistic fashion that they seemed to be actual reductions of the objects the device transmitted.

Doc's bronze hair, flat against his head, showed plainly. The television even transmitted the bronze man's odd flake-gold eyes that stirred like tiny whirlwinds when he was agitated. Of course, Doc looked small in the little oblong of glass. But Doc Savage was so well proportioned that he almost never seemed as huge as he was. It was only when the bronze man was seen in relation to some other person or object that he appeared to reach his real proportions.

"Who is the man and what does he want?" Doc Savage asked.

The tones were possessed of a marked clarity. They were calmly spoken, soft in volume. Yet they carried with a compelling quality that was almost hypnotic.

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"His name is Swenson," Monk answered. "He says he comes from New Jersey and that they're killing people over there."

"Oh, yes," Doc's voice came back. "He's probably from the Stump electrical plant. I've just heard rumors of something queer going on over there. Tell the man I'll be right out."

Monk released the button of the televisor. Then his nostrils began to quiver. He smelled a sharp, unusual odor that he could not quite place for a moment. Then he recognized the smell of ozone, like an open electric arc.

Monk turned from the desk.

Needlenose Swenson still sat erect in the leather chair. One leg was crossed over the other. His hands were folded primly on his lap.

But Needlenose Swenson had no head! His body ended at his shoulders as neatly as if there had never been a head there at all.

There had been no sound. There was no sign of any blood.

Monk Mayfair shuddered.

The world had encountered the first of the headless men!

### Chapter III. LONG TOM IS TRAPPED

DOC SAVAGE took one look at Monk and the body of Needlenose, and stepped to the big walnut desk. The bronze man's motion was so smooth that the tremendous power of the muscles meshed beneath his skin was scarcely noticeable. Only the cabled tendons under the bronze flesh of the hands showed plainly.

Doc's flake-gold eyes were tiny maelstroms of agitation as he pressed the button and said: "Come in here, Long Tom."

Then Monk began to squall in a voice that sounded frightened. That was highly unusual for Monk. "Lookit!" the chemist shrilled. "The thing is movin'!"

And Monk's statement was not an exaggeration. The headless figure of Needlenose Swenson snapped jerkily to its feet. Needlenose Swenson, without his nose or the head that had held it, took three steps forward on the thick-carpeted floor!

Then the thing collapsed. With a *whoosh*, a lungful of air gushed out of the larynx which terminated at the base of the neck. The body of the unfortunate janitor fell to the rug.

Another figure leaned over Swenson now. The newcomer, apparently the one summoned by Doc's press of the desk button, had a complexion about as healthy looking as a mushroom. In fact it would have been an attractive bet for one who did not know him, that Long Tom Roberts had never been out of a cellar in his life.

Long Tom, otherwise Major Thomas J. Roberts, electrical wizard extraordinary, was a small, thin man with a tremendously bulging forehead. Neither his size nor his complexion was to be discounted, if fighting had to be done. Long Tom could handle his share of wild cats or of human rats.

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Long Tom studied the fallen man closely. He had seen the figure rise from the chair, take three steps and fall.

"Unusual post-mortem reflex action," Long Tom commented. "The suddenness of the decapitation made it possible. Like a chicken running around a barnyard after its head had been cut off."

Monk breathed a little easier. He *had* seen chickens race half the length of a barnyard after decapitation. Monk looked at Doc for confirmation.

The bronze man said nothing for a moment.

Finally, he said, "Look at the present termination of the neck column. What do you think of it?"

Long Tom looked. It was the most peculiar formation he had ever seen. The various veins and arteries, the larynx itself, all terminated in neat bits of scar-tissue. The neck itself was like a well-healed wound that had been inflicted many years before.

The situation was manifestly impossible. Monk rubbed his eyes. They seemed trying to pop out from the sockets that were usually overhanging pits of gristle.

"Dang it!" Monk complained. "I must have been seein' things. Maybe this guy didn't just come in here and talk to me. Maybe someone hypnotized me."

Doc Savage's voice was quiet, reassuring. But it didn't cheer Monk up much. It gave no indication of whether he had any idea what had caused the unbelievable decapitation.

"You saw him come in, Monk," Doc said. "And he did speak to you. See what identification he has in his pockets."

NEEDLENOSE SWENSON'S clothes yielded an identification card that said he was a janitor employed by the Stumpp Electrical Co., of New Jersey.

Another card showed that he had been taking a correspondence course in crime detection. Long Tom was interested in the first card he found.

"I am acquainted with that concern," he said simply. "I was a stockholder before it was reorganized."

Monk's ears pricked up at this information. "Yeah?" he muttered. "What kind of a joint is the plant?"

Long Tom's story was quite an ordinary one. The Electrical Appliance Co. had gone into receivership two years before. It had never made much money. There were too many firms manufacturing and selling electrical pharmaceutical aids. Most of the stockholders were willing to get out from under for what they could.

L. Pennfield Stumpp had been the one exception. L. Pennfield had a little money. So he bought control of the company. Stumpp scarcely knew an ohm from a wave length. But as a salesman, he had few peers.

"He was kind of lucky," Long Tom opined. "After he took it over he developed the Stumpp Electrical Massage Vibrator. It's making a wealthy man of him."

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Monk grunted. "It's advertised everywhere," he agreed. "How'd he figure that one out?"

"The firm had one asset," Long Tom said. "An old guy named Norgrud Watts. He's really a genius. But because of him, Stumpp nearly junked the whole project."

Stumpp, it seemed, didn't know about Watts until he had bought in. Watts was a minority stockholder who did not sell out. The gnomelike genius was a weird little fellow. Stumpp seemed actually afraid of him. Electrical hocus-pocus was beyond Stumpp's mental grasp. There was one story that he was going to bail out and take a financial licking after his first visit to Norgrud Watts' laboratory.

Then Watts developed the electrical vibrator.

Ham, who had come in quietly from the other room, looked again at the body and shuddered.

"I don't think Norgrud Watts is the kind of a guy I'd like to meet," he said flatly.

Doc Savage's eyes stirred with life. His expression gave no indication of what he was thinking.

"You're going to meet him," he said smoothly. "You and Monk prepare to go to Jersey immediately. Go by car and find out all you can at the factory."

Ham squared his shoulders and started from the room. The dapper lawyer wore a suit that was the last word in sartorial elegance. His shoes reflected every object in the room.

"O. K., Beau Brummel," Monk grunted. "I'll go along to take care of you."

Doc spoke swiftly to Long Tom before returning to his laboratory.

"I knew of Stumpp's history and that of the factory," he said simply. "But I wanted Ham and Monk to hear it, too. Stumpp is speaking today at the Electrical Goods merchandising convention. I think you should talk to him."

Long Tom nodded.

"I'll go now," he said. "I met Stumpp several times during the reorganization."

Long Tom left the offices just ahead of Monk and Ham. The lawyer reappeared in the outer office leading, what at first appeared to be, a smaller edition of Monk.

Some scientists were baffled by the thing that followed Ham. Some said it was a chimpanzee. Others held that it was more closely related to the tree-climbing baboon. Still others hinted darkly that the missing link might have been involved somewhere.

Most scientists, however, had come to the conclusion that they didn't care. One of them, they agreed, was enough. The what-is-it's-name was Chemistry. Ham had found him in a South American jungle. He made a pet of him to annoy the hairy chemist whom he so much resembled.

"I don't see why you have to lug that danged thing along," Monk grumbled as he carried Habeas Corpus, his pet pig by one saillike ear. "I'll have enough trouble just takin' care of you."

Ham ignored the gibe but looked meaningfully at the pig.

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"Just what are we to look for, Doc?" Ham asked.

"I have heard reports that a grounded flier, named Wings Dedham, is working with Norgrud Watts," Doc explained. "Dedham's past is highly unsavory. I would like to ascertain what his connection is with the electric plant."

Ham nodded. He knew that Doc Savage received a vast amount of mail and other information. Many of the bits of information were merely suspicions that later proved groundless. Some of them had proved to have bearings on crimes of highly unusual nature.

"I'll try to keep Monk out of trouble," Ham said.

The two men went out with their pets. Their perpetual quarrel went with them.

LONG TOM ROBERTS left the skyscraper offices by way of the private high-speed elevator. The cage left the eighty-sixth floor with such breath-taking speed that occupants felt as though they were suspended in midair and falling without any break.

Only strong men could withstand the sharp check in its descent at the bottom. The electrical wizard's effortless disregard of that grinding stop indicated the muscles that lay beneath that pallid, unhealthy-appearing exterior.

Long Tom took a taxicab to the Electrical Goods merchandising convention. The affair was being held in one of New York's largest and newest hotels. Long Tom had often spoken before that convention in the past.

At the ticket-taker's desk outside the great convention hall, Long Tom was greeted cordially. Inside he could see a crowd that numbered well above a thousand. At the far end, on the speaker's stand, a man was speaking.

"How long has L. Pennfield Stumpp been talking?" Long Tom asked the convention secretary.

The secretary looked at his watch. "Half an hour," he said crisply. "He's good for another fifteen minutes."

Long Tom went in and gazed thoughtfully at the morning-coated figure on the speaker's stand. L. Pennfield Stumpp's diction made Long Tom smile. It was, to say the least, original.

"These handy, dandy, simply grandy gadgets are the best, the tops, the finest vibrators you've ever sold," Stumpp proclaimed to his audience. "It's your duty, just like taking booty, if you sell them instead of any other's. Don't let any bug, any unfeeling mug, sell you off them."

L. Pennfield Stumpp was talking about his electrical massage vibrator. Long Tom grinned slightly. L. Pennfield had a highly unusual sales approach. And he was in a field that knew plenty of competition.

It wasn't only L. Pennfield's somewhat rhymelike choice of words that made his delivery unusual. The portly, gray-haired sales expert had a voice that defied imitation. Stumpp could not control it. Sometimes he would start off in a falsetto and wind up in bass. Sometimes it was the other way around.

Long Tom looked at his watch. Ten minutes had gone by. Stumpp had been talking half an hour before Long Tom came in, the secretary had said. Long Tom realized that that put Stumpp in the convention hall before Needle-nose Swenson had entered Doc's outer office, and talking ever since.

## THE HEADLESS MEN

It wasn't that Long Tom suspected L. Pennfield Stumpp. It was merely a practice of all Doc's aids to check up on things like that. In fact, Long Tom did not believe that the salesman could grasp any terrible scientific force that could do the awful thing that had happened to Needlenose Swenson.

Long Tom did not have any theory himself. He wanted to reach Stumpp as soon as his speech was over.

Several curtained doorways served as emergency exits from the big hall. In the crowd, Long Tom was forced to press close to these as he made his way toward the front. He was not expecting trouble here in this crowded room. So he was off his guard.

Two beamlike arms swung suddenly from behind heavy velvet drapes. One clapped over Long Tom's mouth. The other jerked quickly at his arm. Doc's aid was off-balance at the moment. He stumbled between two velvet curtains.

The heavy drapes deadened what little sound there was. Five men were in the darkness between the hangings and a double door behind them. One of the men swung a bludgeon. It smashed against Long Tom's head, nearly cracking his skull.

"You ain't goin' to see Stumpp now, pal," one of the thugs grated. "There's things he ain't to know. An' you ain't goin' to see no one else, ever. You're findin' out too much."

Long Tom struggled. But there was little consciousness left in him. His mind whirled in a pit of blackness. Then he didn't know anything at all.

In a dim hall behind the double doors stood two men with caps that identified them with a well-known hospital. They carried a stretcher with a sheet thrown across it.

A third man stepped up in front of them. He wore the uniform of a New York policeman.

With this phony escort, Long Tom was carried out on the stretcher.

### Chapter IV. THE FIRST EXTORTION

MONK and Ham got out of the high-speed elevator at the sub-cellar level. Doc's garage was down there. It held a variety of machines. There was an ancient laundry truck that really contained a complete chemical laboratory and a motor that would do a hundred and ten. It was also proof against anything smaller than an anti-tank slug.

There were two smart sedans. They were also of bulletproof construction. Ham chose one of those for their trip. Monk was strangely silent. He let Ham climb in behind the wheel without any protest. Monk usually did the driving for the pair.

Ham toiled the car up the wide ramp. The steel doors of the garage were as strong as a safe. They operated by photoelectric control. The garage was built like a fortress. It was virtually impossible for an intruder to get in.

Ham had to stop for a moment as the doors swung open. Someone had hung a sheet or something like a sheet on the edges that opened. The sheet had a sign on it.

## THE HEADLESS MEN

"If you want to keep your heads," the sign informed them, "you will go back and keep your noses out of this business."

"Blazes!" Monk muttered. "They must plan on makin' more headless men!"

"Obviously," Ham commented dryly. "Why else would Doc want this investigated so quickly?"

"Maybe we ought to tell him about this," Monk offered.

Ham disdainfully drove through the sheet. The doors swung shut behind them.

"Doc knows it is dangerous," Ham snapped. "And he gave us a job to perform."

Monk agreed that the lawyer was right. The hairy chemist loved a fight more than any of Doc's aids.

They passed through the Holland Tunnel, and were in the underground approach to the Skyway when the lanes of cars were halted by the traffic lights that stretched like Christmas ornaments across the five lanes. Ham scanned the cars in the opposite lane.

"Look," he said. "Third car in line."

Monk looked. Suddenly he straightened his shoulders, made a dab at his necktie. Monk hadn't seen a redhead like that in many a year. And Monk was especially susceptible to redheads.

"Boy," he said happily. Then he peered more closely.

"Say, ain't that Lynda Ladore, the oomph gal of the movies?"

Ham's reply made Monk's jaw drop open a bit.

"What if she is?" Ham snapped at the chemist. "The guy driving is the one that I mean. Remember his pictures? That's Wings Dedham, or I'm crazy."

Monk gulped and remembered the job Doc had ordered them to perform. Wings Dedham was supposed to be working with Norgrud Watts. And somehow, Norgrud Watts seemed involved with the men who became headless.

"That's him!" Monk shrilled. "Let's grab him!"

At that instant, the car lanes began to move. The machine bearing Lynda Ladore and the notorious ex-flier shot past them.

"Let 'em go," Ham advised. "Our orders are to go to the plant. Did you see anyone else in the car?"

Monk shook his head.

"There was a couple of guys in the back," he said. "But I couldn't see what they looked like."

Monk spent the rest of the trip wondering what a beautiful girl like Lynda Ladore could have to do with the headless men. He didn't get any answers.

## THE HEADLESS MEN

Coincidence played a considerable part in what occurred when they got to the Stumpp electrical plant. Monk was perking up as they neared their destination. He hoped there'd be somebody he could fight to keep his mind off that scar-tissued stump that had once carried the head of Needlenose Swenson.

A pale-blue sedan started to shoot out of the main gate of the Stumpp plant as Ham turned into the drive. Both cars were at an angle, each blocking the path of the other.

The pale-blue car held six burly men. All bore the unmistakable stamp of professional thugs. The driver mouthed a curse and told Ham to pull back into the street.

This was Monk's meat. With a howl like an enraged banshee, the hairy chemist was out of the car. He lunged at the pale-blue sedan and yanked open one door. A thug happened to be leaning against it at the time. He sprawled out into the street.

Monk yanked the driver out of his seat and hauled him through a window. The window was only partway open. That didn't do the thug any good.

The rest of the mob piled out and began throwing blackjacks and fists. Apparently they didn't want to attract attention by shooting, unless they had to. Ham leaped into the fray then. The dapper lawyer carried a slender cane that seemed a highly inappropriate weapon. But the sheath came off a shiny-tipped sword that was really the heart of the stick.

Ham danced in and out, jabbing with his sword-cane. One thug ran into the point. The plug-ugly assumed an angelic expression and sighed with what sounded like pleasure. He sank slowly to the cobblestones. Then he began to snore. Ham's sword-cane was tipped with an anaesthetic that brought quick but harmless unconsciousness.

Monk roared as he plunged into the four fellows who faced him. They grabbed him with four pairs of hands. They slugged. Monk struggled back to free himself.

Then the blast came. Monk and Ham were not expecting it. Apparently the thugs were well set for the concussion that broke windows for miles around the electrical plant. There was a *whoom* and a roar that nearly burst eardrums.

Monk and Ham were knocked flat on the pavement. Blackjacks struck then. The thugs took quick advantage of the surprise.

HAM BROOKS regained consciousness and asked Monk, who had also revived, "Where'd they go? What happened?"

Monk did not know where the thugs had gone. Their pale-blue sedan had vanished.

But what had happened was easier to determine. At least one building in the electrical plant had been blown to smithereens. What was left of it, burned redly. Some kind of an incendiary compound had been used. Something like thermite.

The two men walked toward the ruins. Other men were there now. In the distance, fire sirens moaned faintly. Monk and Ham could see that the demolished building had been long and rectangular.

## THE HEADLESS MEN

They had no way at the moment of knowing that it had also been a low, one-story structure. Nor that it had been the experimental laboratory of Professor Norgrud L. Watts.

Monk looked at the ruins. "We oughta contact Doc right away," he decided. "He should know about this."

"For once you're right, gorilla," Ham snapped. "Let's get to the car."

A strange clicking noise came from the dashboard of the car. Monk leaped to the door and flicked on a switch. Contacting Doc was going to be no trouble at all. The clicking sound was an indicator directing the occupants to turn on the special two-way short-wave set that all of Doc's cars were equipped with. It had a special wave length, so low that only a car specially equipped could have intercepted the message.

"I'm up in the gyro," Doc's calm voice informed them. "I have seen the explosion and am going back to Manhattan. Stay where you are for the time being."

"Any orders, Doc?" Monk queried.

"Yes," Doc told him. "If you see L. Pennfield Stumpp, ask him to accompany you to the office. He may be able to help."

With that, Doc wheeled toward Manhattan. The gyro looked like some gigantic mosquito in the darkening sky. It was one of the few true gyros that could land or take off in a vertical line.

A commotion at the gate interrupted Monk as he watched Doc's craft disappear.

Chemistry had taken a notion to belabor Habeas with a stick. The porker was squealing as if the monkey was killing him. Actually, it was merely a pantomime that the two thoroughly enjoyed. Habeas lit out toward the gate.

At that moment a man was attempting to enter. Both continued in their original directions.

If the man had been sufficiently bowlegged, he might have achieved his objective. As it was, man, pig and monkey became inextricably entangled in something that seemed to have eight legs and four arms.

The man did not seem to enjoy it.

"Dab it! Nab it! Grab it!" he shouted. "Get out. I'll pout. You'll give me the gout."

The voice had started in a shrill falsetto. It ended in a bass so menacing that both Habeas and Chemistry quickly disentangled themselves and jumped away.

The man was well dressed, gray-haired and portly. He wore striped pants and a morning coat. He struggled to his feet and began brushing off his clothing.

"You're bad. I'm mad," his roller-coaster voice informed anyone who wanted to listen. "This is indeed sad."

Monk groaned. He began to wish he had never been given this assignment.

L. Pennfield Stumpp had arrived.

## THE HEADLESS MEN

THE majority stockholder of the Stumpp Electrical Co. proved willing enough to talk. He agreed that something pretty horrible was going on, and said he would co-operate in every way. Sometimes L. Pennfield managed to get a sentence out without rhyme, and all in one tone of voice.

Both Monk and Ham hoped he would improve with practice.

Stumpp told them he had been very much frightened by Norgrud L. Watts when he first got to know him. He said Watts repeatedly babbled about working on something tremendous; something that would shake the world. He said that Watts would never tell him what it was. Nor would Watts let him in his laboratory. Watts, he informed Monk and Ham, threatened to blow his place up if he were spied on. Then, he confided, Watts invented the vibrator that permitted L. Pennfield to get some good returns on his investment.

"Then I thought I should. Understood. He was really good," L. Pennfield began to explain.

Monk put his hands over his ears.

"Will you come and talk to Doc?" he asked. "Just nod your head. Don't answer me. Please."

L. Pennfield Stumpp bobbed his head up and down. So the three of them started off for New York. L. Pennfield rode up in front with Doc's two assistants.

He had had all of the pig and the monkey that he wanted.

The journey was uneventful until Monk bought a late evening edition from a newsboy near the tunnel. The type on page one was something the editor had been about to discard as useful only on the kind of story he knew he would never live to print:

### HEADLESS MAN

### BLACKMAILS

### INVESTOR

That much took up half of page one. The story was terse and very much to the point. Apparently the rewrite man had been so amazed by the story itself that he forgot to use any adjectives.

It started when General Smedley Worthington Watson, the millionaire Wall Street investor, had rung for one of his junior associates. The man's name was Sneedfield. The name was not particularly important, because Sneedfield ceased being of value to anyone.

When the young man did not answer, Smedley Worthington Watson stormed into his office, somewhat irate. Sneedfield was seated as calmly as you please without any head. Smedley couldn't have been more surprised if he had been also smoking a pipe.

But what happened next was the thing that was causing jitters to gallop up and down the spines of most persons who had any cash.

While S. W. Watson was staring at something he knew couldn't be, someone touched him on the elbow. He was handed a printed notice which gave him specific instructions. The alternative was to fall victim to a similar, unbelievable death. Smedley had not informed the public what he was supposed to do to prevent this.

But he did describe the person who handed him the note.

The man had no head!

The headless courier had bowed politely and stalked out of the office. Smedley Worthington Watson, who had been decorated for valor in the World War, fainted right there.

The notice had closed on a nice cheery note:

You are only the first. Others will follow. Maybe you'd like to be a horrible example.

## Chapter V. STUMPP SAYS HE'S STUMPED

ABOUT that time, a huge man with a face somewhat like an unhappy horse, was reading the same headlines in the hotel that had housed the gathering of the Electrical Goods merchandising convention.

This gloomy-looking individual held the paper in a hand that looked roughly like a quart or two of bone and gristle put together in the form of a fist.

"Holy cow!" he muttered in a voice resembling the roar of a disturbed lion. "I wonder if this has any connection with what Doc's working on."

The man who was speaking, was known in engineering circles as Colonel John Renwick, a man who knew just what to do about bridges, aqueducts or skyscraper construction. As the fifth of Doc Savage's aids, he was known more simply as Renny.

Renny had only one pastime to which he admitted. He was thoroughly convinced that he could smash through any wooden door made with one blow of his Gargantuan fists. To date, he had not been forced to admit he was wrong.

Renny crumpled the newspaper and dropped it into a wastebasket. Then he looked again at the note he held in his other gigantic fist. It was from Doc Savage and had been left for him in the office.

"If Long Tom has not returned," it instructed him, "check at the hotel where they are holding the Electrical Goods merchandising convention."

Renny did not know that Doc himself had intended to keep an eye on Monk and Ham from the gyro. Renny didn't know that Monk and Ham were on an investigation. For that matter, he didn't know what the whole thing was about.

At the door of the convention hall, he began to ask questions. The hall was empty now. The meeting had been over for more than an hour. Renny asked half a dozen flunkies if they remembered seeing Long Tom.

One of them seemed to have a glimmer of consciousness on the subject.

"Was he a pale guy who looked like he ought to be in a hospital?" this one asked.

Renny agreed that the description was quite accurate.

## THE HEADLESS MEN

"If he was also skinny and undersized, I think I seen him," the flunky observed.

He explained that he had been sent out for a particular brand of cigarettes that the hotel did not carry and happened to walk behind such an individual. He said he noticed him particularly because he seemed to be shadowing somebody else.

He was vague about what the other looked like. But he was quite sure where they had gone. He named a saloon around the corner that had been a speak-easy in the old days.

He did not add that the place had not changed very much. Either in appearance or the type of gorillas who ran it.

The flunky was a No. 1 liar. He was also considerable of an actor. Renny thanked him and hurried out into the street. He found the saloon without any trouble. A man was just emerging from a phone booth as Renny went in. The man looked like an ordinary bartender at first glance. But when he turned his head, Renny could see he had only one ear. One-ear whipped a handkerchief from his breast pocket, waved it slightly in the air.

Renny opened his mouth to ask about Long Tom. Then he thought the building had caved in. Thugs had been stationed on both sides of the door. They jumped on the big-fisted engineer with a confidence born of superior numbers.

The first three or four to reach Renny realized that their conclusions had been hasty. Renny swung his quart-of-gristle fists like buckets of sand. His horselike face assumed an unhappy, puritanical look that would have done well in an early Salem gathering of the faithful.

The sadder Renny looked, the happier he really was. And in a fight against killers, Renny was happiest when he was doing lots of damage.

Five thugs in all dived to the floor. If it hadn't been for the bung starter, Renny might have cleaned up the entire house. The bung starter was expertly wielded by One-ear. And from One-ear's viewpoint, it was just as expertly received by Colonel John Renwick.

"Two down and three to go," One-ear grunted as the rest of the mob hauled Renny into a back room. "Now, here come the cops."

One-ear was almost as good a liar as the flunky back in the hotel. He insisted that a wild-eyed drunk had come in with a blackjack. These innocent patrons, he said, had defended themselves. Now the drunk had gotten away.

And weren't the cops a little ashamed of themselves? The minions of the law looked a trifle embarrassed and went out to hunt for the drunk.

RENNY saw Long Tom when he opened his eyes. The pale electrical wizard seemed to be in his natural habitat. At any rate, it would have been a good place to grow mushrooms. It was some kind of a cellar.

A candle flickered on a backless chair in the middle of a dirt floor. A dozen thugs slouched around the room. One of them was One-ear. His face showed how smart he thought he was. Suddenly, his features clouded with anger. The anger was not without fear.

## THE HEADLESS MEN

Renny's big voice began to rumble like a storm inside a cavern. One-ear was completely baffled at the strange dialect the big engineer was speaking. He needn't have felt so badly about it. Perhaps not a dozen men in the civilized world could have understood that tongue.

It was the language of a lost race the speech of the ancient Mayan civilization of Central America.

It was the strange land of the Mayans that furnished Doc Savage with his mysterious supply of gold. All of his aids spoke the ancient language. In its use, they were almost certain of privacy in any kind of company.

"I came to before they brought me here," Long Tom answered Renny's query. "I know where we are. But what good will it do us?"

Renny spoke again in Mayan, and Long Tom told him that they were in an old subcellar beneath a row of condemned buildings on the East Side. He gave Renny the approximate location.

One-ear broke up the conversation then. He strode over to the pair, the bung starter in his hand. Other thugs came closer, leveled submachine guns at the bronze man's two aids.

"Shut up your yammering!" One-ear bellowed. "Shut up, or I'll let you both have a bellyful of machine-gun slugs."

There was little question that One-ear meant it. Long Tom and Renny shut up. Their silence gave One-ear a great deal of pleasure. He began showing off. Renny glowered in dour silence, nervously drummed his fingertips against the sole of one shoe.

One-ear amused himself by describing the reign of terror that his boss was going to loose upon the world. He sneered that the big shot could deprive a man of his head and either let him live or not.

The phony bartender grinned evilly and clapped his hands. "Cigarettes!" he grated. "Chop, chop." One-ear had heard somewhere that "chop, chop" was Chinese for hurry.

The figure that brought the cigarettes, however, was not humorous to either Renny or Long Tom. It was a headless man!

Renny had not quite believed the description in the evening paper. Right now he was flabbergasted. The headless figure moved with a slow, measured tread as if it were an automaton. It handed One-ear a package of a popular brand of smokes and stalked out of the room again.

The subcellar was so quiet that dripping seepage water could plainly be heard. Even the thugs were impressed. As well they might have been. The spectacle of the headless man actually walking and obeying orders was even more amazing than the sight of a corpse without its head.

The silence was broken by a sudden burst of gunfire. The *rat-a-tat-tat* of a machine gun filtered down into the cellar. Then there was the sound of bursting hand grenades. The subcellar was instantly thrown into confusion. Thugs whipped up guns of every sort and crowded up the stairs. They felt invincible in their cellar fortress, particularly with the advanced fighting equipment they had.

Renny spoke quickly to Long Tom. Renny had a compact short-wave transmitter built into his shoes and clothing. His nervous finger-tapping had been the transmission of an S O S to Doc.

Long Tom and Renny plunged into the milling thugs from behind. They did a quite complete job of

## THE HEADLESS MEN

subjugation. The killers had not bound the pair. They had considered it superfluous with the numbers so drastically against them.

Up above in the sub-street-level cellar, the rest of the thugs were having quite a time. The sound of gunfire seemed to be coming from above them. They didn't expect trouble where they found it. There was one point where they all had to emerge from a narrow door below the level of the street.

A cable-corded hand flicked out and touched each one. Capped to one finger of the cable-corded hand was a hollow needle. The needle fed anaesthetic to the thugs. Soon they were all unconscious on the floor.

All that was, except One-ear. He had escaped through some hidden doorway. The sound of shooting kept on coming from above.

"Go upstairs, Long Tom," Doc instructed, "and shut off that portable phonograph. It will soon attract too much attention."

DOC followed shortly. He had to impress two excited policemen that no real trouble was going on inside the vacant building. None was, at that moment. It was all over. Doc displayed an honorary commission in the police department, and that satisfied the cops.

A phone call from a nearby drugstore brought an ambulance to the deserted building. The unconscious thugs were all loaded into it. The ambulance bore no name, and was built for long-distance travel.

By the following morning, the machine would deliver the unconscious criminals to an upstate institution maintained by Doc. His aids referred to it as the "college."

In that institution the crooks would undergo a delicate brain operation that would erase from their minds both their tendencies toward crime and all memory of it. Then, after extensive training in some useful trade, they would be returned to the outside world.

Doc had long ago recognized that crime is caused by some basic maladjustment that can be remedied.

When the ambulance had left, Doc Savage instructed his two aids to return to the office. He was silent about his own destination. Neither Long Tom nor Renny made any inquiry. If Doc had wanted them to know he would have stated it. They reached the offices in a very few minutes.

The absence of any sound of quarreling as Long Tom and Renny stepped into the reception room made the presence of Monk and Ham a surprise. Such quietude between those two was not on the regular menu.

Monk and Ham were both solemnly eying the agitated figure of L. Pennfield Stumpp. The eccentric electrical manufacturer was excitedly passing a sheet of paper from one hand to the other. He acted as if the thing burned him.

"Omigosh, oh, bigosh, oh, pishtosh!" L. Pennfield moaned in his up-and-down voice. "It was in my pocket . . . docket . . . sprocket. Oh, hell!"

L. Pennfield broke down in a sweat. He apparently was sufficiently terrified to speak in a normal tone of voice. Monk drew a sigh of relief.

## THE HEADLESS MEN

"Some day," he prophesied, "I'm going to put a cork in that guy's mouth."

Stumpp handed them the sheet of paper. He explained that someone had evidently shoved it into his pocket as they walked through the crowded lobby of the office building. There was a restaurant on the first floor and a lot of people had been going in and out of it.

The note was simple. It stated that the writer had information that L. Pennfield Stumpp would receive seventy-five thousand dollars insurance for the destroyed building in the Jersey plant.

It instructed the electrical manufacturer to fork over that sum forthwith.

Unless, it added, he desired to be suddenly deprived of his head.

But perhaps the most peculiar part of the missive was the method of disposing of the cash.

"You will deposit this sum immediately," the note ordered, "to the international credit of the Republic of San Roble."

Doc Savage's four aids looked at each other in amazement. Such a method of extortion was new to them. So, for that matter was San Roble. Renny shook his head.

"Holy cow!" he rumbled. "I never heard of the place."

Neither, it seemed, had any of the others.

### Chapter VI. TRAP!

OTHER unusual methods of extortion in the headless-death menace were under discussion in another part of the city.

The sumptuous offices of General Smedley Worthington Watson seethed with activity and confusion. General Watson kept running a finger around his size-nineteen neck. He couldn't help it. Every time he found that his head was still there, he looked vaguely surprised.

The general tried not to look at the corpse on the floor. The head was gone. The wound presented the same area of well-healed scar tissue as had the neck of Needlenose Swenson.

The medical examiner of the City of New York bent over the corpse. The good doctor was muttering to himself like a small boy who was dreaming of goblins.

As far as he was concerned, this thing was more unreal than goblins would be. He would have preferred sea serpents. Or nice pink elephants that danced on the ceiling.

Decapitation was usually a messy, horrible affair. Everyone knew that it was impossible to remove a head, vanish it and heal the place where the head had been. All in the space of a second. The medical examiner said flatly that it couldn't be done. But here it was done; so neatly that it was unbelievable. Not even a sign of blood; nothing horrible or offensive about it; just expert and efficient and unbelievable!

He didn't mention the headless man who walked. The medico preferred not to think of that thing at all.

## THE HEADLESS MEN

Anyway, he hadn't seen it. He could just believe that it hadn't occurred.

Smedley Worthington Watson made such ignoring difficult. When Smedley had fought in France, he had weighed two hundred and ten. Good living since then had brought it up to three hundred. If you imagine a terrified bullfrog of three hundred pounds, you have General Smedley Worthington Watson at that particular moment.

What he had seen had made Smedley's eyes bug out as it they were going to leap at his listeners. The greenish tinge came from the way he felt when he looked at the corpse of young Sneedfield.

"One million smackers!" the general moaned. "I laid it on the line just before the close of the market."

Even the imminence of death could not make the general quite forget about money. His statement indicated that he had not informed the police immediately about the thing that had happened. In fact, the note he received had hinted strongly that it would be unwise for him to do so at all.

The commissioner of police, who was present, clucked sympathetically at General Watson. The commissioner hadn't actually said he didn't believe the story of the headless man who had walked. But the intimation was there in his voice.

Smedley Worthington moaned. "If you'd seen that guy, you'd have done what he said," he protested. Then Smedley brightened as if at a new thought.

"Anyway," he said oddly, "I didn't give the money to any crook. I merely invested it."

THAT peculiar statement met with a variety of responses. The medical examiner looked as if he thought he should have brought a butterfly net. The general was apparently going dotty under the strain.

The commissioner, who had the original note left to Smedley tucked away safely in his pocket, merely looked wise.

One big cop who had been poking around the place, seemed roused to sudden interest. He abandoned his looking under tables and behind doors and faced the general. The big cop didn't look overly bright.

"What'd you do?" he asked sarcastically. "Donate it to charity?"

Smedley Worthington Watson flared in angry defense.

"I invested it in Bentley Novelties, Preferred," Smedley shouted. "That's what the note said to do."

The commissioner sighed. It was out now. He had been intending to keep it a secret. The extortion notice had instructed the victim to invest the million dollars before the close of the market in the stock of a perfectly respectable firm!

"I've investigated them," the commissioner offered. "They're a small outfit. But they're perfectly clean."

Obviously, the set-up didn't make sense. The commissioner was about to say so when the phone began to shrill in one corner. The big, nosy cop was the first one to reach it.

## THE HEADLESS MEN

"Yup," he grunted into the mouthpiece. "Who? Oh, yup. He's here."

He set down the phone and pointed toward the general. The room was very quiet. And the voice was loud and rasping. As often happens, those standing close to the general could hear what the caller was saying.

"You were instructed not to tell the cops or Doc Savage," the grating voice said. "If we weren't really kind-hearted, you'd lose your head now."

Smedley Worthington began to perspire. His eyes bugged out a bit more. Everyone in the room was staring at him. No one noticed the big cop fumble with the badge on the left side of his chest. The rest were too intent on what else the caller might say.

"Warn your wealthy friends that no such mistake will be tolerated again," the ominous voice grated through the phone. "For each new mistake there will be another headless man. You "

A low hum began to come from the phone then. It was like the induction hum on an old-fashioned party line in the country. The hum rose to a buzz that cut out the voice completely. The commissioner grabbed the phone from Smedley and jiggled the hook to summon the operator.

In that instant, the big cop slid out into the hallway. As he raced down the emergency stairs, he underwent a startling transformation. Thin transparent disks of a dull-bluish hue came from his eyes.

The fleeing man tossed the uniformed coat into a corner. A flick of his hand brushed black powder out of his hair.

It was Doc Savage who hit the street running! Beside the building, in a half-hidden niche, he picked up a battered shoe-shining kit. Inside the kit was a complicated short-wave recording device of peculiar quality.

When Doc had twisted that fake badge in the office, he had set up an oscillation over the phone wire that extended to the transmitting instrument. High above the city, Doc's robot-controlled gyro droned over a fixed spot. A complimentary set in the gyro made an instant automatic triangulation between the transmitting phone and the one in Smedley Worthington Watson's office.

It was as efficient as a mariner taking a four-point bearing from a lighthouse. The recording sheet in the shoe-shine kit gave Doc the exact direction and distance of the villainous sender!

Doc hailed a taxi and sped across the midtown area of New York. He had appeared in the disguise of a cop for two reasons. He had been certain that the commissioner would not release any detailed information of the extortion letter.

And Doc had wanted to keep his own methods of investigation from falling into any wrong hands.

Doc knew now that that threatening phone call had come from one of the more select of the smaller hotels in the midtown sector. The cab reached it in a matter of minutes.

THE bell captain whom Doc sought out, was more than willing to co-operate. He had always hoped that some day he would personally encounter Doc Savage.

Doc seldom used his own prestige to gain information. But he knew that a great many lives depended upon

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quick action in this. Doc had become certain that the headless menace, whatever it was, would grow in tremendous proportion if its makers were not quickly brought under control.

The bronze man had not been in contact with Monk and Ham since they left New Jersey. He had no means of knowing that L. Pennfield Stumpp had returned with them to the city.

Doc swiftly described three individuals who might be connected with the headless men. The third description brought an instant response from the bellhop.

"Yellow eyes, huh?" the youngster demanded. "An' a jaw that sticks out like a fist?"

The description of Wings Dedham fitted the ex-flier perfectly. Doc nodded his head. The bellhop was instantly excited.

"Gee!" the lad blurted. "Dat guy's here with the swellest-lookin' dame I ever seen."

The boy grew confidential.

"She's a movie star traveling under another name," he said. "Room 928. I'll take you up if you want me."

Doc moved toward the elevator with a fluid speed that amazed the agile youngster beside him. The bronze man let the bellboy come along. By listening to his uninterrupted prattling, Doc might learn more than he would by deliberate questioning.

On the way up, he had to listen to the young lad's appreciation of the beauty of Lynda Ladore. Doc Savage had not known of her connection before. If he now came to any conclusions concerning her status, his features did not show it.

The boy said Lynda and the man with her had carried on a heated conversation all afternoon. He hadn't heard anything startling. But he had noticed it every time he went by the door. A guy would notice what was going on where one of the screen's most famous beauties was concerned.

Doc halted briefly at the floor matron's desk at the end of the ninth-floor hallway. The desk was in plain sight of Room 928. The matron was positive that no one had entered or left that room in the last thirty minutes.

Even as Doc turned, the sound of a rasping voice drifted over the transom. The bronze man raced to the door. When he got there, there was complete silence within. Doc took a finely tooled key. He picked the lock expertly and swung in the door.

Room 928 was empty. Doc searched every corner and cranny.

The bellboy stuttered in his amazement. Vainly, he tried to justify his assurance that the couple had been here.

"It wasn't no radio or nothin' like that," he stoutly maintained. "The voices was too clear. Just like you was in the room with them."

Doc Savage walked to the window and looked out. The only possibly peculiar thing in the room was a small scratch on the sill. The window itself was half open.

Doc Savage gave no indication of his surprise in finding one tiny clue to the mystery before him. The bronze

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man merely pressed a five-dollar bill on the boy and descended to the street level.

Doc Savage saw the thugs crowded into the small entrance foyer. He raised one hand as if to brush hair out of his eyes. A tiny mirror silvered onto his thumbnail showed more thugs massed behind him. The main lobby was crowded with guests.

Doc knew that to stage a battle inside the hotel would cost many lives. If he could confine it within the walls of the small foyer, fewer lives would be risked.

Doc Savage began the attack. That surprised the killers somewhat. They had expected to close in before the bronze man knew he was in danger.

Doc Savage was a mass of blurred motion as he struck. Howls of anguish welled up from the foyer. Submachine guns bit out in staccato roars. One husky killer let go with a sawed-off shotgun less than four feet from the bronze man. Doc was hurled back by the force of the blast.

The shotgun totter yowled in amazement as the bronze man tore back toward him. The thug did not realize that Doc's body was covered with a fine mesh bulletproof suit that fitted like underwear. One of the bronze man's many inventions, it weighed less than an ordinary jacket.

Doc's corded fingers reached out and seized attackers by their necks. Skillful application of pressure on nerve centers put many asleep.

Then the thugs began to scream. Real terror crawled from their throats. Skulking killers beat hasty retreats. Hardened thugs fled screaming in horror. Many onlookers thought that it was only Doc Savage they feared. It could be seen that more than a dozen thugs still milled around the bronze man.

Then came the pungent smell of ozone. In the massed pack of thugs, six newcomers had converged on the bronze man. They seemed to be concealing some object between them. In the pack of struggling humanity, it was difficult to be sure.

Someone saw the bronze giant drop to the floor. In the same instant, the smell of ozone changed to a queer, penetrating odor an odor that defied description, except for the overtone of ozone that it carried.

But before that odor had drifted away, a sweetish odor of gas drifted through the lobby. Many people went to sleep and later wondered what had caused them to do it.

In the foyer, Doc Savage lay on the floor. The bronze man held his breath as he broke tiny anaesthetic capsules between his thumb and forefinger. The quick, anaesthetic gas brought instant unconsciousness, but would pass in a short time. Its victims would feel no ill effects.

Behind Doc lay the headless corpse of one of the attackers! Doc's sudden dive to the floor had saved him. The headless death aimed at the bronze man had taken one of the killers who worked with it!

Doc Savage never took a life if he could help it. But it happened so often that the murderous efforts of his enemies destroyed themselves and their confederates.

The six men who had seemed to be concealing some object, however, were gone. Apparently they had escaped before Doc's gas had been released.

Police sirens screamed as a squad car bore down toward the hotel. Doc Savage slipped silently into the night.

He glided unobtrusively into the phone booth of a corner cigar store.

## Chapter VII. LYNDA APPEARS

HAM received the phone call from Doc. He spoke rapidly in Mayan for a few minutes, and then he hung up. Ham next made a call to a friend of his who was a broker in Wall Street.

Then the dapper lawyer turned to L. Pennfield Stumpp. L. Pennfield kept looking into a mirror at his head. He seemed to have come to the conclusion that it was a pretty good head. He remarked that it was odd how a person could take for granted such a valuable piece of equipment.

"We haven't gotten around to asking you yet," Ham informed L. Pennfield, "but Doc would like to know just where Wings Dedham fits into the picture."

Stumpp began to wave his hands in the air. His mouth opened and closed a couple of times. Monk leaped forward and clapped one hairy paw over the electrical merchant's lips.

"If you can't say it without poetry, write it," Monk growled. "I ain't goin' to stand for any more rhymes."

L. Pennfield's Adam's apple bobbed up and down once.

"Wings . . . stings . . . er, Dedham, the flier?" he asked, apparently getting a grip on himself.

Ham nodded.

"Norgrud Watts hired him," L. Pennfield told them. "Watts handled all the hiring of his own help. He didn't seem to trust me. He hated people who handled the commercial end of science."

Long Tom interrupted to remark that Wings Dedham had a considerable reputation in experimental radio and electrical aids to flying.

"Yes," rumbled Renny, who had apparently made up his mind. "And he's getting a reputation now as a killer."

The throbbing of a muted phone bell sent Ham scurrying to the big walnut desk. The call was apparently from his broker friend. Ham talked for several minutes. Then he put down the phone and turned, a look of triumph in his eyes.

"General Watson made a million-dollar purchase of Bentley Novelty stock just before the market closed. That purchase trebled the value of Bentley stock."

Ham paused with what he hoped was dramatic emphasis. Monk ambled toward him.

"Go on, shyster," he yipped. "Whatcha waitin' for? The market to drop?"

"No," Ham informed him. "Only that the sale was obviously planned. Bentley stock is closely held. The sudden sale meant a huge profit for whoever sold that stock a profit of about half a million, actually."

Renny began to get excited now. He was beginning to see how a foolproof delivery of extortion money might be made.

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"Holy cow!" he rumbled. "Who did a thing like that?"

Ham smiled mysteriously. "The seller, in this case, and the one to get all the profit, was a Central American Republic of San Roble. That account had accumulated Bentley stock over a period of several weeks, and unloaded it, at the much higher price, on Watson!"

L. PENNFIELD STUMPP began running around the room like a madman. He tore at his iron-gray hair and moaned about the seventy-five thousand dollars he had been instructed to let loose of. Stumpp mumbled incoherently.

"Roble . . . noble . . . bobble . . . robble " L. Pennfield muttered not quite rhythmically. "Dammit, we ought to declare war on them!"

"That," Ham informed him succinctly, "is just about what Doc is going to do. He "

The visitor-approach-indicator interrupted Ham. So did a snapping metallic sound in a gadget on one wall of the room. The snapping sound was merely the arrival of the early morning editions of the papers. Some New York morning papers are printed early the evening of the night before.

The visitor approach indicator signaled the arrival of Lynda Ladore. Lynda immediately demonstrated that the temperamental qualities often attributed to redheads, have some scientific basis.

There may not have been murder in the redhead's eyes. But her temper was breaking records in mercurial rises of blood pressure.

"Wings Dedham is behind this whole thing!" she screamed without waiting for any introductions. "I know you're working on the headless deaths. Get busy, you nitwits, and find out what Dedham's been up to!"

Lynda Ladore may have been a good actress. She may have been one of the best in Hollywood. But if she was faking her indignation at that moment, she was fooling four of Doc Savage's aids.

"Wings is the real master mind!" Lynda shrieked. "I'll help you find him if you'll "

Renny interrupted the gorgeous redhead. "Look at this, will you?"

Renny had discreetly retired to one corner to read the morning papers when the girl had started blasting. The big-fisted engineer stepped forward now with the paper in his hands. The type was not quite as large as that used by the editor of the afternoon paper. There was a two-column picture in the upper left-hand corner of the page.

The man who looked out of the newspaper at the readers resembled a bald skull with pince-nez glasses on. The cadaverous-looking features were not entirely unfamiliar to newspaper readers. They were better known to the readers of scientific periodicals. His name was Norgrud L. Watts, who owned a string of initials after that which would have occupied more than the two columns. The headline was eight columns:

HEADLESS DEATH FOR MY

ENEMIES, SAYS SCIENTIST

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The story, it seemed, had been mailed to the newspaper by Norgrud Watts. The text of the statement was weird in the pent-up hatred that seemed to lie between the lines.

Norgrud Watts warned that he would take money where he chose. He said that too long had the commercialized agencies of distribution stolen the money that belonged to scientists.

The statement said that Watts had developed something horrible and powerful that no one could duplicate nor halt. He said that unless his demands were met, battalions of headless men would march the streets.

The rewrite man may have added to the horror pictured in the piece. He resorted to indirect quotes in places. But there was plenty of terror in the actual text that was quoted verbatim. It was the horror of an unhinged mind, made mad by the explosion of a persecution complex.

Wind *whooshed* out of L. Pennfield Stumpp's mouth.

"I knew he hated commerce in science," Stumpp mumbled, "but I didn't know he hated it that much."

L. Pennfield was so impressed he forgot to be poetic.

THE mercurial temper of Lynda Ladore seemed to recede like a thermometer plunged into a bowl of ice. Her blue eyes looked like two frightened violets as she stared at the terrifying type.

"O-o-o-o-oh, my!" the crestfallen girl moaned softly. "Maybe Wings was telling me the truth. Maybe he is really a victim in this thing! O-o-o-oh!"

Lynda Ladore began to weep softly into a tiny handkerchief. Monk almost broke Ham's leg getting over to her side. Monk had to trip Ham to keep the lawyer from getting to her first.

"Now, now, honey," Monk began in a shrill voice that made the words sound like a comedy. "Don't take it so hard. It's all this shyster's fault."

Monk nodded toward Ham. The hairy chemist believed in reducing Ham's status to a minimum as soon as it was possible. Ham usually wound up higher in the favor of feminine acquaintances than Monk did.

Lynda abandoned the handkerchief and wept fetchingly on Monk's coat lapel. At that moment, Doc walked in.

The bronze man ignored the pretty tableau before him. He spoke quickly to Ham.

"What information did you get on the Bentley stock?" he asked Ham.

While the dapper lawyer told the bronze man about the quick profit-taking by the Central American republic, Monk extricated himself from the girl's weeping embrace as deftly as he could. He felt a little silly and more than a little embarrassed in the presence of Doc Savage.

Lynda dried her tears and flashed Monk a smile that made him gulp. Then she headed for a small side room where a mirror could be seen through the door. As she went, she pulled rouge and lipstick from a tiny coat-cuff pocket. She began humming a popular ditty.

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"Where's this place, San Roble, Doc?" Monk intruded, just to show that he hadn't forgotten the non-romantic aspect of the situation.

"It is a small country south of Mexico which was recently taken over by a dictator," the bronze man said calmly. "It is little known, and has no imports or exports of importance."

It was not surprising that Doc knew of a change in government in an obscure Latin republic. The bronze man's reading was prodigious. Few events in the fleeting history of the world escaped his notice. Doc did not, however, know much about the present governmental set-up in San Roble.

That indicated to his four aids the fact that such information was not available.

"We are going to San Roble immediately," Doc informed them. "It is obvious that the criminals behind this thing believe they are safe in clearing their loot through that country. We must first bottle up that end and make further operations profitless and dangerous.

"Then," the bronze man added, "we will concentrate on the actual users of the headless death. Some of those may be merely hired killers."

"You mean the real brains behind this thing the top guy is in San Roble?" Monk queried.

"I mean that I believe we will find him there," Doc said somewhat cryptically. "Now, I would like to speak with Lynda Ladore."

Monk straightened his shoulders and headed toward the room where the blue-eyed bonfire had gone to powder her nose. He could still hear her humming the popular ditty she had started before she left the reception room. The ditty was still being hummed when Monk reached the little room with the mirror.

Lynda Ladore was humming right beside him. But she also had disappeared!

Monk let out a bellow of rage and indignation. The apelike chemist was just as completely surprised every time a pretty girl fooled him. Pretty girls were Monk's major weakness.

"She's gone, Doc!" Monk shrilled. "The door's open to the elevators."

Monk crashed out, not bothering about the mystery of the voice without a body that had been humming a song beside him. There was an emergency door leading from the small room to the regular elevators. Lynda Ladore had somehow found out how to open it.

Monk raced to the elevators and punched a button. He suddenly realized he was not alone.

"Yah, yah, wise guy," Ham gibed. "You fell for the dame. And now look what it's got you."

Monk refused to answer. The two descended in the elevator together.

Out on the street, they saw Lynda Ladore. She was in the back seat of a taxi. The taxi was leaving rapidly. It was lost in traffic before Monk or Ham could give pursuit.

"Criminy!" Monk grumbled. "I'd like to get my hands on that female."

Lynda Ladore had not been alone in the cab. The unmistakable figure of Wings Dedham had sat beside her.

Lynda had been holding a businesslike automatic against Wings Dedham's skull!

## Chapter VIII. AN UNANNOUNCED VISITOR

MONK squinted his little eyes in the direction of the taxi he could no longer see.

"D'you suppose Wings Dedham really is a victim in this thing?" he asked.

Ham adopted a superior attitude. After Monk's experience with the girl, Ham decided he had had a good opportunity to rub salt into the wounds.

"Don't be a hairy ape all your life," Ham sneered. "Even a guy as dumb as you, knows Dedham is a crook."

"What's the score, then?" Monk queried, for once too baffled to resent Ham's gibing.

"The two of them are in this thing together," Ham said, as if he were explaining something simple to a child. "They had some sort of a falling out. And now they're quarreling about it. If they kill each other, it will be just dandy."

Monk thought for a minute.

"I hope she gets him first," he muttered. "She's too pretty to get mussed up."

Ham's reply was in stronger language than he ever used. It was to the effect that Monk had no sense whatever, that any pretty girl could make a fool of him and that Doc in particular and the world in general would be far better off if Monk had remained in an embryonic stage.

Ham was just completing his thesis on the advantages of a world without Monk when they ran into L. Pennfield Stumpp in the center of the office-building lobby. Stumpp was bouncing along like a jack rabbit outrunning a shotgun blast. The eccentric manufacturer waved wildly at Doc's two aids and beckoned them to come over to the wall where he was.

Monk squared off like a boxer when they reached L. Pennfield.

"Just one rhyme," the chemist growled. "Just one and I bop you!"

Stumpp's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. He pulled a small pad from his pocket and began to write on it.

"I'm going with you," he inscribed. "Doc said I could go. I want to help solve this thing if I can."

Stumpp grinned in his delight at accompanying the bronze man. Ham touched his arm.

"Don't let this monkey scare you," he advised. "Go ahead and talk, if you want to."

L. Pennfield seized his pencil and pad again. "I've just developed laryngitis," he wrote, handing the slip to Monk.

Monk sighed in relief. "I guess I won't have to strangle him, after all," he grunted. "This is the first break I've had today."

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Monk absently took Stumpp's final written bit of conversation and ambled toward the elevators. Then the apelike chemist nearly choked.

"I'll get over the laryngitis," Stumpp had written, "just as soon as we hit a warmer climate."

LONG TOM and Renny were examining a peculiar gadget when Monk and Ham wandered into the office. Doc had apparently retired to the laboratory. Ham explained what they had found in the street and asked what the funny gadget was. Long Tom explained.

"This is a new advancement in the frequency-modulation system of radio broadcast," he told them. "It permits the transmission of sounds with neither distortion nor the metallic quality of ordinary radio."

Blazes!" Monk said. "An' Dedham is a radio technician."

Doc appeared in the doorway.

"Yes," he said. "And such a device was used yesterday to decoy anyone who checked back on a phone call to a hotel room that was empty."

Doc then told them about the voices from the empty room. Doc had suspected a frequency-modulation broadcast hookup. The scratch on the windowsill had told him where the gadget had been hauled out by its wiring.

"We are up against some very clever criminals," the bronze man said. "Not only are they ready to terrify the nation now, but I am afraid that if we do not stop them, they will develop their discovery into something even more destructive and deadly."

Monk bridled. This was the first indication he had seen of how seriously the bronze man considered the menace of the headless men. Monk balled his fists and grunted his defiance.

"Let's go after 'em, Doc," he grated. "I'd like to get my hands on some of those guys."

Monk was remembering the thugs at the electrical plant who got away when the explosion knocked Ham and Monk unconscious.

"Monk and Ham will prepare to leave immediately for San Roble," Doc said. "We will take the dirigible, so that more lengthy observations may be made from the air."

"Holy cow, Doc!" Renny rumbled. "Do we get left behind?"

Doc smiled slightly. He knew that big-fisted Renny would be deeply hurt if he were deprived of a fight that the others managed to get into.

"You and Long Tom will remain in New York," he directed. "I believe there will be at least one more major thrust in the city. I would like to have you two work on it together. Particularly, I want Long Tom to investigate any activity that appears in connection with the headless death."

"Huh?" Monk interpolated as he returned to the room, dragging Habeas and a trick parachute he had invented for the porker.

## THE HEADLESS MEN

"I believe some terrific electrical force has been harnessed into the headless deaths," the bronze man explained. "It must be something that could have been developed only by a genius or a madman. I do not know yet what it is. But we must find it."

DOC would not say any more. He preferred to let Long Tom work in the direction of any theories he might develop himself. Doc had several reasons for deciding to go immediately to San Roble to pursue his investigations in Central America.

Another one came to him as he packed a small vestlike contrivance that had an assortment of pockets and clips. It was this inner vest that Doc wore when he was deliberately walking into danger. Many little-known chemicals and pieces of equipment were placed in those pockets. More than once they had saved the life of the bronze man, as well as those of his aids.

The phone rang again and Long Tom answered it.

"LaGuardia Field," Long Tom told Doc. "The dispatcher wants to talk to you."

Doc picked up the phone and listened for a moment. Then he asked one or two questions.

"How much gas did they take?" the bronze man inquired. "What was their exact departing direction?"

Doc cradled the phone. The airport dispatcher had called him at Doc's own request. The bronze man had wanted to be informed if a certain couple took off in a plane. The couple were Lynda Ladore and Wings Dedham.

Wings and his red-headed companion had loaded enough gasoline to take them well into Central America. And they had headed southwest by south. That, Doc figured, would take them pretty close to San Roble.

Monk wanted to know one thing about the affair at the airport.

"Who was leadin' who when they got there?" Monk demanded.

"They didn't seem too friendly with each other," Doc advised him. "But they were at least on speaking terms."

Doc Savage pulled off his coat and struggled into his equipment vest. Then he headed toward the high-speed elevator. Monk and Ham trailed after him. Their two pets paired off behind them.

Doc Savage was silent as the elevator cage plummeted to the lower level of the garage floor. Doc did not know about the sheetlike sign that Ham had driven through earlier in the day. So much had happened that the two aids had forgotten to mention the sheet sign that had warned them not to mix in the headless deaths. The most important thing that they did not remember was that when the dapper lawyer drove through that sheet, it momentarily obscured their vision of the garage doors they were leaving.

Doc climbed behind the wheel of a sleek sedan and Ham got in beside him. Monk got in back with the two pets. The car windows were all rolled up. It was a usual precaution against machine-gun slugs in ambush outside the door. Such onslaughts had occurred in the past.

The big doors swung back as the machine eased out onto the street for the short run to the queer warehouse

depot that housed Doc's long-distance transportation units.

The rolled-up windows would have fended off any leaden ambush had there been one. But the street was silent.

What the windows did accomplish was to make the sleek sedan soundproof, also.

None of its occupants heard the low chuckle that drifted from the subterranean garage. The low laugh was one of mirthless triumph. The intricate system of Doc Savage's burglar alarms had been penetrated.

### Chapter IX. BLAST A LA HINDENBERG

IT is safe to assume that if Doc Savage had had any inkling of the intruder in the skyscraper garage he would have delayed his trip to San Roble. It was not his custom to unnecessarily leave his aids to battle against foes of unestimated force.

Apparently the bronze man had complete faith in the scientific system of burglar prevention he had installed in his headquarters. Had Monk or Ham thought to mention the affair of the sheet, Doc might have altered his plans.

As it was, the bronze giant tooled the sleek sedan toward the waterfront districts of the broad Hudson River. Doc did not go up on the ramp of Manhattan's outer drive. He weaved in and out of the vaultlike recesses that lie below the speedway that has solved so much of the city's traffic congestion.

Monk opened the windows once they were out away from the headquarters building. The hairy chemist watched their progress with interest and pleasure. Monk loved this section. He loved the many superplanes and other transport units that were hidden in the unique warehouse the car was approaching.

The Hudson's banks were lined with piers and warehouses under the drive at that point. Passenger liners and freight steamers were tied up at most of the wharves. Other gaunt buildings apparently had not been used in some time.

The extremely large pier-warehouse with "Hidalgo Trading Co." emblazoned on its front, seemed to be one of the most forlorn in the death row of unused and antiquated structures. The pier on which the edifice stood, was of somewhat unusual construction. The warehouse walls, which looked as if they were about to tumble into the slip from the sheer weariness of age, extended down into the water. These walls, under a flimsy ramshackle exterior of wood siding, were of solid concrete.

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

The Hidalgo Trading Co. warehouse was little less than a gigantic and modern fortress.

There was only one figure in sight in the dim gloom that illumined the street. L. Pennfield Stumpp was just paying off the cab driver who had brought him. The cabby took his fare and went away with great haste. This was not a section where he expected another fare at this time of night.

If the cabby had not looked behind him, some innocent lives might have been saved. The first thing that the

## THE HEADLESS MEN

cab driver saw was the form of L. Pennfield Stumpp waving a greeting at Doc Savage's car. Then the cabby let out a whoop of horror and jammed down on his accelerator.

He was the first one to notice the approach of the headless men.

The headless ones drifted into sight from behind pillars and complicated ramps that led to the speedway above. There were two dozen or more of the things. They used an assortment of weapons. Tommy-guns gobbled and roared. Lead spattered against the bulletproof windows of the big black sedan.

Monk and Ham leaped from the machine at a quick order from Doc.

"Keep moving," the bronze man clipped to his aids. "Don't stop for more than a single burst of shells. The guns are not the only things that we will have to fear in this fight."

L. Pennfield Stumpp screamed in sudden terror. He tried to flee from the oncoming menace and take shelter with Doc. Headless men cut him off.

Monk dived into a shadow with a whoop of defiance. He whipped out a peculiar weapon with an oversized drum. It was one of Doc's superfiring machine pistols. The magazine drum was filled with thin-shelled anaesthetic slugs that brought quick unconsciousness to the victim.

Ham had abandoned his sword-cane for the battle with the headless men. There was something about them that made the dapper lawyer want to fight from some distance. He whipped out a superfirer of his own. Both of Doc's aids cut loose with their weapons.

The superfiring machine pistols moaned in a bullfiddle roar. So rapid was the rate of fire that the stream of explosions seemed to be one long continuous sound.

Headless men faltered and lay down on the pavement. If it is possible for a man without a head to go to sleep, that was what these seemed to do. The effect was unreal, horrible.

Doc was advancing slowly toward the monsters who had headed off L. Pennfield Stumpp's attempt to flee. The headless men seemed to move like automatons. They answered directions screamed by a wizened man who seemed to be their leader.

This little runt of a man had a head on his shoulders. His face was covered by a domino mask. A black hat on his skull hid what he looked like.

"Save the faker Stumpp," the wizened leader cried. "For him there is personal vengeance!"

At that moment, the cops arrived. The terrified cabby had turned in an alarm. Four riot squads stormed down into the murky recesses beneath the speedway.

The policemen were ill-equipped to defend themselves against the menace that struck them. Few of them were able to accurately describe the horror that followed.

Some swore they heard a faint hum as if a powerful dynamo had been suddenly set up among them. Others denied that manifestation of the catastrophe that descended.

But all of them remembered the queer smell of the air, a smell they couldn't quite describe, except for the touch of ozone in it.

## THE HEADLESS MEN

One cop stopped in the middle of a terrorized scream. His face seemed to dissolve in the night. Then his head disappeared completely, and he was a headless corpse fallen to the street!

Doc Savage moved quickly to protect his two aids.

"Back!" he cried. "Monk! Ham! Run for it! This thing is too big for us to combat now. Get back so that we can live to cope with it later!"

Monk and Ham retreated with reluctance. Never before had they heard the bronze man give such a peremptory order of flight. Then Monk shrilled a cry of anguish.

"Doc ain't comin' Ham!" the hairy chemist moaned.

DOC SAVAGE, indeed was not retreating. The bronze man forced his way slowly over the cobblestones in the direction of the monsters who were herding L. Pennfield Stumpp steadily toward the little man in the center of the attackers.

The rest of the headless men concentrated their efforts on the policemen. A second and then a third blue-coated figure screamed in anguish and collapsed on the street, a corpse without a head.

Then the thing struck Doc Savage.

Monk and Ham stood paralyzed with a feeling that nothing they could do would help the bronze giant. Doc reached quickly into his equipment pouch. He darted swiftly to right and left as he went through strange motions with his hands.

Smoke began to curl from Doc Savage's clothing. A white glow seemed to hover around his head. The bronze man began to waver. An overpowering urge seemed to make Doc claw at his face and neck with frantic, steel-muscled hands. Doc Savage staggered, fell slowly toward the street.

IT was about that time that the leader of the headless men heard the sirens announcing the arrival of the reserves. Half of the available men in Manhattan seemed to be converging upon the scene of disaster.

Apparently the controller of the headless horror was not quite ready for battle on such a gigantic scale. He screamed sudden orders into the night air.

What at first appeared to be a huge sanitation department truck lumbered into the field of battle. Headless men who were on their feet, picked up their fellows who had been struck by the mercy bullets of Monk and Ham. They heaved the recumbent men into a special aperture in the side of the elephantine body of the truck.

Many cops tried to stop that flight of the headless horrors. The foremost of those who tried to stop them became headless corpses. The fake sanitation truck suddenly leaped into life. It jerked forward with the speed of a racing car.

The type of engine that could hurl that leviathan of a vehicle with such speed must have been an engineering marvel.

## THE HEADLESS MEN

It gave the authorities an inkling of the kind of a brain they were up against.

The last thing they heard was a scream of terror from L. Pennfield Stumpp.

"They've got me!" L. Pennfield screamed. "Somebody save me!"

Monk and Ham had not too closely witnessed that juggernaut departure. When Doc Savage had fallen to the street, his two aids raced to his unconscious body. Not only were Monk and Ham horror-stricken at the thought that Doc was dead, but they also knew that the bronze man was the only one who might possibly cope with the menace of the headless monsters.

Doc stirred as they leaned over him. The bronze giant moaned faintly. Then he sat erect. The tremendous vitality that enabled Doc Savage to perform his work undoing wrongs through the world, surged through his veins. Doc's face was pale, strangely white and drawn. He scarcely seemed the bronzed fighter of a few moments before.

As the flake-gold eyes began stirring with life again, Doc passed a hand over his face. Whitish powder seemed to fall from his features. It dusted down on clothing that still smoldered with a strange inner heat. Monk gasped when he saw the powder.

"Doc!" he gulped. "You've figured this thing out. You've found a way to stop this headless death!"

Doc Savage shook his head. He struggled wearily to his feet. Monk had almost never seen that occur before.

"No," Doc said slowly. "If they had not abandoned their efforts with the arrival of police reserves, I would now be a headless corpse!"

A DEPUTY inspector of police strode over to the bronze man. The inspector was considerably distraught. At first he acted as if the thing that had happened was Doc Savage's fault. Then he realized that such a thing was foolish. It occurred to him that Doc was probably the one person who could bring justice to those who were responsible.

"What can I report on this, commissioner?" he asked, using Doc's honorary title in the police department.

"Describe what happened, inspector," Doc said quietly. "You may inform your superiors that we are doing everything we can to stop this thing."

The inspector thanked Doc. He opined that the citizens of New York would feel better to know that such was the case. He knew that his superiors would be somewhat relieved.

Doc beckoned to Monk and Ham. Monk drove the sedan through the photoelectric control of the Hidalgo Trading Co. doors. As the car went into the gaunt building, two frightened faces showed in the rear window. Chemistry and Habeas had shown the good sense to make themselves exceedingly scarce during that battle.

Doc turned once as he went into the building and saw the police picking up the bodies of their fallen comrades. Soon the street would again be deserted, like a vault beneath the speedway.

Inside the warehouse, Doc began speedy preparations for a trip to San Roble. The huge building was lighted indirectly. There was no illuminating agent to be seen. There was also no place within that building where a

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shadow could be cast. The intricate system had been scientifically worked out and constructed after months of study.

A VARIETY of craft rested within that steel-and-concrete fortress. There was a four-motored duralumin giant that had furnished the basic design for one of Uncle Sam's mightiest army bombers. There were speed ships with wing span so short it scarcely seemed possible they would fly. Those consisted practically entirely of motor.

The true gyro, which had returned automatically by robot control, descended from the roof on an elevator as Doc actuated a lever.

At one side there was an expanse of water that looked like a shipyard drydock. A submarine which hid secrets many a foreign nation would give millions to learn was tied in the drydock.

There were speedboats. And there were other planes. But the craft to which Doc gave his immediate attention was a dirigible of streamlined proportions. Shaped something like the German Zeppelins, this craft was sturdier, more compact and smaller. It was of all-metal construction and could out-speed many heavier-than-air craft that were considered suitable for pursuit and fighting ships.

The dirigible rode proudly at her moorings, tugging mightily, as if anxious to soar up into the clouds.

Doc's gold-flaked eyes stirred in tiny whirlpools as he inspected every device on the ship. Every piece of machinery functioned smoothly, performed the duty for which it was intended.

Doc gave low-voiced instructions to his two aids. Monk and Ham scurried back and forth in the huge warehouse, performing various tasks that were important to the trip they were about to undertake. At last the big ship was ready for the air.

It was an inspiring sight to see Doc's dirigible leave the safe harborage of the Hidalgo dock. A double-wing construction in the roof opened by hydraulic action. The great bag floated serenely into the cool air of the night. A fingernail moon cast a suspicion of illumination.

The forms of Doc, Monk and Ham could be seen in the light reflected from the instrument panel in the control cabin. A grunting and squealing came from the rear cabin as Chemistry played some trick on Monk's pet pig.

The dirigible nosed slowly out over the quiet Hudson. It gained altitude slowly, reached nearly a thousand feet.

Then the holocaust occurred. Screams of pain and terror roared from the big balloon as it burst into flame. It became instantly apparent why the killers had been willing to leave Doc Savage unconscious but alive in the street beside the warehouse.

It became apparent, if anyone had been there to remember it, why the dirigible had tugged so mightily at her moorings. The helium with which Doc kept his ship inflated would not have exploded. Someone would have had to replace that helium with more explosive, more bouyant hydrogen gas to carry out such a plot.

Doc's dirigible exploded now. With a booming roar that was heard for miles, the big ship disintegrated over the Hudson River. Screams came from the big ship. The screams died in choking horror.

Nothing on that ship could have lived. The sheet of flame that enveloped the sinking bag was all-consuming.

## Chapter X. A CLEAN-UP FOR EVIL

A SEDAN was moving slowly along the upper-level speedway as Doc Savage's dirigible fell the remaining distance in flaming shreds. A man grinned broadly beneath a mask he wore. That all life aboard that ship had been extinguished, there was no longer any question.

Only the twisted metal that had been motors, plummeted to the bottom of the river. And it could be seen no living forms clung to them.

The watcher put a powerful pair of binoculars to his eyes. Through them he carefully inspected the flaming shreds that drifted to the water. There was no piece big enough to be a human. The fire had consumed everything.

The masked man put down his glasses. He grunted an order to his driver and the sedan moved along. It descended to the lower level and retraced the exact route Doc Savage had traversed driving from the skyscraper garage to the waterfront.

The masked one directed his driver to park the sedan some distance from the double doors that guarded the entrance to Doc's garage. Stealthily, the two men crept toward the gigantic building. Outside the burglar-proofed approach, the masked man pursed his lips and gave forth an odd, eerie whistle.

The masked man stood back expectantly. Only the whites of his eyes gleamed in the dim light of the street. For a moment there was silence. Then a faint drone of machinery sounded. The giant doors began to move. The driver of the masked man's car crowded forward.

A thin, rabbitlike figure stood in the ramp as the doors swung back. The masked leader addressed him as Fingers. The thin one rubbed his hands in triumphant glee. He told his boss how he had sneaked into the big garage behind the sheeted sign. Once in, it was a simple matter to pull levers to open the big garage doors.

"Silence!" the masked crook ordered. "There is no time for boasting until we have these others reduced to headless automatons."

Then he seemed to remember some other plan. "The brain of one we must keep alive," he said cryptically. "It may prove useful. Come."

The three men hauled a square box about three feet in each dimension from the sedan into the high-speed elevator. The masked man closed the door of the cage and shot the contrivance upward. As the cables sang with friction and the motors hummed, the crook worked rapidly with instruments within the box.

He chortled happily as the cage jerked to a sudden stop at the floor numbered eighty-six.

SENSITIVE indicators within Doc Savage's laboratory foretold the arrival of the private elevator. Hidden alarms buzzed throughout the bronze man's quarters. They were part of the elaborate system to warn Doc and his aids against any surprise attack.

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Long Tom and Renny knew it was not an unexpected return of the bronze man. Had it been Doc or one of his aids using the elevator, they would have pressed a hidden button in the sub-basement level. That action would have temporarily disconnected the alarm devices.

"Holy cow!" Renny grumbled. "It looks like we have visitors."

Long Tom did not reply. He leaped immediately to one wall of the laboratory and pulled two levers. One of them threw into action a newly developed magnetic field that would paralyze anyone stepping on the floor.

The other lever dropped across the center of the reception room an invisible flexible curtain. It was somewhat akin to the glass substitute recently developed in commercial laboratories. Any hurled object or projectile would merely bend it like a baseball hurled at a rubber sheet.

Thus protected, the two men stepped into the outer office. Each carried a superfiring machine pistol for use if the emergency proved greater than they anticipated.

As they set themselves behind the big walnut desk, they heard a scraping noise in the hallway outside. It was as if some heavy piece of furniture were being hauled across the floor.

"Holy cow!" Renny ground out. "I gotta hunch we're in for more than we've expected."

Renny's voice displayed more anxiety than was his custom. Hunches are funny things. Everyone has them at times. Sometimes they are oddly accurate. The premonition that pressed down on Renny's mind at that moment made cold little fingers gallop up and down his spine.

"Look!" Long Tom breathed. "The approach indicator's moving."

The light blinked on and off and a buzzer sounded faintly. Then the outer door swung slowly open. The man who stepped inside was masked and wore a loose black hat. About his shoulders was thrown a flowing cape that effectively disguised his shape and stature. He spoke as if his mouth were full of pebbles or gravel.

The masked one seated himself in the leather chair near the door as if his visit were purely social. He crossed his legs, pulled out a long cigarette and began to smoke it.

"I realize that your smart devices protect me as well as they do you," the visitor announced calmly. "And I have no intention of penetrating them by any means you would understand."

Renny coughed. The calm assurance of the man was beginning to get him.

"What do you want?" he rumbled. "Doc isn't here. And we haven't got anything for you."

The masked one flicked an ash from his cigarette onto the floor. He spoke with complete deliberation.

"Surrender at once," he rasped in a tone of finality. "Or you will be destroyed!"

Long Tom seemed to stagger against the desk. One of his slender fingers touched a button. The button released an anaesthetic gas in the part of the reception room on the outer side of the rubberlike glass partition. The gas had a faint color. Long Tom could see it surge up from the floor jets.

So could the masked one. He pulled a compact gas inhalator from his pocket and thrust it into his mouth. When he spoke through it his voice sounded weird and hollow.

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"You have signaled for your own death!" he announced. He waved his hand. "O. K., boys. Give it to them!"

The masked crook backed hastily out into the hallway. It seemed that he did not wish to get in the way of his own death device. It turned out his judgment in that was excellent.

The first thing Long Tom noticed was the excessive heat. The outer part of the room began to glow. The leather chair curled up, cracked into a dozen bright pieces and then began to burn. The metal floor began to burn.

The magnetic field Long Tom had set up, would hold any physical object that attempted to pass through it. But it was no defense at all against this awful heat. Great tears began to appear in the transparent rubberlike glass that constituted their second line of defense.

Long Tom leaped to the wall, pulled a hidden switch. Cascades of water began to gush down from an intricate sprinkler system. The water struck the white-hot outer floor and began to sizzle. Clouds of steam filled the room.

Then Doc's two aids heard a grating laugh from the corridor. A blinding crash followed that. It was not the sort of a blast that comes from an explosive. It was a rending crash more like the ripping crash of an atom-smashing arc.

The water that came down then was an actual flood. The special tanks above that fed the sprinkler system split as if giant hands had torn them asunder. There was one great cascade of water. Then there was no more.

The masked man laughed again in his grating voice. Then his companions thrust the three-foot black box into the doorway. The heat became intense, unbearable. The rubber-glass curtain curled up into disappearing tongues like burning Cellophane.

There was another spitting crackle as the metal housing of the machines that controlled the magnetic field cracked under terrific heat and fell apart. Long Tom and Renny were driven into the laboratory beyond. Long Tom rushed to his experimental workbench. He had been working on an electrical device that was calculated to offset any other electrical force. Unfortunately, it was far from complete. There were certain elemental forces that had defied solution by the brilliant mind of the electrical wizard.

Long Tom was stumped. It seemed that the brains of the criminals were more advanced than those of Doc Savage's aids. Long Tom worked frantically with his apparatus. Meanwhile, the heat increased. Sweat broke out on the forehead of the pale electrical expert. The composition floor beneath his feet began to soften and turn to a sticky substance, like asphalt under a blowtorch.

Then Long Tom heard Renny's booming voice. He hadn't noticed the big engineer. Long Tom had considered an electrical onslaught something that it was his duty to combat. He didn't stop to realize that the awful force was a thing that even Doc Savage had so far been unable to cope with.

"Look out!" Renny rumbled in sudden warning.

The booming voice was followed by a shattering explosion that seemed to shake the very foundation of the building. Glass windows crashed and burst into tiny fragments. Thick, pungent black smoke whooshed through the laboratory and the outer reception room.

Another roaring explosion followed, and a door was snatched from its hinges as if a mighty hand had plucked it.

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"Look out, you guys out there!" Renny boomed again. "You know what trinitrobenzine can do. Enough of it can make fine gravel of this whole danged building."

A third explosion followed the big engineer's remark. The walnut desk in the reception room was blasted into splinters. A fourth explosion was even closer to the outer door.

There was a scurrying of feet in the corridor. The black box was hauled outward. Apparently, the masked intruder did know the power of trinitrobenzine. Known to the trade as TNB, it is even more powerful than its sister explosive, TNT. It is not extensively used in projectile shells because its tremendous power disintegrates a shell into fragments too minute to be effective as murder units.

Renny hurled another small bomb toward the outer door and another deafening explosion occurred. The whine of the elevator indicated the retreat of the killers.

Long Tom sat down on the floor and mopped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Whew!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know you had trinitrobenzine up here."

"I haven't," Renny announced calmly. "This is just ordinary black-smoke gunpowder."

"Huh," Long Tom spluttered. "You said "

"I didn't tell them this was trinitrobenzine." Renny reminded him. "I merely asked them if they knew what TNB would do."

LONG TOM struggled to his feet. He seemed rather crestfallen to realize that his electrical genius had been surpassed by the knowledge of the killers. Renny's device that had saved them was a life-giving trick. But it had not solved the mystery of the awful force that created headless men and destroyed things by awful heat.

The electrical expert staggered into the outer office just as the phone rang. The phone by the desk had been destroyed. But another extension on a wall bracket buzzed faintly. When Long Tom answered, he straightened somewhat. His failure so far made him all the more determined to find out what caused the terrible force that was working against them.

"Is that so?" Long Tom said into the phone. "Where are you?"

Long Tom motioned to Renny. In deaf-and-dumb sign language, he instructed the big engineer to trace the call while he held the man on the line.

"We'll be right over," Long Tom said to his caller. "Give me the address again and tell me the quickest way to reach there from this office building."

Long Tom kept the man engaged in meaningless conversation until Renny reappeared in the doorway and nodded his head. Renny had used another private line in the laboratory to trace the call. Long Tom hung up.

"The guy said he was Smedley Worthington Watson," he offered. "He said he'd been threatened again. He was told to get up another half million because he had called Doc and the police. He says he hasn't got that much dough left."

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Big Renny nodded. "The call came from his office all right," he said. "And I called an all-night cigar store in the lobby. The guy said he saw the general go up in the elevator half an hour ago."

Long Tom's pale face tensed in concentration.

"We've got to do something to solve this," he decided. "That's why Doc left us here in New York."

"Yeah," Renny agreed. "Let's go see the general."

The two men left the offices as well guarded and locked as they could. An emergency magnetic-ray system was cut in and harmless explosive bombs were set to go off. They usually were enough to frighten intruders away when they exploded.

A taxi took them to the offices of the general. When they got to the floor that housed his suite of offices, they saw a light burning through the frosted-glass door. There was no reply to their knock, so Long Tom tried the latch. The door was not locked.

Long Tom and Renny crowded into the office. Long Tom shuddered and muttered under his breath.

Renny merely took off his hat. He was too dumfounded to say anything at all.

As has been previously stated, General Smedley Worthington Watson weighed all of three hundred pounds. A corpse of such Gargantuan size seated in an office chair minus its head was certainly a sight to dumfound anyone.

"Holy cow!" Renny finally got out. "That's the blamest thing I ever did see!"

They were both too absorbed to notice the gas. The stuff had absolutely no odor in any event. Renny suddenly stumbled and fell to his knees. Long Tom slowly collapsed on the floor.

The gas did not rob them of consciousness. It merely paralyzed the motor nerves of the brain. They saw the masked killer rush through the door with his two companions. The trio held handkerchiefs over their noses. Apparently the handkerchiefs were saturated with some antidote for the paralysis gas.

Long Tom and Renny made feeble attempts to fight against the intruders. But they had no strength left at all. They were quickly bound, and dirty gags were thrust in their mouths. Then the masked man stepped quickly to one window and opened it. The gas quickly dissipated into the night.

"This is swell," the gravel-voiced killer announced. "We got these two now. And "

A sneer of triumph crept into his voice.

"I personally seen Doc and the other pair killed."

## Chapter XI. ESCAPE FROM DEATH

THE masked killer would not have sneered so triumphantly had he been able to see inside the Hidalgo Trading Co. warehouse at that moment.

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Doc Savage was not dead. He was not even burned. Nor scorched. Apparently Doc was entirely unperturbed at the turn of events. Monk, who stood beside him, wore a grin that almost hid his head.

"Jeepers," he grunted. "That scream of death that Ham made was really something. He better keep it practiced. He'll need it if he doesn't quit messing with me."

Ham ignored him. "It's a good thing you noticed the bag was too light for helium, Doc," the lawyer observed.

Doc Savage did not reply. The bronze giant regretted having had to sacrifice such a fine transportation unit as his dirigible. But it seemed to have been necessary.

When Doc had noticed that the gas had been changed from helium to hydrogen, he had sent the ship out under robot control. Doc not only had used a frequency-modulation radio device of his own to simulate their own voices aboard the ship. He had also utilized an ingenious television projector to create the visual effect of their presence aboard.

If no trap had been set for the big ship, Doc could have brought it back into the warehouse hangar by remote control and they could have resumed their journey. If the trap had been laid, the bronze man desired that the criminals believe they had perished in the explosion.

The great automatic double-winged roof had sunk back into place. There was no way of anyone outside the windowless building knowing what went on within it. Before announcing any further plans, Doc began a systematic examination of other equipment in the vast warehouse. The bronze man never had fear of danger. But he carefully planned and executed all ventures that concerned the problems that confronted himself and his aids.

Monk, restless, wandered to a radio receiver that rested on a workbench. It was time for a regular nightly news broadcast. Monk switched it on.

"The mayor has requested that any persons who are threatened by the headless death, co-operate in the following manner," the announcer stated slowly. "Spring 9-0002 has been set aside to receive any such calls. This line is being closely guarded to prevent any eavesdropping."

The announcer paused a moment. Then he went on.

"This menace is growing, and it can only be combatted with the co-operation of the public. The mayor states there is no reason for panic. He asks me to urge the public to be calm."

The announcer coughed. Then his voice sounded brighter. It was as if this part of his statement was more to his liking.

"The mayor has also permitted me to announce that Doc Savage is working on this horrible mystery. That, I am sure, will reassure many persons and curb many fears."

Monk glowed as if the compliment had been meant for him personally. "That sounds like we got the thing licked already," he said.

Doc Savage brought the chemist back to earth.

"We haven't," Doc reminded him. "And it looks as though we are a long way from any solution."

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DOC began to issue swift instructions then. He first turned off all the lights inside the building. Then he handed Monk and Ham peculiar-looking opaque pairs of glasses. The lenses were about as thick as small cans of milk.

When they were fitted before the eyes, objects within the building leaped into a weird sort of outline. Doc was using infrared rays for illumination, invisible without the special filtered lenses. These lenses made objects under scrutiny fluoresce brightly.

"When we leave through the end doors," Doc explained, "I do not wish any observers to realize we are still living."

Without the special glasses, no one looking on would see any light or movement. Doc explained that he wanted Monk and Ham to load considerable equipment into a big two-motored transport. Doc encouraged them to take Chemistry and Habeas along. As much of a nuisance as the two animals frequently were, they had also been extremely useful in more than one critical moment.

Doc, himself, was going on ahead in a tiny amphibian speed ship that cruised at more than four hundred miles an hour. There was room in this one for only Doc and the powerful motor that pulled it along.

Just before he pulled a lever to open one of the end doors enough to permit the plane to drift out, Doc looked at a wind indicator on an instrument panel on a wall of the building. The bronze man pressed one of four buttons that were connected to identical devices which were equidistant, but in different directions from the warehouse.

Instantly, on the windward side, a shack that looked like something hobos had thrown together, burst into flame. For such a small shack, it burned with an amazing amount of heavy black smoke. The smoke drifted upward with the wind and swiftly blacked out what moonlight there was above the Hidalgo Trading Co. dock.

Then Doc climbed into the cockpit of his racing plane and drifted out onto the Hudson. The bronze man let the current take him well down into the bay before he stepped on the compressed air starter of the short-winged machine.

The motor coughed, burst into a staccato roar. Then it settled down into a steady hum that was little louder than the exhaust of an expensive automobile. Doc's planes were all equipped with special muffling devices that rendered them almost completely noiseless.

Doc climbed almost vertically in his powerful ship. Then he circled and cut his motor. He would wait until he saw that Monk and Ham made a safe take-off.

BELOW him in the building, the two aids followed Doc's directions. They began to load their two pets unceremoniously into the big two-motored job.

The transport was not an amphibian, but light, canoelike floats were attached to the landing gear. When a take-off speed had been reached, these could be dropped by moving a lever. The floats were of such light material that they would not damage any river craft that chanced to encounter them.

Monk took the controls. Ham gave the big craft a shove and let the river current do the rest. Slowly, they

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drifted out into the stream. Without their black–light goggles, the big warehouse was shrouded in darkness. There was no sign of life as the big doors slid closed under automatic time control. The plane drifted down toward the outer harbor.

"Golly!" Monk whispered. "The black light and that smoke dodge is a good one. I can't see a thing."

The smoke hung low in the air. As Monk had observed, it provided an ample screen for their movements in the gloom. It also provided a screen for a hunched figure that crouched atop an adjoining pier warehouse.

The hunched figure had apparently been furnished with considerable information on the methods and equipment of Doc Savage.

As he stood up and chuckled softly, he shoved a bulky object into his pocket. The object was a pair of milk–can–thick black goggles; they were strangely similar to those used by Doc's aids to make objects visible under black light!

Though prepared with the utmost of care, Doc Savage's departure was not the secret it had been planned to be.

## Chapter XII. A DESERT TRAP

DOC SAVAGE circled at five thousand feet. The smudge of smoke hid the Hidalgo Trading Co. warehouse and a good section of the Hudson River. But Monk and Ham had been instructed not to take off until they had drifted well past the Battery. Presently, Doc noticed a blinking white light in the direction of the bay. The blinking light described a gradual circle, as if a plane were taking off into the wind and then turning.

Doc spoke into his short–wave transmitter. He talked in Mayan, Monk's childlike voice came back to him. Monk told him, also in the ancient tongue, that the take–off had been on schedule and uneventful. Doc straightened his speed ship out then. He cut out the muffling device that had made the motor as quiet as a gentle whisper.

With a full–throated roar, the mighty engine whipped the streamlined plane in the direction of Central America. The air–speed meter needle crept steadily up on the dial. Presently it reached a point two tiny dots beyond the four–hundred mark. At that speed, Doc set the throttle and bored into the dark night.

Doc Savage was roaring as fast as man can fly toward one of the strangest chapters in his tempestuous career of fighting evil. The bronze man knew that a seething hysteria was working back in New York. Whether he would have admitted it or not, he must have known that only the word that Doc Savage was working on the mystery of the headless horror kept that hysteria from bursting out and causing more death and terror.

How long mob fear could be kept from exploding, how long it could be restrained from forcing millions into headlong flight from the city, was a matter that no one could determine.

That some mad force would stop at nothing to terrify and control millions, Doc was assured. The bronze man had come to some conclusions in this thing. For one thing, he felt certain that the monster behind this force would not be long satisfied with a few extortion plots. The criminal mind is such that success breeds a longing for more grandiose operations. What mass horror might be fermenting in the weird brain of a madman was only a matter of conjecture.

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Doc studied the instrument panel closely as his plane roared along. Depending on winds, he should reach his destination in less than ten hours. The bronze man would have preferred to approach San Roble in the dark of night. But he did not feel that he could afford a delay until another day had passed.

It was logical to assume that the force responsible for the headless deaths would be kept in some place remote from New York City. The master criminal would realize that New York's vast force of law-enforcement officers would make that city a hazardous place to hide such a thing.

The secret of the headless menace, Doc had therefore decided, would be found in the little-known country that had already been connected with the extortion plots.

As darkness gave way to daylight, Doc Savage pointed the nose of his speed ship toward the ground. The altimeter needle dropped from fifteen thousand feet to five. Doc wished to survey all of the terrain approaching the Republic of San Roble.

With the muffler switched back on, the tiny ship was scarcely audible on the ground. Doc looked over the side and made a minute study of the terrain. In some places sharp canyons of sandstone seemed to descend into the very bowels of the earth. Other sections of the country were flat, sandy desert that sent up scorching heat waves even in the early-morning sun.

The uneven air currents, heat from the flat spaces and cool drafts from the sandstone canyons alternately slapped Doc's ship hundreds of feet upward and then dragged it down with descending currents.

The bronze man toiled the ship along almost automatically. Such bumpy air was an ordinary occurrence for him. Occasionally, Doc looked ahead and upward. Any plane that might have been within many miles, would be instantly called to Doc's attention. An automatic electric "ear" would pick up any foreign sound of motor vibration.

Doc saw the buzzards. He didn't pay them very much attention. Buzzards were extremely common in this desert area of Central America.

The first real notice Doc paid to the buzzards was when lead and flame began to spit from their wings!

Both aerial monsters converged upon Doc's plane, breathing fire and death as they plummeted from the great height at which they had been soaring.

It wasn't until they were almost upon him that the bronze man saw what they really were. Doc, for once, had been taken completely by surprise. The things were gliders, built to resemble the great birds Doc had thought they were. Doc realized now that the terrain was ideally suited for extended glider flight. The alternate upward and downward currents of air created by the hot sands and cooler canyons beside them kept the glider's flight medium in constant agitation.

Under such conditions, gliders have made sustained flights of many hours.

These gliders were equipped with twin machine guns in their wings. Doc Savage gave his ship full throttle. He had slowed to a minimum sustained flight speed while examining the terrain below him. One of the gliders was ahead and above him. Both of its guns were spitting flame.

Doc maneuvered his ship quickly, whipped out a superfirer gun he carried for emergency. Ordinarily, Doc

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seldom used weapons of any kind. He wouldn't use the gun now to take lives if the glider fliers abandoned their own deadly mission.

Doc shot the speed plane upward, zoomed directly under one glider. The bronze man pressed the trigger of the superfirer and the tail of the glider burst into flame. Doc was using inflammable bullets. The glider could get down to earth before the flier lost control. It could do that only if it headed for safety now.

THE pilot thought considerable of his neck. He lit out for the nearest flat piece of ground.

Doc Savage came out of the zoom in a complete upward outside loop. It would have torn the wings off an ordinary ship. It almost tore the wings off the other glider.

Doc had cut his circle closer than he had thought. The two ships almost met head on. Doc had to maneuver quickly to the right to avoid a head-on collision. For one small second, the cockpit of the speed ship was directly in the line of fire of the glider's wing guns.

As Doc passed, he managed to set fire to the tail of the second glider's fuselage.

Then, suddenly, Doc knew he was in trouble. The mighty motor of the speed ship began to cough and stutter. The machine guns of the second glider had done their work!

THE plane dropped rapidly toward the ground. The motor did not stop entirely. It was cut to less than fifty percent efficiency. The short-winged plane limped over the sand and canyons. The ship had a landing speed of more than a hundred miles an hour. That much speed was needed to keep her in the air at all, so small was the amount of wing space.

Now, the ship was a plaything for the sudden up-and-down drafts of air. Sometimes cold currents sucked it close to the mouths of canyons. Then, just beyond the jutting lip of a precipice, hot air would kick it into the air like a flat stick scaled upward.

Doc Savage fought with the controls. He leaned the mixture of the fuel, cut out lines that were drenching now-useless cylinders. The motor ceased its strangled coughing. But only half of the cylinders were functioning.

The end of the peculiar canyon-desert terrain helped Doc then. The scattered canyons vanished. Ahead of him stretched a broad plain of desert, almost as far as the eye could reach. At its termination, a low range of mountains crouched, blue in the distance.

The crippled speed ship no longer had to battle the conflicting currents of the atmosphere. The damaged motor pulled her along at slightly more than a hundred miles an hour. Doc got the altitude up to three thousand feet. Higher than that he could not force the craft with the power he had.

The desert sand reflected the heat of the mounting sun like a gigantic mirror. Waves of hot air fanned Doc's cheeks. Paint blistered on the sides of the fuselage. That much heat Doc expected in the hot, tropical desert.

He did not expect the heat that set fire to the oil in the cylinders of the motor. He didn't expect the heat that started the leather of the seat beneath him to smoldering.

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This was no heat born of the sun. Doc knew that now. He knew that the terrible force that was associated with the headless men was beating on his ship from the ground!

Doc fought for altitude. He couldn't get it. There was a smell of ozone as the heat increased. The right wing began to crumple. The end of the wing curled up and began to burn!

Then the ship went into a tail spin. Like a thing possessed, it shrieked through the air, a flaming plummet of disaster. The ship spun and twisted at an angle. It covered half a mile or so in its headlong flight.

There came a spurt of smoke and a grinding crash and the ship burst into a raging pyre. The oversized gasoline tank which had so far been saved by its special insulation, burst and cascaded blazing fuel over the plane.

THE men who emerged from the interior of what appeared to be a huge boulder were ordinary thugs by their appearance. Their leader was distinguishable from them only in that he had one ear.

The head thug was One-ear, the fake bartender who had set the trap for Renny in the midtown saloon outside the hotel. One-ear and the thugs who followed him, seemed extremely respectful toward something that was inside the imitation boulder in which they had been hiding.

"De boss is sure smart," One-ear declaimed. "He knew Doc Savage was comin'. An' he said if de gliders didn't get him, we'd be able to crack him down with that thing."

One-ear shuddered as he mentioned *that thing*. One of the thugs behind him shuddered even more.

"Who's de guy in there runnin' it?" he whispered to One-ear. The head thug shrugged and said he didn't know. Whoever it was, apparently wished to keep his identity secret from his confederates. From the thugs' description bandied back and forth, the operator of whatever it was kept himself disguised.

Presently the gasoline supply burned out and the speed ship was revealed as a mass of smoking wreckage. One-ear leaned as close as he dared. Then he began to yell.

"There ain't nobody in here!" he screamed. "Doc Savage must have got away!"

A hollow voice from inside the imitation boulder rasped out into the hot air.

"Stand away," the voice directed. "We will find the bronze man!"

The manner in which the thugs scurried away from the plane, bespoke their horror of the thing with which they worked. A faint, humming sound filled the air. Then it began to get hot. It got hotter than any man could stand. A small cactus bush a dozen yards from the wreckage of the plane burst into flame.

Then a voice came from the mound on which the cactus bush was burning.

"All right," Doc Savage's calm tones announced. "Turn it off. I'll go along with your men."

A hollow chuckle drifted from the boulder. The voice came again, as if the speaker were talking through a hollow tube to disguise it.

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"A clever stunt, Doc Savage," the voice intoned. "Dropping a smoke bomb just before your plane crashed and parachuting into it, had me fooled for a moment."

Doc emerged from the mound of sand he had hurriedly heaped over himself. The bronze man was scratched and bruised. His clothing still smoldered from the terrific heat of the thing that had been turned on him. Thugs surrounded him with submachine guns. The voice within the boulder spoke once more.

"You will go with my men, Doc Savage," it grated. "Your brain may be of use to us. Put your hands behind you."

Doc Savage complied. It would serve no purpose to fight a losing battle at this moment. Even Doc apparently held a healthy respect for the force that made the headless men.

Doc's hands were tied behind him and he was led toward the distant range of mountains.

### Chapter XIII. THE HEADLESS LEGION

THE sun was well past its zenith when Long Tom and Renny first saw the same mountains of San Roble. Doc's two aids were both stoutly manacled. They rode in a big transport plane that was making nearly three hundred miles an hour.

Long Tom and Renny knew they were somewhat in luck to be alive at all. There had been quite a huddle about that subject after the incident in the office of Smedley Worthington Watson.

The masked killer with the gravel voice, had made the final decision. He had said that, inasmuch as Doc was dead, they might need Long Tom's electrical knowledge. Long Tom, he concluded, might be more willing to listen to reason if they held the threat of sudden headless death for Renny as an inducement.

Then the masked leader had left them. He left to get to San Roble in a faster ship. He boasted that he had planes even faster than Doc's speedy ships. From what they had seen of the scientific prowess of their captors, Renny and Long Tom did not dispute him.

There was another prisoner in the plane with Doc's two aids. This one was not bearing up with much fortitude.

"O—o—oh, I'll be dead . . . lose my head . . . it's with dread . . . dammit!" L. Pennfield Stumpp exploded. "My own damn rhyming's driving me crazy now."

Long Tom bent a sympathetic eye on the frightened electrical manufacturer. L. Pennfield had described his capture in front of the Hidalgo Trading Co.'s dock. He had told them of the crack made by the masked man who seemed to be leading the headless men, about a special vengeance death for L. Pennfield Stumpp.

"I'll get the whole works," Stumpp moaned. "Whatever they've got, it'll be their worst horror for me!"

The gray-haired man shuddered. He shuddered so hard he shook the wicker seat to which he was manacled.

About midafternoon, the plane sat down on a flat space at the foot of the mountains. The one-eared thug who had fled the others in Doc's capture, ambled out from beneath the sparse shade of a giant cactus.

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"O. K., Fingers," he said to the pilot. "Everything's goin' on schedule. You got our radio that Doc Savage escaped in New York?"

"Holy cow!" Renny blurted out. "That's the best news I've heard in a year."

"Shut up!" One-ear growled. "We got Doc well under wraps."

It developed that previous uncertainty as to how well under wraps they would have Doc Savage, was the reason for this precautionary stop on the desert.

Fingers, who was the thug who entered Doc's skyscraper garage the day before, gunned the transport into a quick take-off. One-ear engaged in conversation with Fingers. The thin pilot wanted to know everything that had happened. It seemed that Fingers and One-ear were pretty high up in the gang; enough so that their take depended on a split of the profits.

"Boy!" One-ear said. "That million from the Bentley Novelties sellout came bouncing right through."

"Pretty clever," Fingers observed. "Using a slick system like that kind of investment. Nobody could prove that the Republic of San Roble was in on the plot. At any rate," he added. "Not until it was away too late. This beats the snatch racket all hollow."

One-ear was quite enthusiastic.

"Some of the new gadgets is completed," he confided. "If anybody tries to fight his way into San Roble now, he'll have his konk burned off of him."

Fingers laughed. Then he grew confidential.

"Wonder who is the real brain behind this?" he queried.

One-ear was garrulous that day.

"Might be that nutty little professor," he guessed. "We see him around every once in a while."

One-ear whirled then as if he suddenly suspected himself of talking too much. In a moment he grinned and relaxed.

"None of you guys is goin' to live very long, anyhow," he rasped. "I guess what little you hear ain't goin' to hurt. With Doc Savage alive, we don't need to keep either of you guys."

LONG TOM gazed down at the rough, arid expanse below them. By careful questioning, he had been able to get a little information out of Fingers, the pilot. It was only stuff that Long Tom could have learned from a library, anyway, so Fingers didn't figure it made any difference.

San Roble had once been a quiet little country devoted solely to agriculture. Yams and Indian corn had grown in the bottomlands. There had also been a forest of chicle trees. The little country had never had any dealings with the outside civilized world. San Roble had no seaports. Its boundaries were many miles from the coast.

The quiet people had dealt with other Central American countries who had, in turn, furnished San Roble with

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such civilized things as it needed. And those were few to satisfy the needs of the primitive natives.

Then had come the drought that was caused by extensive soil erosion in the valley. Just as dust storms in the central United States had ruined thousands of miles of tableland, so did sand storms wipe out the agricultural areas of San Roble. Even the chicle trees had dried up and died.

The first dictator had come then. He apparently had thought there was gold in the hills. He had found the old Inca ruins that bordered El Grande, the capital of San Roble. The first dictator had impressed labor and restored those ruins into something of their former forbidding splendor.

According to Fingers, the palace somewhat resembled the Kremlin in Moscow. Fingers had never seen the Kremlin. But he had read something about it.

The present dictator had taken over when distraught natives had risen and murdered the first. The present dictator didn't amount to much, Fingers had informed Long Tom.

He was pretty well scared by the headless death that had come to San Roble. So, for that matter, was the entire native population of the place.

THE airport in El Grande was a large patch of sand. It looked almost like any other patch of sand in San Roble. There was one large hangar. The roof of that had sand glued onto it with some sticky substance. The hangar was built to look like a sand dune.

There was considerable activity at the airport when the transport arrived with the prisoners. Natives were being ordered around by thugs, through an interpreter.

They looked like some kind of Indians. They had broader noses than the North American type. It made one think there might have been some Negroid infiltration from slaves of white men in some earlier century.

Neither Renny nor Long Tom could understand the language the natives used to converse with each other. That was somewhat unusual. Both of Doc's aids spoke Mayan. And they were familiar with several other Indian dialects.

There was only one thing that was really noticeable about these Indians. The whites of their eyes showed more plainly than in most people. They moved jerkily, and cringed as if they expected something terrible to happen to them at any moment.

They were terribly afraid. And Renny and Long Tom knew that all Indians are possessed of a certain amount of stoicism. They don't greatly fear anything they can understand. Not even death. Ordinary death.

A runty thug raced over to the plane as fingers braked it to a halt on the runway.

"Get it into the hangar!" the runty one shouted. "We gotta move fast. Bring the prisoners into the city."

There were a couple of dozen thugs ordering the Indians around. Renny noticed one thing about them. They were all runty, exceptionally ugly criminals.

"Holy cow!" Renny boomed. "You'd think they'd get some guys big enough to do some fighting, at least."

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"They don't need any," Long Tom commented dryly. "With that headless-death machine, what do they want fighters for! They've got the whole book right in that thing."

Renny agreed. For a moment he had forgotten about the headless horror. He was reminded of it shortly.

"Take Doc Savage's two guys to Dungeon No. 1," the messenger shouted. "We'll execute both of them tonight."

L. Pennfield Stumpp began to tremble. It was as if he felt a premonition of greater disaster.

"Oh, I see . . . gee . . . what about me?" he moaned sadly.

"You," the thug spat evilly, "are going right before the big boss now. He says he's goin' to take care of you personally."

The thug's gesture with one forefinger across his neck left little doubt concerning the fate that he believed was in store for L. Pennfield Stumpp.

A SMALL man suddenly bounced out of what looked like a hole in the sand dune of a hangar. He bobbed up and down like a rabbit as he raced toward the plane that was being slowly wheeled into the hangar. Radio earphones were clamped to the little man's head. He began to scream as soon as he got close.

"Hurry up, you idiots!" he shouted. "Get that plane in there and get these prisoners into the city."

Runty thugs prodded Long Tom and Renny toward the edge of the airport. Behind them, other thugs prodded L. Pennfield Stumpp in a similar direction.

From the conversation, Long Tom had decided that the city was some distance away. He was wrong. Around a ledge of rock at the edge of the airport they almost fell into the capital of San Roble. The capital of San Roble smelled. In fact, it could be said that it stank. Only such an inelegant word could have described it. The odor of the goat seemed to be predominant.

El Grande stretched out for about a half mile and consisted mainly of mud huts. At the farther edge of the area of mud huts loomed what Fingers had said looked like the Kremlin. For a blind stab guess, the skinny crook hadn't been far wrong. The ex-Inca palace of El Grande did resemble the Kremlin.

The whole of it was surrounded by a thirty-foot wall. Domed buildings showed their tops above it. The walled area seemed to be about as big as the rest of the city.

The jutting lip of a huge cliff above it, hid the Kremlinlike palace from the air. Only the placid village was apparent. One-ear, who led the parade, strode directly to big double gates in the center of one wall. He pounded on the massive portals and a peephole was opened. Then the gates swung wide. The prisoners were thrust inside.

"The gray-haired gink to the throne room," One-ear directed. "The dictator will take him to the master."

A runty thug led L. Pennfield Stumpp to the right. Other thugs prodded Renny and Long Tom into a street that led to the left. The passageway was inch-deep in dust. Some of the buildings that faced it were of adobe. Others were of masonry so old it showed great cracks. But it was substantial.

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Apparently the criminals had not taken over all the old Inca palace grounds. Many of the buildings were empty, obviously had been abandoned for centuries and never reoccupied. In the street between outer walls and buildings, the gloom of late afternoon was oppressive. Presently they came to an extremely substantial building of solid masonry. The windows in the structure were tiny, scarcely a foot square each. Small as they were, they were heavily barred; triple sets of inch-thick bars set into the masonry itself.

Suddenly Renny gasped. "Holy cow!" he boomed. "Doc!"

Long Tom twisted quickly. He was just in time to get a fleeting glimpse of Doc Savage's face behind one barred window. The bronze man did not get a chance to speak. But Long Tom could see his face. It was seldom that the bronze man displayed emotion. But Long Tom now gained the clear impression that Doc was upset and worried.

That portended odds against them of an unusual proportion.

ONE-EAR ground out an oath at Renny's recognition of Doc. He shoved his prisoners brutally into a vaulted opening in the building; ordered his thugs to prod them toward a cell block that was constructed entirely of masonry.

"Seein' the bronze guy ain't goin' to do you any good," One-ear rumbled. "You guys is both goin' to lose your heads before the night is over."

Neither Long Tom nor Renny replied. Their concern at the moment was not their respective heads. What really frightened the two adventurers was the fact that Doc Savage's plight might mean that the headless horror would not be stopped at all.

When they inspected the cell into which they were thrown, their concern on that subject increased considerably. The door, they noticed as it swung closed, was of an amazing construction. Two outer sections were of some hard wood, each more than two inches thick. Sandwiched in the middle, and bolted through, was another two-inch section of some flinty stone! The walls were of solid masonry. Judging from the depth of the window, the walls were more than three feet thick.

This inspection was interrupted suddenly by a persistent tapping sound. Long Tom did not get it at first. Then he recognized Morse code. Doc was signaling his two aids.

"How did you get here?" Doc's tapping inquired. "Tell me everything you can."

Long Tom tapped back the complete story of their capture and of the trip to San Roble. He described the danger in which L. Pennfield Stumpp had been thrown and told about the confusion and haste at the airport.

"Wonder what that was all about?" Long Tom queried. He didn't think Doc could know, but it was instinctive for him to ask questions of the bronze man.

"That," Doc shot right back at him, "is undoubtedly caused by the fact that Monk and Ham are about due in the big transport. Some ruse is probably being concocted to induce them to land at the airport."

The tapping conversation was interrupted at that moment by a weird thump of music out in the street between the palace wall and the buildings. Renny was peering out of the barred window.

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"Holy cow!" he suddenly exploded. "It ain't real. It can't be!"

Long Tom left the wall and raced to the window beside Renny. What he saw sent shivers up and down his spine. He shut his eyes; blinked them. But the things were still there when he opened them again.

A column of headless men, four abreast, marched down the dust-filled street! They marched mechanically, like automatons, in step with the weird music that seemed to come from nowhere at all. From the angle of the window, Renny and Long Tom could see the massive gates of the palace swing open.

Majestically, in mechanically perfect unison, the legion of the headless men swung out into the dimming twilight of the capital of San Roble! That was the way to the airport.

### Chapter XIV. THE FRIGHTENED DICTATOR

MONK was at the controls of Doc's big transport. He had undergone a tough session at the controls and Ham was enjoying his discomfiture. The area of canyons and flat desert had tossed the big plane up and down like a wind-blown chip.

Then there had come the heat of the desert. Now, the rocky, mountainous contour of the terrain below them repeated the tricks of conflicting currents of air. The big transport reacted even more than a smaller ship like Doc's speed plane would have. Monk fought with the controls.

Monk yelled at Ham, "Keep a lookout. You might be able to see something of Doc. We ought to be almost there."

Ham resumed a survey of the terrain with a powerful pair of binoculars. Suddenly he yelled with satisfaction.

"For once you're right! There's Doc's plane down below."

He handed Monk the binoculars. Monk squinted through them for a moment and handed them back.

"Yep," he agreed. "Those are Doc's markings all right. Down we go."

All they could see was a small plane that bore the proper markings resting on a broad expanse of sand. Near it was what looked like a little village. Not a prepossessing sight. Certainly nothing that looked as though it had hid disaster. The overhanging cliff hid the Kremlinlike palace.

Monk tooted the big ship down for a landing. Little gusts of sand told him which way the wind was blowing. Once having satisfied himself that the plane he had seen was Doc's, Monk paid no more attention to it. He bent his entire concentration on the not-too-easy job of making a good landing in what might well prove to be loose, drifted sand. Ham, too, was pretty much occupied with the landing. He looked back into the cabin to see if the two pets were safe.

Chemistry was curled up in a seat with Habeas Corpus asleep in his lap. In a rack directly over the monkey's head was a canister of explosive superfirer shells. The can had come loose from its moorings and was teetering precariously on the edge of the rack.

Ham let out a startled yelp and raced back to rescue shells, pig and monkey. And probably the plane as well, if the explosive shells had fallen hard enough.

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Neither Monk nor Ham noticed the deception of the dummy plane until it was much too late. Outside, a machine gun cut loose. Explosive shells poured into the transport's gas tanks. The tanks let go with a great big *whoosh*. Ham thought Monk had crashed. With a yell of imprecation, Ham grabbed the two animals and what equipment he could carry and dived out of an emergency exit in the fuselage.

Monk clambered down from the pilot's compartment, whipping out his superfirer as he did.

"Why you danged murderous pirates!" Monk bellowed. "I'll take every one of you into camp."

But things were moving too rapidly to give Monk a chance. The killers had fired the plane to create a good amount of confusion. They did not underestimate the fighting abilities of these two aids of Doc Savage.

Ham was jumped on the instant he hit the sand. He landed in a sprawling position anyway. Three runty thugs landed on him, swinging bludgeons as they did. Half groggy, Ham was quickly bound with stout hemp ropes.

Monk let loose with one barrage of mercy bullets. But he couldn't see anything to shoot at. The flames and smoke of the burning gasoline blinded him and he was just shooting in the hope that something would get in the way. The wing tank on the farther side of the ship exploded then and Monk had to jump quickly back from the plane before the nearer wing tank let go.

Monk jumped right into more trouble than he had encountered in quite some time. The first of the trouble was a long tube of leather filled with lead. In more civilized climes, it would have been called a blackjack. Monk joined Ham in no time at all.

"You danged shyster!" Monk grunted as he fought off unconsciousness. "Why didn't you look more closely through those binoculars?" Monk now could see the dummy plane that had been made to look like Doc's.

"And Jeepers!" Monk moaned. "Look at that! The things must have followed us."

The weird music that seemed to come from nowhere filled the air. Marching four abreast, the legion of headless men filed across the airport field and came to a halt around Monk and Ham. The two men were between two files of the monsters.

Beyond them, Monk saw Chemistry and Habeas, obviously baffled. The pets didn't realize the significance of the headless men. They started to try to come through the file to reach their masters.

"Keep away from these guys!" Monk called out in Mayan. Chemistry and Habeas disappeared.

The ever-present One-ear made himself known then. The thug was assuming the role of major-domo of the headless legion. He smirked and said, partly for the benefit of the dozen or so ugly thugs who also looked on, "You guys are going to have a special ceremony."

"Huh?" Monk said. "Ice cream and everything?"

Monk wasn't going to let it get his goat if he could help it. One-ear ignored his sally.

"Doc Savage's aids are going to be disposed of in pairs," he explained. "For instance, you and this skinny dude will make a very interesting pair of headless corpses. The natives will be much impressed."

The assembled thugs snickered. But there was an awesome note in their snickering. Most of them must have been wondering if there was any chance of their falling out with the master of the headless death.

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The weird music started up again and the headless column moved toward the city. Monk and Ham moved with it.

MONK and Ham were not taken directly to the cell block. As they were marched into the walled palace, a harsh gong began to bang. Frightened-looking Indians crept toward the Kremlinlike inclosure. Apparently it was the hour for some sort of worship. Indians ahead of the legion of headless men slid into the walled palace, casting fearful glances behind them.

It was almost entirely dark by this time. Headless men at the front of the column carried open torches that guttered redly in the night. The flaring torches and the weird music that must have come from some sort of hidden sound magnifiers combined to create a spectacle more weird than Monk or Ham desired to endure.

The headless column marched to the right of the double-gated entrance. They passed no prisons on this march. The buildings looked as though they were occupied on this side of the gates.

Presently, Monk and Ham saw the broad steps of what had once been an Inca temple. Half-clad Indians were prostrated on either side of the path taken by the headless legion. The living torsos marched in weird unison up the steps and into the vaulted hall in the center of the temple. Many torches guttered there. The hall was divided into two sections.

The largest was the great pit, where apparently the worshipers gathered. The legion of the headless separated in that part of the hall and lined against the walls. As they did, the terrified Indians crept in and prostrated themselves upon the masonry floor. They all faced the other part of the temple. This was a raised dais, backed by a sacrificial altar. Beside that were three figures of great dissimilarity.

One of them was obviously the dictator. He was a tall man. He was made up to suit the occasion. Stripes and odd designs were painted on his features. He wore only a loincloth of some peculiar fur.

Behind the dictator was the figure that made Monk gasp. It was a tremendous idol squatting like some great gilded Buddha. One difference was that the hands were clenched in an attitude of threat, rather than draped in the lap. The other difference was that the idol had no head!

Monk muttered, "That thing looks newer than the rest of the junk in this joss house. I don't know what to think."

Then Monk almost jumped. He saw then for the first time the other figure on the sacrificial altar dais. It was Lynda Ladore! The glamour girl's red tresses glinted with a weird beauty in the light of the guttering torches. Her amethyst eyes looked green in the flickering red illumination. The girl was tense. Her emotions seemed to be stirred by some powerful stimulus.

What emotion the girl was expressing, Monk could not tell. Her expression was one difficult to analyze. Lynda looked down upon the bound figures of Monk and Ham without once blinking her green-appearing eyes.

A subtle chant from the dictator forestalled any further discussion. The dictator raised his hands skyward. Then he pointed to the headless idol. A response from the native population came as a pent-up outburst of fear.

"He's just asked them if they'd lay down their lives for the headless god!" One-ear took the trouble to inform

## THE HEADLESS MEN

Monk and Ham. One-ear apparently had been down here often enough to learn the language. There was one peculiar thing Ham noticed about the dictator. He seemed afraid; seemed to have a horror that he wouldn't do his job right.

Something that sounded like "Ayah! Ayah! Ayah!" burst from the assembled throats. Neither Monk nor Ham needed to be informed that the enthusiastic answer was an affirmative. The dictator made what seemed to be an announcement. Then he turned his back in signal that the session was over. It seemed to Ham that his shoulders drooped just a little.

One-ear prodded Monk and Ham into motion. They headed back toward the gate.

"Big-shot just told them there'll be a sacrifice at midnight," One-ear said. "We brought you in so the boys and girls can look you over. You're on the bill of fare for tomorrow night."

Monk gulped and wondered if he'd look any worse without a head than Ham would. Neither of them said anything. There didn't seem to be anything to say. Monk was nearly moved to resume their normal status when he noticed the one piece of equipment Ham had managed to salvage from Doc's plane. It was Ham's sword-cane. But even that didn't seem to raise Monk's spirits enough to kid Ham about it.

One-ear shoved them along past the gate and to the big pile of masonry that was the dungeon. Neither Monk nor Ham happened to glance at the window of the cell that held the bronze man. Neither did they see Long Tom nor Renny. It was quite dark, now and it would have taken unusual vision for anyone in the prison to recognize Monk and Ham.

Their very silence would have convinced anyone who knew them that the prisoners were some other pair. The interior of the vast masonry building was gloomy dark. Only scattered torches showed down the long cell block. A huge Indian met them as they entered. One-ear snarled at him.

"You stay on the job, Tongueless," he rasped. "You wasn't here when I brought the others in. Keep a good eye on these guys, or you'll lose your head."

The massive Indian nodded silently. Apparently he understood English. He opened his mouth in a sort of toothless grin. The light of a torch happened to be just right at the moment. Monk could see that the man's tongue had been cut out at the roots. Apparently it had been done long ago.

"Criminy!" Monk gulped. "I bet none of this gang did that. They wouldn't trust him as a guard if they had."

"Shut up and get in your cell," One-ear growled. "Wampum here don't like nobody to talk about that tongue. He's liable to carve you if you get fresh."

The cell into which Monk and Ham were thrown was just like any of the others. Either One-ear forgot to remove the ropes that bound them, or he didn't think their comfort was a matter of importance. At any rate, they were not only incarcerated in a cubicle of solid masonry. They were also bound.

"Ugh!" Monk commented. "Me no like Indian."

Ham stared at the wall for a moment. "I wonder what made that dictator look so scared," he queried. "There's something danged phony about this set-up."

"If I was him I'd be scared of this Indian that's guarding the cell block," Monk muttered. "I bet the dictator's the guy who cut his tongue out."

A scraping noise at the door interrupted Monk. The sound was distinctly that of a key surreptitiously turning in the lock. A momentary wave of hope swept over the hairy chemist. Then he groaned anew.

The immense Indian cell guard did not present a pleasant sight. The huge body slipped quickly inside the door and closed it behind him. In one huge hand gleamed a curved knife more than a foot in length.

Both Monk and Ham were still bound tightly. Slowly, the figure advanced, knife extended toward the hairy chemist.

## Chapter XV. THOUGHTS OF THE HEADLESS

HAM did one of those instinctive things he tried hard to live down later. The lawyer would have died rather than admit he hurled himself into the path of a descending knife to prevent that knife from slashing Monk.

Ham's hands were tied. But his head was pretty hard. He dived skull foremost into the big Indian's midriff.

"Get away from that human ape, you imitation Siwash!" Ham shouted. The midriff he struck was about as hard as a section of boiler plate.

In that instant, Monk noticed the odd, gold-flaked eyes of the huge Indian. The eyes stirred in tiny whirlpools of action. There was only one pair of eyes like those in the world. Monk's big mouth opened as if he had seen a ghost.

"Doc!" he blurted. Then the bronze man's hand clapped across his mouth.

"Be quiet," Doc Savage warned them. "There are many thugs out there. They believe I am the Indian guard."

Doc used the Indian's knife to cut their bonds. He told them he had overcome the big Indian when the tongueless one had come into his cell for a routine check-up of prisoners. A quick transformation, from materials Doc carried in his equipment vest, disguised him as the big prison guard.

Monk rubbed his wrists to restore circulation. He felt much better. For that matter, Monk felt almost normal again.

Doc asked his aids to tell him everything that had happened to them. The pair told of the fake plane, the fight at the airport and the queer scene in the temple. Ham spoke of the frightened natives and the apparent terror of the dictator.

"It is quite understandable," Doc suggested. "These criminals undoubtedly have convinced the dictator that not only he, but his people as well, will fall victim to the headless death unless their demands are carried out."

"Maybe they got him believin' in that headless god, too," Monk offered.

"That is possible," agreed the bronze man. "But, at any rate, they have whipped the natives into a fearborn loyalty for purposes of defense."

"How d'you mean that, Doc?" Ham inquired.

"They are obviously planning to transfer huge sums of money to the credit of San Roble through extortion

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plots," Doc explained. "It would take some time for diplomatic channels to set machinery in operation to crack down on the Republic, even if the authorities could prove the San Roble government guilty. Remember there is a Latin nation problem for the Colossus of the North, which many little nations still consider the United States."

Ham didn't have to be told about that. The amazing situation of the Mexican oil expropriations was too fresh in the minds of everyone who could read. Uncle Sam was being very careful in his encouragement of Pan-American felicity. That was what made the San Roble set-up such a cinch for a smart band of crooks.

"If the outside world did decide to enter San Roble," Doc continued, "these natives are whipped up to a point where they would sell their lives to keep out the invader. That would give the crooks a chance to get away with their treasure and set up the headquarters of the headless death some place else. Here the headless sacrifices are used in part to keep the superstitious fear-worship whipped up to the maximum."

"Jehoshaphat!" Monk blurted. The talk of sacrifices reminded him of the words of One-ear. "There's an important sacrifice of two guys set for midnight," he moaned. "It ain't us, because One-ear said we was on the menu for tomorrow. Who d'you think it is?"

Monk did not know that Long Tom and Renny were in the city of the headless. Doc told him.

"Gee whillikers!" Monk said. "We just gotta do something, Doc."

Doc Savage spoke in a low voice for several minutes. Then he slipped quietly out of the cell door. Armed thugs could be seen pacing up and down in the cell block corridor. They would expect to see the big Indian now and then. Cell inspection should not take too much time.

Monk heard what sounded like One-ear's voice calling from the rear of the prison. It was just a guess. But Monk guessed Doc was using ventriloquism.

AN atmosphere of unrest pervaded El Grande that night. Within the walls of the great palace ugly, runty thugs whispered in huddled groups. The crooks were nervous. Those who had watches kept looking at them. There was a tenseness, a horror, in the air that seemed to unnerve even the hardest of the criminals.

One of them muttered, "I'll never get used to these things. Sometimes I wish I'd never even busted out of Sing Sing."

Other sentiments in varying degrees of agreement were expressed by those around him.

Outside of the Kremlinlike walls, the terror was considerably more pronounced. The peaceful Indians of El Grande were no willing participants in the horror of the headless death. As far as they were concerned, an evil god had fastened himself upon their backs and they must do his bidding.

The Indians crouched around little fires before their poor adobe huts. They had no watches. But the sliver of a moon would tell them when the hour of midnight approached. Then they would file silently and filled with terror into the sacrificial temple.

A buzz of hushed conversation droned above the groups of Indians. Then a wave of silence spread over the half mile of flimsy huts. It was the kind of wave of silence that follows a prison guard through a crowded exercise court.

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It was the sight of a prison guard that caused this wave of silence. A huge figure stalked through the expanse of mud huts. No one called to him. It was well known that the giant cell-block guard had no tongue. It was known that his tongue had been cut out for telling lies that cost the deaths of many of his people. That had been long ago. The big man had been imprisoned.

Tongues wagged about that as the big Indian strode by. They wagged about the fact that the present dictator had released the tongueless one and installed him in a place of trust. That was one thing the simple savages could not understand.

The huge guard was pushing a large cart before him. It was the sort of cart three men would have ordinarily been summoned to propel. It was normally used to bring supplies from the airport to the palace. Some supplies had come in that day along with the prisoners. All El Grande knew that was true.

The big Indian paused briefly at the gates of the palace. He was quickly identified and admitted. Smoothly, with no display of exertion, he trundled his cart down the dust-filled street to the prison. Activity was beginning to be noticeable in the dim streets of the palace by that time.

Weird music began to fill the air again. It was the same eerie marching tempo that had accompanied the headless legion in the early evening.

A thug, leaning against the wall of the prison, muttered. "Them damn things still get me. I can hardly stand to look at them."

"Well, shut your eyes then," the harsh voice of One-ear rasped him. "Shut your eyes if you want to. But get goin'."

Then One-ear saw the tongueless one. "About time you got back with them supplies," One-ear growled. "Get inside now and keep your eyes open. You'll be alone until this thing is over."

The huge Indian grinned crookedly and pushed his cart through the wide door of the prison. One-ear scurried down the dusty street, glancing at his watch as he ran. The watch indicated that it was half-past eleven.

"It's goin' to be a pleasure," One-ear grunted, "to see those babies lose their heads."

THE street was dark as the headless legion marched rhythmically toward the prison. Only infrequent torches guttered on the route. Perhaps it had been considered unnecessary to brightly light a path for men who had no heads in which to also have eyes.

The headless battalion marched like a well-drilled unit. The eerie music that accompanied them seemed to direct their steps. One-ear strode at the head of the procession. Immediately behind him marched half a dozen of his ugly thugs. Then came the legion of the headless.

As the moon will make a hound dog howl, so did the weird music of the headless march seem to affect the Indians in the city outside of the palace. A mournful wailing rose into the night from the groups huddled before the mud huts of El Grande.

Some prostrated themselves upon the ground. Others moved toward the gates of the palace. Those gates would be thrown open shortly to admit the natives to the sacrifice. And it was a command performance, as far as they were concerned.

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Within the walls, the procession of the headless halted outside of the prison. The six thugs behind One-ear pounded into the prison and went toward the cell in which Long Tom and Renny were incarcerated.

One-ear leaned against the wall near the window of the cell in which Monk and Ham had been thrown. One-ear saw two late-comers line up at the rear of the column of the headless men. He didn't think much about it. It was difficult to keep track of all those monstrosities in the gloom of torch light.

One-ear concentrated his attention and his spleen on the two aids of Doc whom he thought to be far too flip. One-ear had developed a particular grudge against Monk. He glared through the prison bars at the apelike face inside the cell.

"You look more like a danged gorilla every time I see you," One-ear grated. "It ain't goin' to be hardly any hardship at all for you to lose that pan."

"You're no bargain yourself, you lopsided water pitcher!" the shrill tones of Monk informed him.

One-ear cursed at this reference to his aural appendage and turned toward the door of the prison. The six thugs emerged then, shoving Renny and Long Tom before them. Both men were bound stoutly.

All eyes were upon the prisoners at that moment. No one noticed a slight commotion at the end of the line between the two headless men who had just joined the procession. The heavier of the two reached out with a foot and kicked the skinny one in the shins.

A faint noise came from the heavy one. It was a sort of a gurgle. It sounded like some perfectly sound man trying to restrain himself from an outburst of anger.

The fact that these two "headless" men were somewhat taller than the rest, might have given an observant watcher some cause for concern. Their actions certainly would have. Ham and Monk had been made up carefully to play their parts among the headless legion. Part of that role, of course, called for a complete lack of speech. That was difficult, to say the least, for Monk.

The two had long ago begun experiments in mental telepathy. In fact, they had become quite proficient about it. Ham had just been describing to Monk in thought projection, what a miserable specimen the chemist really was. Ham implied that Monk looked much better without a head than he had before.

"Even One-ear can't tell you from the monkey," Ham thought at him. "No wonder the girls all give you the go-by and pick me instead."

Monk kicked Ham in the shins again. "I'm goin' to crown that danged Chemistry," he thought-waved to Ham. "It was a bum idea of Doc's to bring him into that cell to fool One-ear."

Doc Savage, disguised as the tongueless Indian, had located Habeas Corpus and Chemistry on the edge of the village and had brought them into the prison in the supply cart. The idea of having the ape double for Monk had pleased Ham greatly.

"You've never been of any use yourself," he thought at the chemist now. "You ought to be glad to look enough like Chemistry to fool people."

Monk began to expound telepathetically and at great length on the subject of shyster lawyers, him in particular, and how he was going to personally subdivide Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks when they got out of this particular jam.

The gurgling sound of suppressed rage came from Monk then. Ham had to dodge in and out of other headless marchers to escape the long, powerful arms of his companion.

After a mental oration of several minutes' duration, Monk discovered that Ham had merely closed his mind to telepathetic reception.

### Chapter XVI. DOC MARKED FOR DEATH

ONE sharp word ripped into the air at that moment. The sound made One-ear and his thugs look at the outer wall, from where the sound seemed to have come. The word was unintelligible to them. That was because it was in Mayan.

The word had an immediately quieting effect on the two unruly headless men. They immediately got back into line in the procession.

"Doc's right," Monk thought to Ham. "This is no time for horseplay."

The two men could see through their ingeniously devised disguises. Doc had made the things with materials he had been able to locate while assuming the role of the tongueless Indian cell guard. Doc had found only one drawback in assuming the cell guard's role. Being tongueless, the big Indian could not ask any questions.

The trip to the temple was much like the previous visit that Monk and Ham had made. The main difference was that on this occasion, Renny and Long Tom were the prisoners.

Inside the temple itself, some things were changed. The Indians were there in great numbers. They filled the great pit of the temple, most of them prostrate on the earthen floor. On the dais of the altar, there stood at first only three figures. One of them was the tall form of the dictator. Another was Lynda Ladore. The third figure was an ancient Indian. He chanted a weird tuneless dirge to the people below him. The dictator himself made no sounds. Apparently the sacrificial ritual called for the pagan priest to chant and do all the talking.

The legion of the headless marched straight up onto the raised platform. The altar had been dragged forward since the early part of the evening. The two prisoners were prodded to a spot near the altar. Then the headless legion ranged itself around the dais like a guard of honor.

Monk and Ham managed to get in a spot not too far from the dictator. They had their instructions from Doc Savage. Just as the sacrifice was about to be consummated, Monk and Ham were to dive into the dictator. The bronze man had concluded that the dictator would have to be the one to perform the sacrifice in order to impress his people.

Doc intended to be present. He had told his two aids that he might learn who and what was behind the force of the headless death if he could minutely watch the preparations for the execution and the attempt to perform it.

Doc's plan was a bold one. There was great danger attending it. But there did not seem to be any other way of solving the mystery of the headless death. So far, the bronze man had not been able to devise any defense against the terrible death.

Ham noticed one difference since their last trip to the temple. He called Monk's attention to that one thing, and both of them watched. For some reason, the dictator seemed no longer afraid. There was no stoop to his

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shoulders now. They were squared and thrown back.

The dictator's movements were swift and decisive this time. There was an arrogant, menacing assurance to all of his movements. Once he stepped over to Lynda Ladore. The glamour girl was comfortably reclining in a huge thronelike chair which had been covered with a variety of animal skins and furs. Lynda's amethyst eyes narrowed when the dictator whispered to her. Her face grew hard as she nodded in assent to whatever the dictator had suggested.

The chanting priest at one corner of the dais suddenly raised his voice to a high pitch. He swung one arm toward big-fisted Renny and intoned some sort of a pronunciamento to the crowd. Instantly, an electric, pulse-quicken sense of horror filled the ancient temple of the Incas. Many of the Indians moaned aloud, pressed their faces into the hard-packed dirt of the floor.

Two of the headless legion, as if at some unspoken command, stepped forward and prodded Renny toward the old altar. Renny, it became obvious, was to be the first sacrifice to the god of the headless.

Monk and Ham watched every move made by the dictator. The hairy chemist let his gaze stray for a moment to the crowd in the temple. He could see no sign of Doc Savage. Monk knew Doc would probably come well disguised. But he would have felt better had he been able to find some indication that the bronze man was there. Monk knew the sacrificial ritual was coming to its conclusion.

Suddenly Ham began showing signs of great excitement. He bombarded Monk's brain with telepathic words of discovery. Monk followed Ham's thoughts. Then he, too, saw the object which had stirred Ham's emotions.

As the two headless assistants tied Renny firmly to the altar, the dictator backed slowly toward a great table. On the table lay a peculiar-looking device. From a distance, undoubtedly from the vantage point of the Indians in the pit, it looked like a stone mace.

But Monk and Ham could see a modern construction beneath that apparent stone exterior. Chrome fittings gleamed faintly. And, attached to the end of the thing, was a snakelike cable, the type used to carry tremendous voltage to high-tension lines!

"We won't just jostle that bird," Monk thought to Ham. "When we take him, we'll do it good. And we'll grab that thing."

Big-fisted Renny watched the dictator step slowly toward him, bearing the huge stone mace.

"Holy cow!" he muttered. "That thing's big enough to bash a guy's head off!"

MONK and Ham went into action then. There was a gasp from the natives as the two apparently headless forms plunged at the dictator. By arrangement, Ham dived at the stone mace and began to wrench it from the grasp of the dictator. Monk let loose a howl that scared most of the Indians more than the headless death itself. He plowed into the dictator.

The hairy chemist let loose his battle cry and began banging away with fists that distinctly did not do the dictator any good.

Ham got the macelike contrivance and headed across the platform with it. Renny's big voice began booming

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encouragement and defiance. He was still bound to the altar. But he managed to kick out with his feet and trip two thugs who rushed to the aid of the dictator. Long Tom, tied tightly, but still standing, lowered his head and began butting his cranium against thugs.

Then a cry went up from the thugs. "It's Doc Savage! They got Doc! He's goin' to be the first sacrifice!"

That cry made Monk whirl around. Long Tom and Renny paused in their struggles. Even Ham, racing away with the macelike object he had taken from the dictator, paused to see what had occurred. Instantly, bodies struck Ham from behind, like football tacklers bringing down the man with the ball.

Doc Savage was in the temple. He was tightly bound. Doc's face bled from half a dozen cuts. A tight gag in his mouth prevented him from speaking. His clothing was ripped into shreds. Monk let out a moan of despair. They had, he felt sure, shot their main bolt and failed to accomplish anything.

Doc was shoved to the dais by thugs who jabbed black automatics into his ribs. Other killers had retrieved the mace from Ham and had restored it to the dictator. Suddenly a gravellike voice guttered instructions into the crowd.

"Place the bronze man on the altar," the voice grated. "I have immediate plans for Doc Savage."

A small door opened at one side of the platform and a robed and masked figure stepped into the temple. The figure was the same one who had led the attack on Doc Savage's office; the same one who had trapped Renny and Long Tom in the office of Smedley Worthington Watson.

Now, they immediately learned, he was also the master brain in the horror of the headless deaths!

The man was difficult to describe. The flowing capelike robe that he wore, hid his body made it impossible to guess whether he was stout, thin or husky. The black hat was pulled well down over eyes that were also covered by a domino mask.

"Bring me steel bands," the voice grated. "We will first secure the bronze man. Then instructions will be issued."

The platform door opened again and a runty thug rushed in, carrying things that looked like barrel hoops. When he came closer, it could be seen that they were curved steel bands about an inch wide. The masked leader sprung open one of the bands. He shoved one end under Doc's back, brought it around his body and pressed the two ends together. The effect was to force Doc's arms tight to his body in a solid steel grip.

The masked one directed two thugs to press against the band to hold it in position. Then he took from his cape an object that looked not unlike an ordinary fountain pen. He pointed the object at the two ends of the steel band, which were pressed into each other.

The steel quickly glowed red. The red changed to white. Then, with unbelievable speed, the bands welded together! Even stranger was the extreme localization of the operation. Apart from the minute section of the bands actually fused together, the metal did not seem to take on any heat.

The masked man encircled Doc's body with five steel bands in all. Then he sneered at the bronze man.

"You thought you were clever, in your instructions to these two clowns!" he snarled. He pointed to Monk and Ham who had been shorn of their headless disguises. The masked leader was obviously enjoying his success in making them look silly. He gave vent to an ugly, cackling laugh.

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"These buildings are lighted only by the crudest of torches, bronze man," he snarled. "That is my wish. But every cell in the prison is equipped with both a microphone and a television pick-up lense. I know all that goes on."

He paused a moment to let that one sink in. Then he turned to Doc's aids. They were all tightly bound now. Monk and Ham were downcast. They seemed to feel that they had failed Doc Savage. Monk felt the cruel eyes of the master killer upon him.

"It pleases me to delay this execution for a few hours," the gravel-voiced one announced. "I am going to give Monk Mayfair the opportunity to save the life of his chief. If he fails, the brilliant Doc Savage will be the next headless corpse!"

Monk tensed. Sweat rolled down his homely face. There was nothing under the sun that Monk would not have done for Doc Savage. The master of the headless death was fully cognizant of that complete devotion. He took advantage of it now.

"We have learned from our agents that Doc Savage's fifth aid, William Harper Littlejohn, has returned to New York," the masked one declared. "He found in your offices information leading him to believe that you had come to San Roble. He is even now planning to investigate."

Momentary hope flashed into Monk's deep-set eyes. Then he was plunged again into misery.

"You will go to the coast with two of my men," the leader instructed. "You will get William Harper Littlejohn on the radiophone. He will know your voice. You will inform him that the San Roble tip was a wrong one. You will also inform him that Doc and all of his aids have gone to an ancient Inca city believed to be in the center of Brazil in their search."

The man paused, then:

"You will make William Harper Littlejohn believe you. If a favorable report is not received here by short-wave radio in just six hours, Doc Savage will become a headless corpse!"

MONK'S head was down as he plodded toward the airport, armed thugs on every side. There was no way that he could be sure the killers would keep their word and spare Doc if Monk did call Johnny and tell him the things he had been instructed to say.

On the other hand, there seemed no other chance at all. At least, some delay would be caused. Monk was grateful at the moment that Doc Savage had been gagged in the temple. Monk was pretty sure that had Doc been able to use his voice he would have forbidden Monk to follow the masked man's instructions.

Monk suddenly seemed to realize how hopeless the whole thing was. He began to swear aloud. That seemed to give the thugs too much pleasure, so Monk switched to Mayan. He said a great many things in a loud tone of voice.

That seemed to relieve his feelings somewhat. For Monk subsided. They strode through the city of mud huts and out onto the airfield. A small tractor hauled the big transport to the starting line. The motors were warming up. It was only an hour's flight to the seacoast.

Suddenly Monk went berserk.

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"Hell with you guys!" he barked. "I'm goin' to bash a few heads in, anyway!"

Monk let out a yell. The thugs had heard that yell before. They piled on. They didn't want to kill the homely chemist. They wanted him to be able to complete his radiophone call to Johnny. But musing him up was something else. The mêlée was quite a scramble. In the darkness, some of the thugs missed Monk and slammed each other.

Monk bashed quite a few of them, too. But there were too many of them for Monk to really expect a victory. Several of them were panting when the two who were making the trip hauled their prisoner to the transport.

One of the two was Fingers. He stepped into the pilot's cabin. They didn't worry about enough of a guard to really control Monk. They reminded him of their reasons for that just as the plane took off.

"Remember!" one of them warned loudly. "Unless our own man reports favorable within six hours, Doc Savage gets the headless death. And if you ain't on the plane and nice an' peaceful coming back, he'll get it anyway."

Then the plane roared into the black night. As its lights winked off into the distance, one of the thugs turned to his companions.

"Let's go back," he grunted. "They're goin' to kill the bronze guy anyway. He's too dangerous to stay alive. I want to see it."

### Chapter XVII. REVOLT OF THE HEADLESS

A CONFERENCE under way in an ornately furnished room adjacent to the Inca temple seemed to bear out the statement of the thug. Four persons attended that meeting and all agreed that the death of Doc Savage was of paramount importance.

"We have four good men guarding each of Savage's aids," the masked leader of the criminals observed. "Savage himself cannot move a muscle with those steel straps welded about his body."

The painted dictator nodded. He spoke in quite clear English and did not seem at all afraid.

"The other one took off all right," he stated. "I think we have no reason to worry about the story he will tell to the man in New York known as Johnny."

Lynda Ladore was also a conferee in the bloody business. Her eyes were bright with excitement. Something that she wanted very much seemed to be almost within her grasp.

"Must we kill all of the men?" she asked. Her voice did not reveal whether she desired an answer in the negative or the affirmative.

"No," the masked one decreed. "We will save Long Tom. We may need his knowledge of electricity."

The girl's face clouded briefly. "But why " she began.

"This man is also brilliant," was the odd reply from the masked one.

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The girl subsided. She pondered for a moment.

"Then, if I help, you will "

The masked one laughed harshly. He looked at the painted dictator with what seemed to be amusement.

"This one here seems to desire you as his mate," the master killer grated. "Partly for your co-operation and partly because he desires you, certain requests will be granted."

The masked one laughed in a horrible sort of way.

"Come," he rasped. "Let us get on with our business. A few more headless corpses will improve my disposition."

As they started toward the door, the fourth member of the conference suddenly halted. This was One-ear, who apparently had performed his murderous tasks sufficiently well to rate a place high in the councils of the headless death. One-ear had listened, but had offered no suggestions. Apparently, the head thug was of value as a killer, not a thinker.

One-ear held up a hand. His good ear had caught a sound of running feet outside. There was a sudden pounding on the door then. One-ear opened it. Fingers, the skinny pilot of the criminals, stumbled into the room.

"That damned Monk guy got away from us!" he stammered. "There was a fight at the airport just before we took off. Somehow he had that big monkey switch places with him. We was halfway to the coast before we found it out."

The gravel-voiced leader bit out an oath. "Get to the bronze man first," he snapped.

But someone else reached Doc Savage first. The bronze man was still tied to the altar in the temple. In addition, the steel bands pressed against his chest. The gag was in his mouth.

Doc did not vent his strength against those bonds. But the bronze man was making strange convulsions with his body. He acted something like a pig that is trying to scratch its back. He arched the center of his body upward and shook himself like a dog just out of water.

The killers had missed Doc's thin equipment vest. The garment was made to look so much like his own flesh that a microscopic examination would have been necessary to detect it. From one tiny pocket now a glass vial began to slide. It fell from the pocket and dropped to the stone altar.

The impact shattered the tiny vial. Doc relaxed then. He dropped flat on his back, then rolled on one side. One steel band was immersed in the liquid spilled from the glass vial. The liquid was a powerful acid that would eat through the most highly tempered steel in a matter of seconds. Doc had used it in the past when criminals had handcuffed himself and his aids.

At that moment, Monk arrived. The hairy chemist knew of the steel-eating acid. In fact, he had worked with Doc Savage in developing the compound. The thought of it had been one of Monk's reasons for adopting the plan he did. His apparent swearing in Mayan had been really a means of calling Chemistry.

The big monkey had been released from the cell block by Doc before the crooks had seized him. Chemistry was accustomed to obeying orders and had more than once helped his masters out of tight spots. Chemistry

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had come close in the darkness of the airport. When Monk started the fight there, he was able to trade places with the monkey with very little difficulty.

Doc Savage waggled his head when Monk came stumbling across the platform. Half a hundred Indians were in the pit. They sat still, too surprised to move. Monk whipped out a knife and cut the gag from Doc's mouth. It was then that they heard the pounding footsteps of the generals of crime. The gravel-voiced leader was shouting orders to have Monk apprehended.

"Cut the ropes and roll me behind the altar," Doc told Monk. "Then go out in front and make as much noise as you can."

Monk complied. As he raced out of the temple, he heard Doc's voice ahead of him. The bronze man was using ventriloquism to divert searchers from himself until he could get free from the steel bonds that held him.

The first metal band that had separated gave Doc enough freedom to locate a second vial of the steel solvent. Then, complete liberty was only a matter of moments.

Doc was still crouching behind the altar when the members of the crime conference pounded across the platform. Doc was completely hidden in the gloom. The masked leader paused, grabbed the painted dictator by one arm.

"If the bronze guy does get away," he rasped, "we'll have to move fast. We'll have to kill everybody here who knows anything and move to new headquarters."

The dictator merely grunted. Doc Savage's voice seemed to come again from outside the temple, and the two conspirators raced out in that direction.

Doc drifted from the temple as silent as a shadow. He found another door and raced rapidly along the street between the outer wall and the temple. As he ran, he barked orders in Mayan. Monk heard them and quit raising a rumpus in front of the temple. Monk drifted into the darkness and began hunting Ham.

Doc raced past the dungeon in which he had been imprisoned. He tore through the night to a little-used part of the Kremlinlike inclosure. It was a part of the place shunned by the Indians. The natives shuddered at the thought of it.

There was an inclosure within an inclosure there. Doc had learned about it when he was moving around in the guise of Wampum, the tongueless Indian. The place for which Doc was headed was the barracks of the headless legion!

MONK found Ham without any trouble. To get him out was something else again. All three of Doc's aids had been returned to the prison. Each was in a separate cell and four guards stood before each cell door.

It so happened that the cells were not together. They were separated, on different corridors. Monk whispered in to Ham through the window of his cell before he went into the building.

The first sign of disorder was when Ham began kicking the inside door of his cell. The dapper lawyer began to shriek abuse and defiance at his captors. The four thugs muttered among themselves. Then they began to get mad.

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"Let's go in and give that fashion plate his lumps," one of them suggested.

That was the course they decided upon. All four of them crowded in, with blackjacks drawn. The door swung inward. Ham's voice kept right on screaming at them from under the single bunk in the cell. The thugs leaned over to drag the prisoner out into the open.

In that instant, dapper Ham stepped quickly from behind the door and dashed into the corridor. Monk's ventriloquism, which he normally used solely for the purpose of annoying Ham, had proved useful. The two slammed the door in the faces of the astounded thugs and barred it. The locks of the cells were old-fashioned, inefficient things. They were supplemented by heavy steel bars fitted from the outside.

Together, Monk and Ham located the cells of Long Tom and Renny. Monk had an anaesthetic gas bomb. He used that on the first four thugs. That released Long Tom. The second quartet fell for an old ruse. Using the voice of One-ear, Monk began to yell for help. Then he threw his voice from one corridor to another. The thugs were all afraid of One-ear. If he needed help, they were really going to try to give it to him.

"Doc says to get near the gate, but stay out of sight," Monk told his three companions.

"Holy cow!" Renny rumbled. "I wonder what he's up to."

DOC at that moment was the central figure in a highly unusual drama. The bronze man stood on the top of an adobe wall about twelve feet high. There was quite an assemblage within the inclosure made by the wall. There were a hundred or so figures in there, none of which had a head.

"You may consider me an enemy," Doc Savage told them. "But I think you will believe me if I tell you something is true."

There was silence from within the courtyard. The headless men gave no indication of whether they believed or not. Doc Savage apparently had not expected one. He continued.

"Your chief has just decreed that everyone who knows anything that would endanger his plans must die if I get away. That means that he will not protect you if there is a pinch."

Doc paused.

"This is true," he said in a queerly compelling tone. "And who, more than you of the headless legion, knows enough to turn his campaign of terror upside down!"

There came a low muttering from the courtyard. The headless men began to speak! One of them jumped upon a stone bench.

"I told a lot of you guys this bird would run out on us," he shouted. "I think he's a phony all the way through. We know part of his racket is a phony."

Voices welled up from the inclosure.

"Let's get the guy!" one headless man shouted.

Then it became a mob scene. Doc tried vainly to stop it. He shouted that they would probably be killed if they

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made the attempt to rush the temple. The men ignored him. Such is the fever of a mob aroused. They stopped thinking; merely acted on an overpowering mass desire for vengeance.

One of them whipped open the gate to the inclosure. Then the legion of the headless plunged madly down the street in the direction of the temple.

MONK, Ham, Long Tom and Renny were just leaving the prison as the headless legion roared past. Monk came to an amazed halt and rubbed his eyes. The headless men were shouting epithets and threatening to kill the master mind behind the headless death.

Monk gathered that they didn't know who it was. Most of them seemed to suspect Norgrud Watts. They called him that "little professor we seen around." That was the term One-ear had used in the plane carrying Long Tom and Renny.

Listening to that, Monk almost got adjusted to the fact that the headless men could speak. Then one fellow, running just in front of him, cursed.

"To hell with this thing!" the fellow rasped.

The running man reached up and took off his neck as if it were a hat! Then the secret was out. The headless legion consisted of short men who were made up much as Monk and Ham had been!

"Holy cow," rumbled Renny. "Now I see why they hired so many little guys. They still weren't too tall when they made them up to look like guys without any heads."

Doc Savage raced up to them at that moment.

"We must try to save those men," Doc announced. "Come. Toward the temple."

Doc and his four aids raced along in the wake of the headless men. Near the big gates, the bronze man paused beside what looked like an abandoned packing box. He stooped over it and lifted several large numbered boxes. He handed one to Long Tom. The electrical expert took it in both of his hands and its weight nearly bent him double.

"I rescued some of the equipment from our transport when I was walking around as Wampum," Doc explained. "The thugs had pulled it out of the plane, but they didn't know what it was."

Long Tom began to get excited. It seemed that he knew what the objects were.

"We will try it," Doc stated simply. "I do not know whether it will work. But we must try to save some lives."

THE five men hauled the equipment boxes to a spot near the temple. The headless men were storming the steps of the temple now. Some of them had removed their disguises and stood forth as what they really were; undersized killers in a clever disguise.

The painted face of the dictator could be seen on the steps of the temple. The painted features were twisted into a frenzied snarl of hate. The dictator carried the thing that looked like a big stone mace. Then there was

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the odd smell of ozone in the air, and one of the faked headless men turned into a real headless corpse.

Long Tom and Doc worked with their equipment boxes. No one paid them any attention. The headless legion was too busy in an attempt to storm the temple. And the dictator was too absorbed in making headless corpses out of men who really had their skypieces.

Apparently, the dictator could only remove one head at a time with the instrument he carried.

"Whillikers!" Monk grunted. "If someone could sneak up behind him while he's using that thing "

Someone tried it. A gun blasted, and that assaulter died a death by lead. Doc and Long Tom had a complicated array of instruments working now. There was a mighty buzzing and a crackling. Lurid blue flames shot up into the air from the bronze man's equipment boxes.

"What's the gadget?" Monk asked the bronze man.

"Works on the principle of static interference," Doc told him. "If it is sufficiently powerful, it will interfere with the current used in the death machine, and nullify it."

The painted dictator began to scream with rage. One of the recently headless men plunged up the steps. The dictator pointed the macelike instrument at him.

Nothing happened.

Doc's interfering current was working! It looked as if the bronze man had won. But the battle was a long way from over. The dictator screamed orders and instructions. Another gun blazed from behind him. The attacker, whose head had been saved, lost an eye. A bullet went through it.

Then another object appeared. Three thugs were hauling on it. Renny gasped.

"Holy cow!" he burst out. "That looks like the gadget they tried to burn the office up with!"

Doc Savage's voice was calm. "The static interferer was sufficient to cope with their earlier and simpler death machine," he said, "but I doubt whether it will do for this one."

Doc was right. The interferer did no good. The humming sound of the new death machine was louder. The smell of ozone was stronger. The heat was terrific!

This one did not lop off heads. It burned men to a crisp in their tracks. The headless legion was a lost one right then. Many tried to flee. They could not even escape.

On the steps of the temple, the painted dictator chortled with glee. Behind him crouched the cloaked and masked figure of the master mind.

"Stay here, whatever happens!" Doc said. "I am going in!"

## Chapter XVIII. KILLER STRIKES BACK

BEFORE any of his aids could stop him or object, Doc Savage whipped from sight. He raced toward the packing box where there was one more piece of equipment. Doc had one more plan to use in ending the horror of the headless death. And this one he would try alone.

The bronze man stripped quickly to shorts. In another minute, he was racing directly toward the temple steps and the square black container of the death machine. Doc presented an amazing sight. He resembled one of the living statues in a circus tableau. Any of the larger circuses would have paid plenty to hire a living statue of such proportions.

Doc, apparently, was silvered from head to foot. Even his bronze hair was covered with a silvered skull cap of some kind. Monk drew in a quick breath.

"Gee whillikers!" he muttered. "Doc'll get killed by that thing!"

Ham gasped and began to moan. They all knew that Doc's attempt was a particularly dangerous one. That was undoubtedly why he had tried it in such a fashion as to eliminate his aids from participating. It began to look as though the bronze man's second attempt also would fail.

Doc forced himself through the milling crowd of once "headless" men. Men were dropping and dying right and left. Doc pushed on through. He got to the very steps of the temple. The dictator began to scream in a rage and hate. He rushed to the square box and began depressing a lever.

The heat increased. Doc's four aids could scarcely stand it back where they were. Then strange things began happening to the bronze man.

Doc no longer was a silver statue. His body turned a glowing, cherry red. Then it became white-hot. Doc Savage was as glaringly brilliant as a white-hot iron ingot in a rolling mill! He was a living, walking mold of flame.

Monk cried in anguish. Doc Savage stumbled as he climbed up the steps to the temple. He fell to his knees, raised a flaming hand to his brow. Then Doc forced himself to his feet. The effort seemed to drain every bit of strength and will that Doc Savage had. He stumbled the remaining distance.

Doc's aids could see the expression of incredulity and horror that spread over the painted dictator's face. Behind the dictator, they saw the masked figure of the master mind turn and race into the cavernous hall of the temple.

Doc stumbled out of the range of the death machine. He wavered as he half fell to one side of the machine. The dictator tried to flee. Doc Savage halted him. Doc put out one hand, seized the dictator by one wrist. The painted man's scream of pain was enough to send shivers up and down the back of strong men. Doc Savage's hand was so hot that his mere touch sent the smell of scorching flesh into the air. The painted dictator fainted with the pain and fell to the floor.

Doc summoned reserve strength then. He whipped from the dictator's side a sort of jungle knife. It was almost as heavy as a machete. Doc rushed to the black box of the death machine. Behind it was a black cable, apparently leading to a power source. Doc swung the jungle knife, severed the cable.

Instantly, the heat began to wane. Monk and Ham were the first to rush over.

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"Golly!" Monk grunted. "How'd you do it, Doc? What kind of an outfit is this?"

Doc Savage was still glowing a cherry-red. Monk looked closely and decided that the stuff Doc wore was some sort of asbestos. He was wrong. But he didn't get a chance to find it out right then.

The painted dictator struggled to his feet. With a scream, he plunged into the temple.

"We're not through yet!" he shouted. "I've got some tricks of my own to do."

The dictator disappeared through a tiny door. Immediately tremendous detonations shook El Grande. It seemed the dictator had mined the entire city. A terrific blast sent the floor of the temple climbing up into the air. Huge stones and piles of debris hurtled down from the roof.

"Run!" Doc advised. "We must get out of here!"

Monk headed toward the tiny door through which the dictator had disappeared.

"Not that way!" Doc rapped. "He expects us to go that way."

Doc ran lightly down the hall and onto the raised altar platform. Then he turned in the direction from which he had heard the dictator and the masked man coming when he was hiding behind the altar.

There was a door back there, a small one made of some very stout wood. Doc instructed Monk to use a vest-pocket bomb. The chemist hurled it in the small crack under the door. There was a blinding flash, and the door was blown from its hinges.

Doc stepped through the door. He found himself in a sumptuous apartment. The man who had been the dictator sat at a complex instrument board. By pushing various levers, he was methodically blowing the entire city of El Grande out of existence.

He whirled, snarling, as the bronze man came in. The painted fabric he had pulled over his face to resemble a dictator was off, now. It hung on the chair, a queer sort of hood.

The man crouching before Doc was revealed as Wings Dedham, the ex-flier who had worked in the laboratory of Norgrud Watts back in New Jersey. Doc reached out for the man. The bronze man's peculiar silvered garment still glowed a cherry-red. Wings Dedham glanced involuntarily at his seared wrist, where Doc had seized him before.

With a scream, Wings Dedham tore himself away. He plunged through a window on the street side of his apartment. A horrible screaming immediately welled up from the street.

Doc moved swiftly to the window. Monk, Ham, Long Tom and Renny raced over beside him. Wings Dedham had landed right in the midst of a group that really appreciated him. The remainder of the "headless" men whom Wings had been trying to kill, went to work in decisive fashion. They literally tore the screaming killer to pieces.

Another fight started then. Nearly a thousand Indians had crowded in from the village. It is to be remembered that their patience was exceeded once in the past. Once before they had risen and killed the man who had subjugated them.

They killed this time. But it was not one man. They moved in with great curved knives on the crooks who

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had been hired as the headless legion. The Indians suddenly realized that these men had been engaged to prey on their superstitions and subjugate them with a horror that was not true. Then they started a hunt for the thugs and gangsters.

The guttural cries of the Indians indicated their rage. Doc Savage understood the lost tongue and translated.

"We could not stop them if we tried," Doc stated. "It is of greater importance that we locate the real criminal behind this. Dedham was merely an assistant."

"Who " Monk began.

Doc ignored the question.

"There are three other innocent persons in this palace somewhere," Doc said. "One or more of them may be alive. We must find them!"

### Chapter XIX. MONK RIGHT FOR ONCE

THERE was another dungeon in the palace of the Incas. It was a more elaborate dungeon, a deeper and darker one. This, they discovered, was the hiding place of prisoners with whom the killers wanted constant contact. Doc led the way with a self-actuated flashlight, which did not need batteries. Monk kept asking questions.

"That danged suit's quit glowing, but I still can't tell what it's made of," the hairy chemist complained. "What is it, Doc?"

Doc did not answer him directly.

"It would not have worked against the first death machine," Doc explained. "The rays used in the second machine have some kinship with the X ray. They are combined with a terrific concentration of the blue rays similar to those of an electric arc. The ultra short frequency rays used in artificial fever also enter into the thing."

Monk scratched his head.

"Ain't nothin'd stop all them things," he muttered.

Doc kept on going down the stone steps. Finally, he answered.

"Both the X ray and the short waves are similar," he stated. "Roentgen found when he discovered the X ray that the only two things that would stop it entirely are platinum and lead. The same is true of the short-wave high frequency. The garment I am wearing is a combination of the two metals, built on the vacuum-bottle principle."

Monk grunted. He could see part of it.

"B—but the other "

A new voice cut in.

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"The other machine is something for which the bronze man has not found a complete defense," a sneering voice grated. "He could offset it temporarily with his interference wave. But there is no such equipment at hand."

Doc swung the flashlight. The narrow corridor suddenly ended in a huge, vaulted room, only part of which was revealed by the pale rays of Doc's electric torch. Half a dozen heavily barred doors gave onto the great tomblike compartment. In the center there was a great pit.

A weird, eerie trilling sound came as Doc swiftly inspected the dungeon. Here, he knew, was the ancient Inca dungeon and torture chamber. In one corner there were racks, thumb screws and various instruments of torture.

Nowhere was there any evidence of the voice that had just spoken. Then it came again.

"I am behind you, Doc Savage. And I am going to make a headless corpse of you!"

There came a raucous, grating laugh. Doc whirled. One stone seemed to be missing from the wall beside the door through which they had come. As Doc noticed that, he heard a rending crash back in the passageway.

"Howlin' calamities, Doc!" Monk's shrill voice informed him. "A big slab of rock's dropped across the passageway behind us."

The rasping laugh of the killer came again.

"I can wipe out all of your band, Doc Savage," the voice said. "But I prefer to have your head first. I want your aids to watch how horribly the great man of bronze can die."

The tones held the rising inflection of a man whipping himself into a frenzy. It was obviously the voice of a man demented through his own lust for power. Doc saw another and then another stone in the wall swing on a cleverly concealed pivot. Through the aperture was thrust an instrument in the general shape of the mace wield by Wings Dedham on the steps of the temple.

Doc Savage did something extremely rare for him. He gave one piercing scream of terror. Then he gobbled strangely and began to run across the cavernous dungeon.

Doc hurled the deep pit in the center, looking down into it as he did. He played his flash into it and saw a huddled figure at the bottom. The figure seemed devoid of life.

As Doc whirled, the masked and caped figure of the master killer stepped quickly from the niche made in the wall by the turned stones.

"You will find I have learned much from you, Doc Savage," he sneered.

"Blazes!" Monk yelled. "Let's get the guy! He can only use that thing in one direction at a time!"

It was then that Doc's aids found out how much the killer had learned from Doc. Monk leaped through the doorway. Or at least, he attempted to do it. He landed on the floor in a heap.

"Jehoshaphat!" he blurted. "An electric magnetic field just like the one we got back in the office!"

The masked killer laughed.

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"You are helpless," he snarled. "You can only watch the death of your leader!"

MONK, Ham and Renny watched, transfixed with pain and sorrow. Long Tom seemed frantically working at some sort of a device, as if in a final, desperate attempt to aid the bronze man. Monk coughed, dabbed a hand at his eyes. The homely chemist was weeping openly.

Ham squeezed his arm. The lawyer was fighting back tears that insisted on coming. They were witnessing the most horrible spectacle of their careers; the most terrible sight that was possible to them.

The caped killer moved crabwise toward the bronze man. He pointed the macelike death machine in Doc Savage's direction. Doc Savage did not have his emergency equipment vest on. He had removed that before going up against the terrible heat in his platinum-lead ray insulation outfit. Doc had been afraid that the heat generated, even through the thermos-insulation, might detonate all of the bombs in the vest.

Doc Savage had neither bombs nor weapons now. The masked killer crept slowly forward, cutting down the distance between them. Slowly, he raised the macelike object, leveled it at Doc. Doc Savage yelled something unintelligible. He buried his head in his arms, whirled around.

The villain uttered a cackling laugh and circled with the bronze man. Then there was a humming sound, the smell of ozone, Doc Savage staggered. He sat down slowly, a body without any head!

With a screaming cry of triumph, the masked one hurled his death machine to the floor. He stood, fascinated with the work he had done. The great Doc Savage had fallen under the headless horror! The man began to dance in a weird little step.

Then his eyes bugged out in a horror of his own. Doc Savage was moving slowly toward him!

The headless bronze man was between the killer and the death machine. The killer began to blubber. Saliva drooled from the corners of his mouth. He knew *he* couldn't be seeing this thing. He had known all about the phony headless men who walked; he had arranged for them to terrify others.

Doc advanced slowly upon him. "Release the magnetic wave that holds my men," Doc said evenly. "Then you will release the prisoners from their cells."

The masked man began to break down. The greatest crime of the century, the murder of Doc Savage, had turned upon him. He could not assimilate the horror of it all. He began to sag like a bag of water with a hole cut suddenly in it. Then he noticed that the headless Doc Savage had picked up the instrument of death!

"Oh, my . . . oh, why . . . oh, dear me, I'll die!" the voice blurted. "Oh, why in hell didn't I just shoot you?"

The killer began to run as if the devil himself were behind him. Monk gasped from behind the magnetic screen.

"L. Pennfield Stumpp!" Monk howled. "How'd he get control of this thing?"

The masked man made a frantic effort to escape from it all. He lost his disguise in his haste. He turned out to be L. Pennfield Stumpp, all right. He raced for one of the barred cell doors, still talking to himself.

"I'll go . . . it is so . . . they won't get hep . . . to my step " L. Pennfield screamed, and ripped open one of the

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oaken cell doors.

In his confusion, L. Pennfield must have picked the wrong door. It later developed that he was seeking one door that looked as though it belonged to a cell. But actually, it led to a secret stairway to the floor of the temple. He was shoved back from the door that he opened.

A tall, brown man came out and jumped right on top of L. Pennfield Stumpp. The tall brown man began to talk in a language that only Doc, Stumpp and the tall brown man could understand. Ham let out a great yell.

"There is a difference," Ham yelled. "That guy was the dictator the first time we went into the temple. I can see it now. Dedham took his place when they were going to knock off Long Tom and Renny."

The tall, brown man wasted no time on conversation. He picked up L. Pennfield Stumpp by the waist and hurled him into the pit in the center of the dungeon. Then he turned to Doc Savage.

"It is fitting that he should die on the spiked pit of my ancestors," he announced as calmly as if Doc had a head. "He held us terrorized with the horror of the headless who walked."

The secret of the young man's apparent unconcern with Doc's condition was that he had been behind the bronze man part of the time. L. Pennfield had fallen for a gag as old as Houdini. Houdini used to vanish a whole horse with the two-mirror trick. Doc Savage just vanished his head.

The bronze man had not unloaded all of his nonexplosive equipment when he went into the heat ray. These two mirrors joined in front of the nose of the bronze man. Anyone looking straight into his face actually saw the side walls of the dungeon. It seemed that he was seeing right through to the wall in behind.

Long Tom Roberts breathed a great sigh of relief. He looked at the apparatus on the floor beside him.

"If this portable interference ray hadn't been strong enough, it wouldn't have been done with mirrors," he muttered. "Doc ordered me in Mayan to set it up when he jumped into the room. He was tryin' to keep the thing away from our heads, I guess."

Which was the truth. Doc had taken the only gamble he could have, without involving his aids. The bronze man searched in the niche from which L. Pennfield Stumpp had come. Finally he found the lever that controlled the magnetic field imprisoning his aids. He released them.

"What is that second ray, Doc?" Monk demanded. "It can sure knock a guy's head off."

"It is akin to the intensification by magnification of the violet rays of an electric arc," Doc explained. "In its simpler forms, the principle is used in healing lamps in medicine today. The process of healing is merely the destruction of germs."

"When *lapus vulgaris*, ordinary skin tuberculosis, was first cured by the ultra violet, scar tissue was created in the process. The excess of scar tissue on the necks of the headless dead made me believe some sort of a principle underlay this terror machine."

"The sun on your hand does not hurt," Doc finally explained. "Concentrate the amount of sun spread harmlessly over the hand to one spot with a magnifying glass and you get a burn. This is a similar principle with intensified ultra-violet rays. They simply concentrated a greater amount of rays on one spot, and used it as a weapon of terror."

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HAM snorted. Scientific explanations did not clear up the thing sufficiently for him.

"Huh!" he grumbled. "I can't see L. Pennfield Stumpp as the main guy in this. Where's that danged girl? And where's Norgrud Watts? He's the only one with the right amount of technical brains."

Doc did not reply. "Let us investigate these cells," he suggested.

The first cell was empty. The second one yielded a frightened and excited Lynda Ladore. Ham hauled her right out into the center of the floor. In his best courtroom manner, Ham began to cross-examine her. Monk butted in. He gave Ham a shove.

"Lay off the gal!" Monk yelled. "Let her tell her own story."

Monk was a very chivalrous person. It is true that the extent of his chivalry sometimes depended upon the pulchritude of its recipient. But that, Monk always maintained, was beside the point. Lynda Ladore shot Monk an appreciative smile.

"I knew Wings Dedham some years ago," she said. "I was worried when he first went to work for Stumpp. It was Stumpp who hired him, not Norgrud Watts. Norgrud Watts developed his concentration of the ultra violet with terrific heat results as a boon to industry. It would have revolutionized spot welding and several other heat processes.

"Stumpp spied on him, tried to force him into a criminal alliance and when he refused, kidnaped him. He kept him alive for a while because, without his technical advice, Stumpp and Wings could not have produced more of the machines."

Ham's nose went up in the air. He didn't believe it.

"What's your interest in it?" he demanded. "And why were you so friendly with Dedham?"

"Wings promised me that Watts was still alive and promised that when he had extorted enough money, by the clever method of stock selling, he would lead me to Watts. It was important to me for two reasons. First, Norgrud Watts, as far as I knew, was the only man who could develop a defense against the horrible thing he had spawned."

Ham's nose was getting slightly out of joint.

"Well," he snapped, "what's the other reason?"

"Norgrud Watts was my father," the girl explained. "When I went into the films I adopted the name of Lynda Ladore. I didn't think Thelma Watts would look well in lights."

Monk glowered at Ham and moved in as if he was going to smack him with one big hairy paw. In the interval, the youthful dictator spoke.

"Stumpp killed Watts," he said. "Watts' body is at the bottom of the pite with Stumpp." He sighed. "And now that I have seen my people freed of their horror," he said, "I shall go back to Connecticut and finish my schooling."

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Monk's mouth dropped open. He turned around, with the intention of putting a protective arm about the shoulders of Lynda Ladore. He found her already in the arms of the tall, erect young Indian.

"Just a moment," Monk muttered. "What school do you go to?"

"Harvard," the young man said, removing his lips from those of the girl. "I'm studying law."

Ham Brooks practically doubled up. He howled so loudly that the walls seemed to rattle. Monk stamped beside him as they climbed a dank passageway to the ground level.

"Shysters!" Monk muttered. "Thieves! Scum! Process servers! That would be enough. But Harvard on top of it kills me."

As they came down the broad steps of the temple, they heard rumbling explosions beneath the ground. It sounded like subterranean thunder.

"What's that, Doc?" Renny inquired.

"The apparatus and laboratory they used are being destroyed," Doc said simply. "There is no adequate defense against the headless death. A strong interferer ray can be offset by more power in the death machine. It is better that the world does not know of Dr. Watts' discovery."

Doc's aids were silent as they strode toward the airport. In a war-bent world, it was undoubtedly better that the secret of the headless death die with its inventor. Doc alone could now reproduce it. And, short of an invasion of the United States, it was highly unlikely that he would ever do so.

THE END