

The Meteor Menace

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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The Meteor Menace

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Chapter 1. THE SNARE

THERE is a theory among scientists that the ancestors of the Indians of North and South America came from Asia.

This probably explained how "Saturday" Loo could don a bright-colored blanket poncho, mingle with a crowd in Antofagasta, Chile, and pass himself off as a native son of the Andes.

Saturday Loo's poncho was not a disguise, exclusively. It concealed an object which resembled a single-shot pistol, with a barrel large enough to accommodate shotgun cartridges. The poncho also hid a long rope, six pairs of handcuffs, a gas mask, and an assortment of tear-gas bombs.

Safety first was a fetish with Saturday Loo. The shotgun-sized implement, which was a Very pistol firing a slug that would burst into a smoke puff high in the air, should set machinery in motion to settle the business at hand. But there was always the chance of a slipup. Hence the rope, handcuffs, and tear gas to fall back upon.

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Taking care not to bump into any one, which might call attention to what he carried under his poncho, Saturday Loo worked forward.

At least two hundred thousand Chilean citizens were gathered on this hill outside Antofagasta. The center of attention was a high speakers' rostrum of temporary construction. Everybody was pushing and elbowing to get closer to the rostrum, although great loudspeakers of a public-address system were scattered everywhere, and should guarantee all hearing what was to be said.

"Puerco!" gritted a man who had been elbowed. "Pig! Why do you shove?"

"I want to see the bronze man at close range," said the one who had done the elbowing, unabashed.

That seemed to be the thought every one had. They wanted to see the bronze man.

Back of the speakers' rostrum towered a structure which, once it was completed, would undoubtedly be the largest building in Antofagasta. It was possibly half finished. Its architecture was plain and substantial. A great sign hanging over the freshly mortared bricks read:

EL HONOR DE DOC SAVAGE

In case there should be any one unable to read Spanish, the legend was elaborated below in English:

THIS FREE HOSPITAL ERECTED IN HONOR OF DOC SAVAGE

The building was being dedicated. The crowd was here for the ceremony, and to see the bronze man.

The bronze man was Doc Savage, that giant, mysterious worker of miracles about whom all Chile was agog.

IN make-up, the crowd ranged from austere grandees of Castilian descent, who had driven to the ceremony in shiny American limousines, to stocky brown Aymaran Indians from far back in the Andes mountains, who probably had come to town driving a string of llamas. The resemblance of these latter to Asiatics was startling.

Saturday Loo was an Asiatic, so he passed among them without drawing attention. To be exact, Saturday Loo was a Tibetan.

As many as one fourth of the Tibetan men become monks or holy men, with a very strict code of morals. Saturday Loo had never been tempted in that direction. A more thorough rogue than he could not be found between the Himalaya Mountains and the Gobi Desert.

Saturday Loo made directly for a cluster of poncho-clad men who hardly seemed to share the enthusiasm of the crowd about the bronze man. These also resembled Aymaran Indians, but were swart Asiatics.

"My children," Saturday Loo hailed them grandly, "make less long the expressions on your faces. One would think you were going to your respective funerals."

"If there should be an error, our fate may be exactly that," mumbled a man.

"Aye," agreed another. "I have heard that this bronze man, this Doc Savage, is very dangerous."

"They say those who molest the bronze man disappear and are never heard from again," offered a third.

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"He is indeed what Yankees call 'hell-on-wheels.'"

"Look what he did here in Chile."

"Two hundred thousand people have come to catch a glimpse of him. That proves he is a great man, and dangerous to molest."

"The gun which makes the loudest report does not always shoot the hardest," quoted Saturday Loo. "You are children scaring each other with ghost stories. Stop it! This great crowd only makes our work the easier."

The conversation was carried on in a Tibetan dialect, which none of the surrounding Chileans understood. In addition, voices were kept low.

Saturday Loo stared narrowly at his assistants. He could see that his words had not relieved them a great deal. Several times, the tobacco-colored men rolled uneasy glances upward. They squirmed, and tried not to let their chief see these overhead stares.

The skyward gazing came to Saturday Loo's attention, however. He understood what was really making his helpers uneasy.

"So that is it!" he snapped. His voice, however, was a bit shrill.

The Tibetans shifted their shoulders under the ponchos, but said nothing.

"You fear the blue meteor!" Saturday Loo accused.

"Aye," one fellow mumbled admission. "We fear it."

"Suppose the blue meteor could not be controlled," said another, and shuddered visibly. "You all know what would happen to us in that case."

In the general exchange of looks which followed this statement, Saturday Loo joined. They were hardened rogues, yet mention of the blue meteor had conjured up a stark terror within their souls.

Whatever the mysterious blue meteor was, these men obviously feared it more than they dreaded the possibility of being, after death, sent back to earth in the form of rabbits, which, in some Tibetans, is their idea of going to hell.

"We will draw away a safe distance," Saturday Loo said hoarsely. "Inside this blanket of a thing which I am wearing is a signal gun. When the bronze man appears, I am to discharge the weapon into the sky."

"And the blue meteor will come?" asked a man.

"Aye. And the blue meteor will come."

They moved through the crowd. Not wishing to attract attention, they curbed a natural inclination to elbow people out of their path, and only jostled gently.

"How far is a safe distance?" asked one Tibetan.

"A very great distance!" muttered another.

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"Two hundred yards, in this case," said Saturday Loo.

"But the blue meteor has been known to affect men for miles – "

"Two hundred yards!" snapped Saturday Loo. "This time, it is not powerful."

AS the villainous Saturday Loo and his fellow miscreants worked out of the crowd and took up a position in the shade of a rickety stand selling beer, fruit and empanadas, or meat pies, there was one person who watched them intently.

The observer was a young woman; and in her gaze was fear, loathing, and a growing horror.

The young lady herself was in turn the focus of no little attention, for she was possibly the most exquisite thing in femininity that Antofagasta had seen recently.

Once sure the Tibetans would not see her, she squeezed rapidly through the crowd toward the speaking rostrum. Desperation was in her brown eyes, and she nibbled nervously at the inside of entrancing Cupid lips.

She was taller than many of the Chileans, even the men, and she gazed anxiously over heads toward the rostrum.

Chilean señoritas, those of pure Castilian descent, are noted for the comeliness of their figures, but more than one envious eye followed the girl who was working her way feverishly toward the speaking stand.

The tall Venus had hair about the hue of rich mahogany, which was in marked contrast to the tresses of the surrounding señoritas.

She reached the vicinity of the rostrum and glanced anxiously about. She was an American herself, and apparently searching for Yankee faces. Seeing none, she accosted a Chilean.

"I must find Doc Savage," she gasped. "It's on a vitally important matter. Where can I locate him?"

"No sabe el Ingles," replied the Chilean.

The young woman shook her head and nipped her lips in exasperation. She did not speak Spanish. She supposed the fellow had told her that he did not understand English. She continued her search for a Yankee – and found two of them a moment later.

They were such an incongruous pair that she stopped and stared.

ONE of the Yanks looked as if an immediate ancestor had been a three-hundred-pound gorilla. His great, corded, red-bristled arms were nearly long enough to permit him to walk on all fours without stooping.

He had an enormous mouth, a tuft of a nose, which apparently had been pounded by many fists, and little eyes almost lost in pits of gristle. His ears were shapeless, and one was perforated with a hole the size of a lead pencil – an opening which could have been made by a bullet.

The hair on his nubbin of a head, as coarse as rusty shingle nails, and of about the same hue, seemed an extension of his shaggy eyebrows. This gave one the impression of a skull with no room provided for brains.

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The girl looking on did not yet know it, but this apish giant was Andrew Blodgett "Monk" Mayfair, one of the world's greatest chemists, former lieutenant colonel in the U. S. army, and at present one of a group of five men associated with Doc Savage in his worldwide adventures.

The anthropoid-like Monk carried a large box under an arm. One end of this was fitted with a screened ventilating hole. From the box came grunting sounds.

Monk was leering at his companion.

The other was a perfectly dressed wasp of a man, by far the most impeccably clad personage in the crowd of two hundred thousand or so. He had a prominent nose, bright eyes, and the large, mobile mouth of a trained orator.

In both hands he gripped a slender, black cane. With this, he seemed about to strike the human ape before him.

"You fuzzy accident!" he snarled. "You hairy missing link!"

Some of the dapper gentleman's colleagues in New York might have been shocked at his performance, for he was Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, considered one of the most astute lawyers Harvard had ever turned out.

He was also commonly called "Ham," and was one of Doc Savage's group of five men.

Ham's cane, which was harmless enough to the eye, was actually a sword cane.

Ham was also – he probably would have died rather than admit it – the best friend of the apish Monk. He would have freely sacrificed his own life for Monk's well-being, should that be necessary. Monk would also do the same for Ham.

An observer would have sworn the pair were perpetually on the point of slaughtering each other.

"You bobble of nature!" Ham continued vitriolically. "You overgrown, bob-tailed jungle denizen."

Monk leered blissfully at Ham. From the box under the apish chemist's arm came a series of piggy grunts and shrilling squeals.

"You only brought that blasted pig along to get in my hair," Ham growled.

"Where d'you get that stuff, you loud-dressin' shyster?" Monk grunted. "I'll take Habeas Corpus wherever I daggone –"

Monk swallowed the rest. His pleasantly ugly face became somewhat blank. His little eyes glistened in their pits of gristle.

A vision whom Monk would have taken oath was the prettiest girl in the world, had confronted them.

"CAN you gentlemen tell me where Doc Savage may be found?" asked the young woman.

Monk and Ham stared, tongue-tied. The girl's beauty had taken the wind from their sails.

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"Darn it!" the young woman said disgustedly, apparently addressing herself. "I thought you looked like men who could speak English. I guess you cannot."

Monk and Ham hastily ceased staring, and registered some embarrassment.

"I hope you will overlook the bad manners of my hairy friend, here," Ham told the beauty politely. "Monk used to be the wild man in a circus, and he got the habit of looking at everybody as if he wanted to eat them."

"He's a liar, miss," Monk put in hastily. "He's got a wife and thirteen children. His offspring are all half-witted, like their father."

Instead of smiling at what Monk and Ham intended to be humor that would break the ice, the young lady seemed distressed. When she spoke, there was brittle fear in her voice.

"If you know where I can find Doc Savage, please tell me," she pleaded in a strained voice.

Monk and Ham sobered.

"Is your business with Doc important?" Ham asked sharply.

"Extremely!"

The chemist and the lawyer exchanged glances. The girl sounded as if she were in earnest.

"Does Doc Savage know you?" Monk queried.

"Rae Stanley is my name. My father is Professor Elmont Stanley. Mr. Savage does not know me, but he has probably heard of my father."

"What do you want to see Doc about?"

Attractive Rae Stanley shook her head. "That must be strictly between Doc Savage and myself."

"In inquiring about Doc, how did you happen to pick on us?" Monk asked curiously.

"You were the first men I saw who looked as if they might be able to speak English," Rae explained.

"Then you didn't know we're two of Doc's outfit?" The girl's brown eyes widened. Her exquisite features showed delight.

"This is a break!" she ejaculated. "I can give my warning to you, then go back to my quarters. I am in danger every minute that I am away."

This caused Monk and Ham to register intense curiosity and bewilderment.

"You're risking something to come here and warn Doc?" Ham demanded.

"My life," said Rae Stanley.

"What do you want to warn Doc against?"

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The girl moistened her lips and glanced upward. There was a nervousness in her manner which indicated that she would not have been surprised had some menace been lurking above.

"The blue meteor!" she said rapidly. "I came to warn – oh–h–h–there's Shrops!"

Her words changed into a scream which put teeth on edge. She clapped both hands over her mouth, as if to make a lid that would keep the sound back. Stark horror had come suddenly into her eyes. She spun and fled.

"She saw some guy named Shrops behind us," Ham barked.

Both he and Monk turned to scrutinize the crowd.

Chapter 2. THE COCKNEY

WITHIN range of Monk's and Ham's eyes was a heterogeneous collection of humanity. Swart Andean Indians and Cholog, or mixed bloods, made up the bulk of the crowd, but there were also Chileans as white-skinned as Swedes. There were scores of Yankees, these for the most part being engineers connected with Chile's great nitrate industry.

One man caught the attention of Monk and Ham. This fellow did not stand many feet distant, and he was facing directly toward them.

He was an apple of a man. His body was a plump apple equipped with arms and legs, and his head another ruddy apple. He wore a fawn-colored lap-over vest, striped trousers, and a gray derby. The derby was hardly a headgear for tropical wear.

He seemed rotund and amiable, except for his mouth, which was reminiscent of a bear trap.

He saw Monk and Ham centering their attention on him, and promptly spoke. He had a strong Cockney accent.

"Wot 'appened?"

"That's what we want to know," Monk grunted.

"The girl acted 'arf barmy," said the Cockney. "She must o' seen somethin' behind me to scare 'er bad."

The Cockney turned, lifted on tiptoe, and peered over the heads of the crowd. Then he settled back on his feet and shook his head.

"Hi bloody well don't see nothin' corkscrewey."

"Is your name Shrops?" Ham asked the Cockney.

"Blimey, no!"

Speaking from the corner of his enormous mouth, so that only Ham could hear, Monk said: "Let's go get that girl."

Ham gave the handle of his cane a slight twist, an act which prepared the hidden sword for a quick draw.

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"O. K. Come on!"

The Cockney watched them as they shoved through the crowd. He even stood on tiptoe to keep them in sight.

Gorillalike Monk, glancing back, noted the Cockney's curiosity. He growled: "I wonder if he could be Shrops?"

"What makes you wonder that?" Ham demanded.

"Well, he's gawking – "

"Anybody would gawk, after the way that girl acted!" Ham shouldered lustily at poncho-clad Indians, and did not hesitate to whack an occasional son of the Andes with the sword cane. But he was not making much progress in the throng.

"Get behind me!" Monk ordered. "Let a guy go through this crowd who knows how to do it."

Carrying the case containing his pet pig high over his head with one hand, and using the other to move people out of the way as if they were stalks in a ripe grain field, Monk plowed through the assemblage.

Ham kept close at Monk's heels, craning his neck. Being taller than Monk, Ham could peer over the crowd. Brown-eyed, mahogany-haired Rae Stanley should have been easy to locate. She was taller than the Chileans.

Her head, however, was not visible above the sea of mantiflas, flat straw hats, and colored knit caps.

"Blast it!" Ham grunted. "She's ducked out of sight."

They veered to the right, and when the young woman did not materialize, worked in a circle. Nowhere did they see the attractive bit of femininity who had claimed she had a warning for Doc Savage.

"Let's go back and talk to that Cockney," Monk growled. "There was somethin' suspicious about that mug!"

Monk and Ham furrowed their way back to the spot where they had left the Cockney. Reaching the vicinity, they halted to stare about disgustedly.

"He's skipped!" Monk grunted.

"I'll bet he really was Shrops!" Ham said thoughtfully. A soft hissing came from the public address loud-speakers, which were mounted atop poles. The amplifiers had been switched on.

Monk grasped Ham's elbow. "Have you forgotten that Doc sent you here to make a speech?"

Ham objected. "But that girl has something important – "

"We may be able to spot her from the rostrum," Monk interrupted. "Come on!"

The huge, hairy chemist, and the slender, immaculate lawyer worked toward the speakers' platform.

A STIFF-BACKED, official-looking Chilean gentleman marched up and positioned himself in front of the bank of microphones which fed the public-address system. Waving his arms in the animated fashion to

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which Latins are addicted, he began to speak.

"We still hope that this bronze wonder man, who is the hero of all Chile, will appear at our ceremony," he said in flowery Spanish. "As you all know, however, this heroic gentleman is not one who likes to accept public acclaim in person. Therefore, he informed me he would not be present."

A profound silence settled over the crowd. The human sea seemed to have frozen, with the exception of one spot, where Monk and Ham were elbowing a path.

"While we wait, hoping that he will come," continued the Chilean spellbinder, "I am going to give you a few facts about this mighty personage to whom Chile owes more than can ever be repaid."

Monk and Ham exchanged glances, and Monk grinned. "I wonder how much this speechmaker really knows about Doc?"

The orator continued: "The bronze man, Doc Savage, is an individual, the like of whom the world has never before seen. He is a superman, a colossus of brawn and brain who has been trained scientifically from the day of his birth to follow his present career."

The speaker paused to let that sink in, then went on: "Doc Savage, by a routine of daily exercise, pursued each day since childhood, has acquired an almost fantastic muscular development, a physical strength beside which that of Samson would pale.

"In addition, it is said that no one ever studied as intensively or as widely as has Doc Savage. This has equipped him with a knowledge which borders on the profound on every subject. Doc Savage is a rare combination of muscular strength and mental perfection.

"Hm-m-m!" Monk grunted thoughtfully, juggling his pet pig's box. "Some of this crowd may think that bird is laying it on thick, but he's not. He isn't even exaggerating, and that's probably something he don't suspect, himself."

"This unusual training was to fit Doc Savage for a unique profession," the speaker went on. "He rights wrongs and punishes evildoers, traveling to the far corners of the earth to accomplish these things. His most recent accomplishment was here in Chile, when he wiped out a gang of fiends who were seeking to get control of the Chilean nitrate industry in order to supply ingredients for explosives to a European nation which contemplates war."

Monk and Ham mounted the rostrum steps, looking about in an endeavor to locate the Cockney and pretty Rae Stanley.

"Doc Savage refused remuneration for his services," continued the Chilean speaker. "But he requested that a hospital be erected to offer free medical and surgical service to the poor of Chile, and a trust fund established to insure its operation for many years. The hospital construction has started, and we are here now to dedicate it. We hope Doc Savage will appear

Ham stepped forward, indicated that he wished to address the crowd, and the Chilean orator stepped back politely.

"I have an unpleasant duty to perform," Ham said in clear, perfect Spanish. "You good people have all heard that Doc Savage is one of those scarce individuals, a genuinely modest man. It embarrasses him to play the hero in public. For that reason, he will not appear on this platform to-day."

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A disappointed murmur arose from the crowd as they understood they were not to glimpse the famous man of bronze.

"Look, Ham!" Monk snapped. "Over there by the hospital corner!"

MONK'S words impinged against the microphones, and all of the two hundred thousand or so people present must have heard the ejaculation. Countless necks craned, eyes seeking the corner of the hospital building.

A girl, tall and exquisitely beautiful, with hair the hue of mahogany, was struggling with several swarthy, broad-faced men.

"It's Rae Stanley!" Ham barked.

Monk was already lumbering across the speaking rostrum, holding the box containing his pig over his head with both hands. Ham leaped after the hairy chemist. They hammered heels down the rostrum steps.

Monk put his head down, hunched his shoulders, and hit the crowd like a torpedo. Ham trod his wake, fending off Chileans who resented being shoved, and showed it by lustily swinging their fists.

Hands suddenly seized Ham's ankles and jerked. He went down.

An avalanche of moon-faced, stocky men piled up on the lawyer.

"Hey, Monk!" Ham howled.

Monk spun and saw what was happening. He lowered his pig case carefully, then leaped into the fight, emitting a bawling roar. Monk was ordinarily quiet, but his fights were howling bedlams.

Monk's hirsute hands clamped on the necks of two of Ham's assailants, and banged their heads together. The pair became magically limp, their arms and legs hanging like strings.

Ham managed to sit up. His sword cane, whipping about, glinted like a sliver of solidified sunlight. The steel leaped at a brown man.

The man threw himself madly backward, but saw he was going to be too late. His eyes protruded, and a scream ripped past his teeth. Mentally, he could feel that glittering steel blade already fixed in his pumping heart.

Ham turned the blade aside, however. Doc Savage and his men had a policy of never directly taking human life.

The blade merely opened a small gash in the squat man's shoulder. But a surprising thing happened. His eyes closed slowly and his arms dropped to his sides. The man seemed to go to sleep on his feet. He fell heavily, blindly to the ground.

The tip of Ham's sword cane was covered with a drug, a tiny quantity of which in a wound was sufficient to produce instant unconsciousness.

The dark attackers cursed viciously in their native tongue and rattled orders at each other. Monk and Ham spoke many languages, and could recognize others.

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"Tibetans!" Ham snapped.

Monk opened his mouth to make some reply. There was a sharp report, not unlike a handclap. Monk closed his mouth and a vacant expression came into his eyes. His legs hinged at the knees.

A Tibetan had struck him from behind with a heavy revolver.

Ham, staring at the fallen Monk, saw a gun clubbing for his own head. He tried to dodge, but too late, and cart-wheels of colored fire spun in his eyeballs as the weapon landed.

Ham sank in what seemed like a pleasantly warm sea of black ink.

The Tibetans gathered up Monk, Ham, and their own unconscious companions. They even took the case holding the pig, Habeas Corpus. Then they moved through the crowd. Their menacing guns opened a path.

AT the corner of the hospital building, the seizure of pretty Rae Stanley had been effected as thoroughly as had the downfall of Monk and Ham.

The young woman apparently had no weapon except her small fists and the sharp toes of her slippers, but she managed to draw several roars of pain from her assailants before they overpowered her.

Saturday Loo was in personal charge of the gang.

"You were warned to stay away from here," he told the girl angrily. "It is a foolish bird which pecks the friendly cat."

"Tell your men to take their filthy hands off me," snapped the young woman.

Saturday Loo favored her with a vicious smile, and accused her: "You came here to warn Doc Savage!"

Instead of replying, Rae Stanley kicked her captors on the shins. They made gobbling sounds which were Tibetan exclamations of pain.

"Come!" Saturday Loo ordered. "Bring the she-tiger!"

Drawing the rope from under his gaudy poncho, Saturday Loo looped it over the girl's arms. Flourishing revolvers in a threatening manner, the Tibetans made for the outskirts of the throng with their prisoner.

It chanced that their course led them directly toward an Antofagasta policeman. The officer confronted them.

"Que hay?" he barked. "What is the matter?"

Saturday Loo did not attempt to palaver. He did not even give the officer a chance to get out of their path. With murderous intent, the Tibetan leader leveled his revolver.

The Spanish race is one quick to show emotion, but it was doubtful if a son of Castile ever changed expression quicker than did that Chilean policeman. He was looking at death. His eyes glazed, and his sagging jaw made his mouth a round hole.

"No, señor!" he screamed.

But Saturday Loo only leered, and tightened his finger on the trigger.

Chapter 3. THE BRONZE MAN

SATURDAY Loo never did quite comprehend what happened next. He remembered a weird trilling sound which he first heard at that instant, however. He remembered that to the last minute of his life.

It was uncanny, that sound. It defied description, except that it might have been the song of some fantastic jungle bird, or the sound of a wind filtering among the ice pinnacles of a polar waste. Most incredible of all, though, was the way the note seemed to come from everywhere, and yet nowhere.

More than one Aymaran Indian onlooker discussed what next occurred over his camp fire of yareta when he returned to his Andean retreat.

A few imaginative souls maintained that a great condor dropped from the sky and hit the earth with a terrific explosion, and that it magically became the figure of a giant man of bronze. But the Aymarans are a race addicted to concocting myths.

They were right about the coming of the mighty man of bronze, but he did not drop from the sky. He came from the crowd with a swiftness which almost defied the eye.

The weird trilling which had sounded was part of Doc Savage, a small, unconscious thing which he did in moments of stress. Sometimes the note came before a stroke of action, and often it meant that he was puzzled. Always it signified the presence of the giant man of bronze.

Doc Savage's hands had tendons nearly as thick as an ordinary man's fingers. One of these hands clamped upon Saturday Loo's gun wrist.

Pain caused Saturday Loo to fire the revolver. Its ear-splitting roar was what led the Aymarans to think an explosion had materialized the bronze man from a condor.

Saturday Loo dropped the revolver and clawed out his Very signal pistol. But he did not fire it. He seemed to remember the horror which it would summon – the mysterious "blue meteor." He let the signal gun fall, not wishing to bring the blue meteor while he was himself present.

Then Saturday Loo saw the bronze man's eyes. He tried to recoil, for there was something about the orbs that made his hair want to stand on end. The eyes bore a resemblance to pools of flake gold being swirled by tiny, unending whirlwinds.

The other Tibetans leaped to the aid of their chief. One struck down, with a pistol barrel, the policeman whose life Doc had saved. The others sprang at Doc.

What occurred now was something else of which Aymaran Indians talked around Andean camp fires. They told of the fabulous giant of bronze who overpowered with his bare hands almost a dozen heavily armed men. They discussed how the great man of metal shifted here and there so swiftly that he could hardly be seen, striking great blows with his fists.

Saturday Loo was among the first to go down.

PRETTY Rae Stanley managed to twist her arms out of the poorly tied ropes which held them. She landed an

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uppercut on a Tibetan's jaw. Her punch was potent.

The man staggered, hands pawing foolishly at the air.

Another brown man swung his gun muzzle toward the young woman. There was not the slightest doubt but that he intended to shoot her.

Doc Savage's weird golden eyes apparently kept track of everything. Even in the heated combat, he saw the Tibetan's intention to kill the girl. The bronze man veered over, and his fist, drifting out with an eye-defying speed, seemed to caress the chin of the Tibetan. There was a distinctly audible crunch – and the man's jaw slewed around almost under an ear. He dropped.

Doc grasped the girl's arm and turned her away from the fight.

"Get clear!" he said, and shoved her into the crowd.

The bronze man's voice was as amazing as his appearance, a tone of vitality and controlled power.

A cyclonic Nemesis, Doc descended upon such Tibetans as were still on their feet. Swarthy sons of the Himalayas dropped in succession until not one remained erect.

Doc, towering head and shoulders above the crowd, searched for the girl and located her mahogany-tressed head a hundred feet distant.

For the time being, she was safe.

Doc Savage now waded into the crowd. He presented a striking figure as he made a path for himself.

The crowd thickened ahead of Doc. An excited milling started.

Doc swung sharply to the left. He reached one of the posts which supported one of the loud-speakers of the public-address system. He climbed to the top of this.

DOC Savage had seen the other group of Tibetans seize his two men, Monk and Ham. He had been watching proceedings from an upper window of the partially finished hospital when this excitement started.

Doc had been sincere in his intention not to show himself at the hospital dedication, for it was true that the one thing he disliked was playing the public hero. He had sent Ham to make apologies. Doc had come, to remain in the background, because he wanted to be present when the hospital construction got its final impetus. That hospital would save the lives of many people in the course of its existence, and such projects were close to Doc's heart.

Because the young woman's captors had been handiest, Doc had employed his hand first against them.

Very little time had elapsed. Monk and Ham could hardly yet have been carried away. From the top of the loud-speaker support, Doc soon discovered them. The Tibetans were carrying Monk, Ham, and their own senseless comrades toward rows of parked cars.

The crowd was between Doc and the gang. To work through that pond of humanity would take time, even for Doc's prodigious strength.

The Meteor Menace

Conductors of the public-address system were telephone wire. Probably originally intended for use in the Andes, where storms are terrific and snowfall great, the wire was of a heavy gauge.

The metal strands would hold Doc's weight. He glided outward over the throng.

Most tight-wire artists use long balancing poles. Only a few, highly expert, maintain equilibrium by manipulating their arms. Doc Savage, however, used his arms hardly at all, which showed remarkable skill.

The throng ceased its milling. In a few seconds, almost all eyes were upon the bronze giant who moved so easily upon the wires overhead.

Doc reached the edge of the crowd. The distance to the ground was a drop which most men would have balked at taking. Doc took it easily, enormous leg sinews absorbing the jar.

He ran for the parked cars, doubling low and traveling swiftly. He could hear the cursing of the captors of Monk and Ham. Doc understood their language. The Tibetans were hunting a car which was not locked.

Doc had a plan. He kept moving at tremendous speed, endeavoring to get ahead of his quarry. Car thieves operated in Antofagasta just as they did in Kansas City or Denver. The majority of these parked cars were probably locked. The Tibetans would have trouble finding a conveyance.

Doc angled to the left and, due to his great speed, got ahead of the gang. His eyes roved and soon found the type of car which he wanted one with an extremely large trunk on the rear. It was an open phaeton – most machines in these tropic lands were of the open variety.

Doc made a mental note of the license number. In case the car met destruction in the plan which was contemplated, he intended to reimburse the owner for its full value.

The bronze man went to the trunk. It was locked. He caught the fastener, tugged, and there was a snapping sound as it broke.

The trunk held dried llama hides, old ponchos, fishing tackle, and a tent. Doc lifted the stuff and dumped it in the handiest adjacent car. Then he ran around in front.

The phaeton was secured with a lock which controlled not only the ignition, but the gear shift as well.

Doc went to work upon it with a semi-flexible bit of steel hardly larger than a needle, which he took from a seam in his vest. Doc was a wizard with locks, as with countless other things.

Within a few moments, he had the motor running.

He whipped around to the rear of the car, inserted himself in the trunk, lowered the lid, and waited.

Chapter 4. THE BLUE GLARE

THE mutter of the car motor was the bait in the trap that Doc had set. He hoped the Tibetans would be drawn by the sound.

It was not a vain hope, for soon running feet spatted the gun-baked ground. A jar and a squeak from the springs indicated some one had leaped upon the running board.

The Meteor Menace

A voice barked in Tibetan: "Our ancestors are smiling upon us! Here is a car ready and running! Who among you can drive?"

"I can," said a voice.

"Then take the wheel, O Gifted One!" ordered the leader. "Place the two prisoners in the rear seat, and retain tight holds upon them. What is in that box from which grunting sounds come?"

"A pig, O Master."

"A pig! Truly the things white men do are beyond understanding! But bring the pig along. It may be of a great deal more importance than any of us think."

Another Tibetan muttered: "A wise man does not carry a musk deer which he has shot in the forbidden forest."

"Aye," another agreed. "Why take the two prisoners?"

"You talk too much, offspring of a wild donkey," growled their leader. "The master's orders were that they were to be taken prisoners, but not slain. Hurry, fools! Load our wounded, also!"

This settled the argument.

In getting under way, the car seemed to shake itself and spring into the air. It careened over ruts, skidded onto the road, and took itself away amid a great roaring and rattling.

Raising the trunk lid slightly, Doc Savage got an idea of the route. The car seemed to be headed for a thinly settled hill district near the city.

Doc lowered the lid, satisfied. Back among the parked cars, he could have rescued his two men. In passing up that chance, he had been adhering to a deliberate plan.

Desiring to learn what was behind the trouble, Doc was seeking to trick the Tibetans into taking him with them. He wanted to get his hands on their chief. He was curious to know what was back of the trouble.

The headlong rush of the car slackened after a time, and it pitched over bumps, boulders gnashing at the under side of the chassis.

Habeas Corpus, the pig, was squealing disgustedly in the car.

The phaeton turned several times. It seemed to be following a narrow lane. Then it stopped. The engine became silent. Habeas Corpus promptly stopped squealing.

"It is said that the wisest fox has the deepest den," one of the Tibetans remarked complacently. "This retreat of ours is the equivalent of a deep den."

"True words," agreed the leader. "We will carry the two Yankees up to our retreat. I note that our ancestors, who see all actions, have favored us with a trunk on the back of the car. Look in it, my sons. See if it does not hold something of which we may fashion a sling, the more easily to carry our captives."

Doc Savage heard a man walk around the car. Hands settled upon the trunk lid and lifted it.

The Meteor Menace

THE Tibetan who opened the trunk was a squat fellow who, thanks to a Tibetan national custom of consuming thirty to fifty cups of buttered tea a day, was extremely fat. He did not look like a man who had received many great shocks. But he got one now.

Doc Savage's metallic hands fixed on the fellow, one set of fingers encircling his neck, the others covering his mouth. The bronze digits sank in the Tibetan's soft flesh until they threatened to become lost to view.

The agony of that awful clutch completely paralyzed the Tibetan. Not only was he unable to cry out, but his limbs trembled as if palsied.

Retaining a grip on the fellow, Doc Savage slid out of the trunk. Unfortunately, he was discovered.

"The Devil Man of Bronze!" a Tibetan shrieked.

The other Tibetans, engaged in hauling Monk and Ham out of the car, whirled and stared. They still wore their poncho disguises. Not needing their guns, they had holstered them under the flowing ponchos. They clawed frantically for the weapons.

Long before the first gun could be drawn, however, Doc Savage flung his prisoner at the Tibetans. The human projectile hit two men squarely and with terrific force. These men carried down a third as they fell.

Only two men remained on their feet. Dancing away, they sought to draw their guns. They grossly underestimated Doc's speed. Blinding blows from great fists dropped them in feebly squirming heaps.

It had happened with explosive suddenness. Snapping fingers could hardly have kept pace with the blows which rendered the men senseless.

With gusto, Doc gave further attention to the men squirming on the ground. He swooped upon each in succession, fists driving short, terrific punches.

In each case, he struck just hard enough to produce ten or fifteen minutes of unconsciousness, something his vast knowledge of surgery enabled him to do.

It was at surgery that Doc Savage was skilled above all things. The world's masters in that profession crossed oceans and continents to look on when the man of bronze gave his periodic demonstrations of newly discovered technique.

When the last Tibetan was limp-muscled and senseless, Doc turned to the car. Monk sprawled half out of the door, motionless, and Ham was behind him, unmoving, draped across the pig's carrying case.

Also lying in the car were the Tibetans who had been victims of Monk and Ham. These had not recovered consciousness, and had been dumped carelessly on the floor-boards by their fellows.

Doc hauled Monk and Ham out. His nostrils caught an odor which told him why the chemist and the lawyer were so limp. It was chloroform smell, and the handkerchief by which the stuff had been applied lay on the floorboards of the car.

Doc held Monk's furry wrist, then Ham's fine-skinned one. In both he found a pulse. They should awaken, eventually, unharmed.

The Meteor Menace

Doc studied the surroundings. The car had stopped in a bleak valley, the rocky slopes of which slanted up steeply on either side. Scattered among the rocks were thorny desert shrubs. Nowhere was there discernible as much as a blade of grass.

Perhaps three hundred yards distant, clinging high on the valley walls, was a small box of a house. The roof was of bright-red tile. To one side of the structure, a stone pen held several llamas. These woolly beasts, heads held high and facing the valley floor, were not unlike humpless camels.

A narrow path angled to the house. There was no other habitation near.

This, then, must have been the destination of the Tibetans.

Doc Savage strode toward the habitation.

THE bronze man did not follow the path, for that would invite lead from any rifleman who might be lurking in the house. Boulders were plentiful on the slope. He kept behind them.

Veering slightly, he approached the house from the side opposite the llama pen. He did not want the long-necked sheeplike beasts to betray his presence by staring inquisitively.

Windows of South American homes are usually fitted with stout iron bars, after the fashion of jails in the United States. But this dwelling, being situated in a remote region, was an exception. The windows were unbarred; moreover, they boasted no glass, being simply square holes in the walls.

Doc whipped silently across the nearest sill. He sank to all fours on the floor and crouched there.

A two-hour ritual of exercise, which Doc Savage had taken daily since childhood, included not only muscular development, but also work with sound waves above and below the frequencies audible to a normal ear, which had equipped him to hear sounds that escaped other ears.

Also among the exercising devices was an array of small vials containing various odors. By identifying these, and concentrating intently on the act, the bronze man had perfected his olfactory senses to an abnormal degree.

Just as a hunting dog can test a brush pile and tell whether there is game inside, so did Doc's superior senses inform him that the house was empty.

He went through the rooms rapidly, searching. He found a number of things of interest. For instance, there was a box holding a churn, lumps of yak butter, and tea leaves. This was equipment for making the buttered tea to which Tibetans are addicted.

In a corner, suitcases were heaped. All of these looked new. They were plastered with steamship labels. These, according to custom, were dated.

Doc noted the dates, thereby learning that the Tibetans had arrived from their native land only a few days before.

Doc found nothing pointing to the identity of the chief of the Tibetans, nor did he find anything which clarified the mystery back of their actions.

The Meteor Menace

Faint sounds – a weak shout and squealing noises – came to Doc's ears. He vaulted outdoors, through the window.

It was Monk who had shouted. The homely chemist had recovered from the stupefying chloroform, and had freed the pig. He was working over Ham. Even as Doc watched, Ham got shakily to his feet.

The lawyer looked around, then stumbled to the car and fumbled inside. Even at that distance, Doc knew the barrister was seeking his sword cane. Ham was lost without the weapon.

Suddenly, Doc's eyes switched to the right. Far away on a mountain top – two miles at least – he had caught a movement. The air was clear, and Doc's eyes were sharp. He distinguished a man. The fellow must have been watching the place.

From the distant man's hand, a puff of smoke jumped. A dot of blue fire climbed into the sky. A Very signal pistol had been fired.

Doc's weird trilling note came into being. Vague, flaunting description, the eerie sound ran up and down the musical scale, then ebbed into nothingness. Doc stared steadily into the west.

The sky, in answer to that rocket signal it seemed, had taken on a weird, faint blue color. This was not the blue of infinite stellar space, but more like the arc of an electric welding torch.

The fantastic radiance grew steadily brighter. Doc Savage brought an arm in front of his face, for the glitter was becoming blinding.

A whistling noise reached his ears. Very faint at first, it grew slowly louder. Beyond a doubt, the piping wail was accompanying the steadily intensifying blue glare.

There was a devilish quality in the whistling note. It seemed to cut at the eardrums with razor sharpness. It actually caused Doc's head to ache.

DOWN on the valley floor, Monk and Ham were facing the west. They had arms thrown across their faces. It would have been easier to stare naked-eyed into the incandescent orb of the sun, than to look at this weird phenomenon.

Doc Savage lifted his voice in a call to Monk and Ham.

¡'Get under cover!'

They did not hear him, due to the deafening whistle from the western heavens.

Doc picked up a weather-rounded rock the size of a baseball and hurled it. The rock did not carry all the distance, but it collided with boulders and started a small avalanche.

Monk and Ham heard the rattle of rock. They reacted as Doc thought they would. They looked up and saw the bronze man.

Doc gestured with an arm.

Monk and Ham rapidly mounted the opposite side of the canyon.

The Meteor Menace

The bronze man began to climb his own side of the defile. He mounted with every ounce of speed that he could muster. At the same time, he kept behind the boulders. His leaps were prodigious, and very seldom did he show himself.

Reaching the top of the hill, he continued his wild progress down the other side. He did not look back, but gave all of his attention to where he was going.

Finally, selecting a crevice between two house-sized boulders, he dropped in. He waited there, motionless.

The whistling had grown infinitely louder. The horrible shriek of it was unlike anything Doc had ever heard.

This phantasm out of the western skies, whatever it was, seemed to be coming down the valley, just above the floor. Its noise mounted and mounted until its scream made awful agony in his eardrums.

A few yards from Doc, a harmless snake had been sunning itself on a rock. But now the reptile was behaving strangely under the influence of the titanic whistle and the tremendous blue glare. It was twisting, writhing, biting itself repeatedly.

Then, like the snap of a whip, the uncanny blue transient from the sky was gone. It receded, dimming its unearthly blue glitter and sucking away its weirdly ear-hurting whistle.

SPRINGING erect, Doc Savage sought to stare after the thing; but the blue glare defeated him. He could not tell what was making the glittering, azure luster.

Doc glided back over the hill. Twice, he stumbled and fell. Once, he found himself veering off to one side. This seemed to worry the bronze giant, whose powers were usually dependable.

It was as if the whistling blue thing had done something to him, had dulled his senses.

Once over the hill, he searched with his eyes for Monk and Ham. The two were not in sight. He went on and came to the valley floor, where the car stood, with the unconscious Tibetans scattered about. None of these had as yet awakened from the effects of Doc's fists, or the chemical on Ham's sword cane.

"Monk!" Doc called.

There was no answer. The bronze man climbed the opposite side of the valley. Freshly overturned rocks showed him the route Monk and Ham had taken in their flight.

"Ham!" Doc's powerful voice rattled in echoes off the valley walls.

After the echoes there was only quiet, except for the ringing effect which persisted in tortured eardrums, a result of the piercing noise of the blue visitant.

"Hey, you fellows!" Doc boomed. "What's wrong?"

Then Doc saw the pig, Habeas Corpus.

The pig had legs like a dog and ears so large that they could nearly double for wings, and ordinarily was quite comical to look at; but there was something hideously wrong with it now.

The Meteor Menace

Doc called softly, and the pig did not come. It was the first time Habeas had ever failed to respond. The pig stood on rigid legs. Its eyes, ears, tail – nothing moved. Doc reached down to touch the animal.

The pig pitched straight forward in flight. It ran blindly and with a weirdly erratic movement. Chancing to be headed for a rock, the small porker did not turn aside, but smashed at full speed into the stone. Then it whirled and charged Doc, and when he stepped aside, went senselessly on and hit another boulder.

"Monk – Ham!" Doc yelled loudly.

He mounted on up the valley slope, and called again for the chemist and the lawyer.

Then he heard it – the sound. There was something in it, some quality, that curdled the blood. It was man-sound. But it was not articulated, interrupted, or otherwise possessed of syllables. It was just a product of vocal cords.

Doc did not voice names again, but advanced quietly.

He found Monk and Ham.

They were horrible.

Doc Savage, mighty man of bronze, had schooled himself until few things really appalled him to a point beyond acceptance. But there had been a few instances when he had felt utter horror. One, long ago, was when he learned his own father had been murdered.

He had that same awful sensation now.

Monk and Ram were men without brains – not, however, that there had been a physical operation; but the evidence of an entirely dormant mentality was apparent the instant Doc saw them.

They stood perfectly motionless, no muscle stirring, and when Doc spoke, they plunged away, pitifully, like wild creatures in flight. When they crashed into rocks, they seemed to feel no pain. And at the same time, they emitted those hideous, unarticulated sounds which Doc had first heard.

It was Ham who was the most unnerving to watch, possibly because of his intellectual appearance. He smashed blindly, face-first, into a boulder, and dropped back, making low bleating sounds. Pain from his hurt – scarlet streams began to creep down his face and dangle off his lips and chin like red yarns – seemed to affect him not in the least bit.

Gibbering, he rushed madly at Doc. His arms were thrust straight out, but he tried to strike no blow.

Doc caught him. They struggled in his embrace.

ALL of Doc's men were experts at wrestling and jujutsu, the bronze man having taught them. And in the teaching he had come to know exactly how much strength each of his five aides possessed.

Ham now showed a far greater muscular power than Doc knew was his normal strength.

"Stop it!" Doc rapped.

The Meteor Menace

If he comprehended, the weirdly afflicted lawyer gave no heed. There was no intelligence to his assault, however. His blows were blind; he tried to bite like an animal, and emitted snarlings and hissings.

To Doc, who had seen the astute lawyer comprehend and expound the most complex legal problems, the effect was gruesome in the extreme.

Suddenly, Ham quieted. There had been no reason for his attack; there was equally no reason for its ending. He became still and mute, and in his eyes was an absolute lack of expression, while his lips, crimson-streaked, hung slack and vacant.

"Ham!" Doc said sharply.

The lawyer picked foolishly at his ears as if he had heard sound for the first time, and thought it was something wrong with that part of his head.

Doc touched him.

Ham struck savagely at the spot which had been touched, and seemed to show no pain from the effects of his own blow, which broke skin and started scarlet droplets running.

Reaching out, Doc placed a finger tip gently against the lawyer's eye. There was no automatic reaction of drooping lids, and after the contact between finger and eyeball, Ham made a convulsive gesture and might have torn his own eye out, except that Doc gripped his arms and held them immovable.

"Brain functioning suspended," Doc said slowly.

Ham cackled giddy, unintelligible sounds.

Something hideous, something totally new on the face of the earth, had happened to Monk and Ham with the passage of the screaming blue visitor of the skies.

Doc went back to the car. In a fender tool box he found wire, towing rope and tire tape. With these articles he managed to secure Ham, Monk, and all of the Tibetans.

It was apparent, as one of the Tibetans sat up, that they also were now men unguided by brains.

Doc completed the binding with the pig, Habeas Corpus. He loaded all in the car. Dropping behind the wheel, he sent the machine hurtling in the direction of Antofagasta,

The whistling blue luminary had caused the grisly affliction which gripped Doc's cargo. That was certain. Doc himself had escaped a like fate simply because he had crossed over the hill and had been farther from the weird thing than had the others. At no time, while it was close, had its unearthly blue glitter shone directly upon him.

Doc drove fast and watched the road.

Chapter 5. TERROR'S HAND

THE road mounted numerous hills. From the tops of some of these it was possible to see the far-off hospital. Distance made the crowd there look like varicolored grains of sand.

The Meteor Menace

The throng had not yet dispersed. A few persons had noticed the weird blue glare in the western sky. Even above the mumbling noise of the crowd, some had caught the shrill whistle, faint though distance made it, which accompanied the iridescent display.

"A meteor!" muttered a man.

"But no!" said another. "Whoever saw a meteor of that blue color."

"Si, si! It is strange for a meteor. The light of it blinds the eye, even at this distance."

"And did you hear the terrible sound it made?"

One individual, a young woman, was showing no interest in these discussions. She was working her way out of the crowd, casting nervous glances about. Her brown eyes were pools of fear.

Rae Stanley had deemed it safer to remain in the crowd. Accordingly, she had seated herself on a pile of lumber in the middle of the throng and waited.

She had seen her captors, whom Doc had overpowered, regain their senses and flee from the vicinity.

Rae Stanley, nearing the outskirts of the crowd, lifted on tiptoe to look about. For a moment, it seemed as if she would scream. She turned to flee.

But she was too late. A man stepped forward swiftly and grasped her arm.

"Not 'arf glad t' see me, are you?" he asked. His manner was preoccupied, and he glanced frequently toward the hills where the blue glare had appeared.

"Shrops!" the girl gasped.

"Hi been watchin' you," Shrops told her harshly.

Rae Stanley gave him a stare of loathing, and said nothing. "Bloomin' well tried t' warn the bronze bloke, didn't you?" Shrops asked sarcastically. "You ran when you saw me watchin' you talk to that gorilla of a mug and the one with the black cane."

"Yes, I did!" the girl retorted defiantly. "I overheard you making your plans last night."

'Ow'd you get out of your room?"

She did not answer.

Shrops eyed the distant hills as if puzzled, then scowled at the girl. "Don't you recollect what Hi can do by way of payin' you back fer this little trick? Suppose I send a cable t' Tibet?"

At the words, the girl whitened visibly. Her lips tightened, and her eyes showed more horror than at any previous time.

"I-thought-of that," she said, each word seeming a torture.

"Hi oughta keep my promise! But if you don't pull any more foolishness, Hi may let you off. Come on!"

The Meteor Menace

The Cockney tapped a coat pocket meaningly. A bulge under the cloth hinted strongly at a gun.

The young woman, instead of complying, glanced about as if seeking a policeman.

"Hi'll blow your pretty 'ead off if you let out a beller!" Shrops warned. "Don't think Hi've got any qualms about shootin' a bloomin' woman, 'cause Hi ain't. You're comin' with me!"

The girl made no move to obey. She seemed entirely desperate, ready to risk getting shot rather than accompany the Cockney.

Shrops realized her state of mind. Inside his coat pocket, his gun cocked with a distinct click.

"Don't be a little fool!" he gritted. "Hi'll send that cable to Tibet, sure, after shootin' you! Play my game and you'll come out ahead."

The girl seemed to be fighting a terrific battle with herself, debating whether to follow Shrops or not. Her face showed loathing for the Cockney, but also apprehension of some awful vengeance, above the threat to shoot her, which he apparently had power to wreak a vengeance obviously connected with his repeated threat to send a cable to distant Tibet.

"You—you – " the girl choked hoarsely.

But she accompanied the Cockney.

THE Cockney and Rae Stanley turned up some thirty minutes later at a small roadside posada a few miles from the city. The posada was a structure of mud and stone, uninviting to the eye. There was no bar for dispensing drinkables within, and there had never been a shooting, stabbing, or like affray on the premises. Outwardly, this roadside tavern was quite decorous.

Actually, the place was one of the most notorious thief harbors in Chile. But criminals tarrying there conducted themselves with sedateness, and were accordingly free of police notice. The proprietor charged sky-high rates and allowed no rowdyism.

Several Tibetans, loafing about the inn, stuck out their tongues as far as they would go the instant they sighted Shrops.

Shrops and Rae did not seem to consider this tongue-protruding performance anything unusual. These Tibetans came from a tribe near the Mongolian border, a region where the customary greeting is the sticking out of the tongue.

"Did some o' you tongue-hangin' blokes 'ave somethin' to do with that blue meteor appearin'?" Shrops demanded.

"No, Master," one replied.

Shrops seemed greatly worried at this.

"'Ere's 'opin' somebody comes around that does know why it showed itself!" he growled. "The thing wasn't to appear at all!"

The Meteor Menace

Saturday Loo now stumbled from the posada. There was a purple smear as dark as an ink blot on his jaw, where Doc's fist had landed. From his manner he did not seem, even yet, to have recovered fully from his ill-favored battle with the bronze giant.

Other Tibetans showed themselves. They were the fellows who, with Saturday Loo, had attempted to seize the girl, and who had fallen victims of Doc Savage's might.

"You managed t' accomplish somethin', anyway!" Shrops said sarcastically. "You got your bloomin' selves back out 'ere safely!"

He darkened with rage at the memory of how Doc Savage had vanquished Saturday Loo and nearly a dozen other Tibetans.

"The lowly dog who has never seen a lion is prone to make the mistake of biting one," Saturday Loo murmured.

"Is that a slam at me for sickin' you on the bronze bloke?" Shrops snarled.

"A thousand pardons, O Master," Saturday Loo mumbled hastily. "I meant not to belittle you."

Shrops growled: "You'd better not get sassy. And if you 'ears why that blue meteor appeared, Hi wants to know about it right off!"

"I hope the blue meteor has turned against you!" snapped Rae Stanley, entering the conversation.

"Hi've 'arf a mind to scrag you, my beauty!" Shrops yelled at her, and yanked a revolver from his pocket.

The girl blanched, realizing she had pushed the Cockney a trifle too far. The fellow was almost distraught over the blue glow which he had seen in the sky, and his temper accordingly short.

Saturday Loo wheeled and fled unashamedly.

"You pipe down, or you'll get it plenty!" Shrops snarled at the girl. "Walk to your bloomin' room! I wanta see how you got out!"

They made their way to a small, dark chamber in the rear. The single small window of this was crisscrossed with metal bars. Shrops tested the bars and seemed surprised to find them firm. He continued his search, and his attention came finally to the door.

"So you pulled the pins out of the hinges!" he growled.

"Well, for that, Hi'll just post a guard outside!"

SHROPS had hardly made certain the girl was a prisoner and returned to the front room, when a car drove up. Springing from the machine, the newcomer raced to Shrops.

"Ave you got some dope on why the blue meteor showed up?" Shrops demanded.

"No, Master!" shouted the man. "I am he who was sent to destroy the plane of the bronze devil."

The Meteor Menace

"Don't Hi know it?" Shrops said sarcastically. "If you can't explain why the blue meteor appeared, what's ailin' you? What's 'appened?"

"I was almost killed!" the Tibetan yelled.

"Calm, you bloody swine!" Shrops snapped. "Did you destroy the plane?"

"I did," said the Tibetan. "But a very tall skeleton of a man chased me. He would have caught me, except that I had waiting near-by the car which I stole last night."

"Blimme! But you destroyed the plane?"

"I did, O Master. It was a metal plane, but I punched holes in the fuel tanks so that gasoline ran out. Then I applied a match. The man-made bird was entirely consumed."

Shrops made a growling noise of satisfaction. "With 'is plane out of commission, Doc Savage will 'ave to start 'ome by boat. The logical tub fer 'im is the Chilean Senorita."

"The Chilean Senorita?" the Tibetan asked, puzzled. "What boat is that, O Master?"

"The name, 'Chilean Senorita,' was painted on 'er bows an' stern only last night," Shrops explained dryly.

"This dumb one still does not comprehend."

"Hi mean that the bloomin' boat is the same one you came to these shores on!"

"Ah! Now my ignorance disappears. But do you think Doc Savage will now take passage on this newly named Chilean Senorita, O Master?"

"There ain't nothin' t' make the bronze bloke suspicious," leered Shrops. "It ain't unusual for the crew of a steamer in the Pacific t' be Chinese or such. Anyway, the boat 'as got papers showin' she's a coastwise tub. She's a bloomin' fast scow. That last, more'n anythin', will persuade this Doc Savage t' take 'er."

It was perhaps ten minutes later when another Tibetan arrived at the roadside posada. He was wild-eyed with excitement and breathing rapidly from a long run.

"I bring bad news, O Master!" he gulped.

"Wot?" Shrops demanded. "Is it about the blue meteor?"

"The bronze man!" exclaimed the excited Tibetan. "He concealed himself in a trunk on the rear of the car which carried the two prisoners. In the valley, he leaped from the trunk – It shames me to admit it, but he overpowered those in the car without great labor."

"Didn't you try t' 'elp?" Shrops growled.

"This one was but the lookout stationed on a distant hill, O Master," the other explained. "I could not reach the scene. But I did the next best thing – I summoned the blue meteor."

"So that's why the bloody thing showed itself!"

The Meteor Menace

"The blue meteor took a course down the valley, but the bronze man's ancestors were watching over him, and he got far enough away to evade its power," said the Tibetan.

"Where's the bronze bloke now?"

"The last I saw of his unworthy person, he had loaded his two men and my own countrymen into the car and headed toward town."

Shrops began to curse. He swore in Tibetan until he evidently used up all of the profane words of that tongue that he knew, then launched into Limehouse expletives.

"This bronze bloke is a bloomin' lot worse customer than Hi thought," he snarled, when he could speak with a trace of calmness.

The Cockney glowered for a time, thinking. Then, muttering to himself, he went outdoors and called loudly for a car.

"Hi'm gonna go see Doc Savage in person!" he growled. "Hi've got a neat plan up my sleeve."

Chapter 6. THE COCKNEY VISITOR

THE Taberna Frio, downtown Antofagasta hotel, which Doc Savage had made his headquarters, was not the most pretentious structure in town. However, its walls were thick, its rooms cool, and the chambers boasted certain comforts much to be desired in this blistering clime – namely, running ice water and electric fans.

An alley gave access to a service entrance in the rear. Doc Savage, arriving with his cargo of awfully afflicted men from the valley over which the blue horror had passed, drove the car up to this back door. Carrying the tightly bound forms of Monk and Ham over his mighty shoulders, Doc mounted the stairs. He used the rear stairway, and it chanced that no one saw him.

The bronze man shoved open the door of the suite of rooms occupied by himself and his men, and stalked inside with his pitiful burdens.

Two men occupying the living room leaped to their feet and stared.

"Holy cow!" gulped one of the pair in a voice which resembled the roaring of a disgruntled lion in its den.

The speaker was tall, angular, and would weigh in the neighborhood of two hundred and fifty pounds. Large as his frame was, however, it was somewhat stunted by the size of his fists. The fists, blocked, would make cubes of bone and gristle larger than many another's head.

He had a face which was very long, and which bore an expression of profound gloom. He looked as if he were contemplating attending a funeral.

The man with the fists and the gloom was "Renny" – Colonel John Renwick, an engineer whose work was known on many continents, and a gentleman whose boast was that he could knock the panel out of any wooden door with either fist.

"What's happened, Doc?" demanded the man beside Renny.

The Meteor Menace

This latter individual was not tall, and only fairly set up. Judging by his pallid complexion, his past life had been spent where there was not enough sunlight. He had an astoundingly high forehead.

He was "Long Tom" – Major Thomas J. Roberts. He was far from being the weakling he appeared, and his forte was electricity. A "wizard of the juice," men of his profession called him.

Renny and Long Tom were two more of the group of five who worked with Doc Savage.

Doc carried his burden into a bedroom.

"My instruments" he said sharply.

Renny and Long Tom both dived into an adjacent room and came back hearing metal cases which held Doc's hospitalization apparatus.

The equipment ranged from endoscopes for scrutinizing the lungs, to complete skiagraphy apparatus for surveying the various parts of the body by X ray.

With the instruments, Doc went to work upon Monk and Ham. The bronze man was trying to ascertain what manner of spell the dazzling sky transient had cast upon his aides.

"There is a car at the back door," Doc told Renny and Long Tom. "You will find men in it, tied securely. Bring them up, will you? And Monk's pig, too. But do not untie any of them!"

Johnny and Long Tom went out, looking puzzled.

They were soon back, carrying the Tibetans. The puzzled look on their faces had given way to expressions of horror.

It had dawned upon them that these men had lost the use of their brain cells.

ALL of the victims were placed in the inner room. Johnny and Long Tom stood by as Doc Savage went to work. They maintained silence, for they could see that Doc was battling with some profound mystery, some culminating horror.

Neither man asked what had happened to Monk and Ham and the rest, although curiosity was consuming them. Doc was working now, and would tell them the story in his own time. They knew from experience that the bronze man spoke only when he so desired.

Time dragged, some fifteen minutes passing. Then Doc's weird trilling came into being. The singular sound drifted up and down the range of musical notes for perhaps a fourth part of a minute, then sank away as if the walls of the bedroom had absorbed it.

Renny and Long Tom shifted uneasily, aware that the trilling meant something momentous.

"What is it, Doc?" Long Tom asked.

"The nerves and brain centers are in practically a state of suspended animation," Doc replied.

"They can't use their brains?" Long Tom ejaculated.

The Meteor Menace

"Exactly. They are so much living flesh and bone, with no power to think or guide their movements."

"Have the brains been destroyed?" Renny demanded in hoarse horror.

Doc did not reply.

Long Tom clenched his pale fists and his lips writhed, but he could not frame whatever words he was trying to say, so great was his emotion.

"They do not respond to restoratives or stimulants," Doc said at last.

The bronze man applied hypodermic needles to the bound men. After this, they became quieter.

"Sleeping opiates," Doc said, indicating the hypo needle. "Just living bodies!" Renny muttered, his long, puritanical face bewildered. "But what caused it?"

Speaking rapidly, and using sentences with a descriptive power that would have been envied by a novelist, Doc told the story. He began with the appearance of nervous, excited Rae Stanley at the dedication ceremony, and finished with the coming of the fantastic, blue, screaming mystery of the skies in the valley outside the city.

"But what was the whistling thing that made the blue light – and ruined the brains of these men?" Renny asked.

"You have heard exactly what occurred," Doc replied.

"Sounds like some kind of blue meteor," said Long Tom. Renny went over and inspected the bound men. He touched them. Then he shuddered violently and retreated.

"Living dead men!" he muttered.

The discussion was interrupted by the thump of excited feet in the hallway. The door of the living room burst open.

The man who entered found it necessary to duck slightly in order to keep his head from colliding with the top of the door frame. He was unnaturally tall, and so thin that he seemed merely a frame of bones padded with a little gristle. His coat resembled a sack hanging over a form of broomsticks. No tailor could have fashioned a respectably fitting garment on that bony physique.

This man was William Harper Littlejohn, former head of the natural science research department of a famous university, and one of the greatest living authorities on archaeology and geology.

Dangling from a silver chain affixed to his lapel, was a monocle. "Johnny" did not look like the type who would condescend to wear a monocle. Nor was he, for the glass was in reality a powerful magnifier, an article which he needed in his profession.

Johnny was the fifth member of Doc's group of five.

"Somebody burned your plane, Doc!" he barked.

The Meteor Menace

DOC Savage's bronze countenance did not alter at this news, but the tiny whirlwinds, which seemed to stir continuously the flake-gold of his eyes, quickened a little in speed.

"How'd it happen, Johnny?" he demanded.

"I was servicing the plane for flight back to New York," Johnny replied. "There is a shack at the edge of the field where gasoline and tools are stored. I was in there, heard a roaring, looked out, and saw the plane blazing."

"It was an all-metal plane!" Renny thumped.

"I know. But the fellow must have punched holes in the fuel tank."

"What fellow?" Doc questioned.

"The bird I saw running away," the gaunt Johnny explained, fingering his magnifying monocle. "He was a squat monkey. I chased him, but he had a car waiting, and got away."

Johnny now changed his position slightly, and one of the array of securely bound men came into his range of vision.

"For crying out loud!" he gasped. "What's going on here?" Without waiting for an answer, Johnny leaped into the other room. He grasped the forms of Monk and Ham, as if to shake them into some semblance of normalcy.

He listened to the sounds they made – horrible, rattling howls as vocal cords simply fluttered with the income and outgo of breath. At times, these sounds resembled the baying noises made by bloodhounds.

He studied the expressions of consummate vacancy on their countenances. He became very pale.

"What happened to them?" he asked hoarsely.

"Their brains have stopped functioning completely," Doc told him.

Johnny dragged his tongue over dry lips. He mopped a sudden sheen of perspiration from his forehead.

"I never heard of such a thing," he muttered.

"Nor has any one else," Doc replied. "It's mysterious. And, without exaggerating in the slightest, it's the most horrible thing we have ever been up against."

Johnny nodded slowly, stiffly. "It attacks the brain and not the body. Somehow or other, that, to me, makes it a lot worse. What caused it?"

Doc went back to to the initial appearance of Rae Stanley and told the story.

"The blue, whistling projectile which passed over the valley simply rendered their brains completely dormant," he finished. "It did not nail me, because I managed to get over the hill and farther away."

Johnny fingered his monocle, then used it to indicate one of the Tibetans.

The Meteor Menace

"The fellow who burned our plane belonged to the same race as that man," he said.

"But why should anybody destroy our plane?" Renny grumbled, knotting and unknotting his huge fists.

"There are two logical reasons," Doc told him. "Some one either wants us to stay here in Chile, or desires us to take another method of transportation northward."

"A steamer is the logical second choice," Renny hazarded.

Doc strode to the telephone, spoke briefly to the office of a travel agency, then replaced the instrument on its stand.

"The next northbound boat with passenger accommodations available is a small, but fast tramp steamer named the Chilean Senorita," he explained. "Renny, you investigate the Chilean Senorita."

THE Cockney, Shrops, would have been astounded to hear this, for he had thought his plan to lead Doc to book passage on the Chilean Senorita to be quite clever, and beyond suspicion.

Renny departed to investigate the Chilean Senorita.

"Long Tom," Doc said, "here's a job for you."

"Shoot it," the electrical wizard replied.

"I want you to telephone the New York headquarters of the American Society of Physical Scientists," Doc directed. "Better make the call from the local phone company office. It's only a few blocks away, and you can get quicker service by talking to the wire chiefs there."

"What am I to check up on?" Long Tom asked.

"Find out where Professor Elmont Stanley is at the present time," Doc directed. "Learn if there is anything shady in Professor Stanley's record. Also learn what you can about his daughter, Rae."

"Who is Professor Stanley?"

"An astronomer, one of the most skilled men in the world in telling the composition of planetoids. I've never met him personally, but have read his scientific works."

"You mean that he's a guy who makes a business of telling what kind of stuff the stars are made out of?"

"That is it."

"Where does he come in on this?" Long Tom questioned.

"It was his daughter, Rae Stanley, who accosted Monk and Ham."

Both Long Tom and Johnny looked greatly surprised at this.

"Did you know the girl by sight?" Long Tom questioned.

Doc shook his head. "Never saw her before."

The Meteor Menace

By way of answering the questions Doc drew a pair of small, powerful binoculars from a coat pocket, indicated them, then replaced them.

No more was needed to tell Long Tom and Johnny how he had learned Rae's identity. Doc was an expert lip reader. Watching the attractive girl when she accosted Monk and Ham, Doc probably had understood every word she had said.

"She told Monk and Ham that her father was Professor Stanley," Doc explained.

Looking vastly enlightened, Long Tom took his departure, headed for the phone office to employ a long-distance telephone to check on Professor Stanley.

Doc continued his examination of Monk and Ham. He administered more restoratives and concoctions calculated to stimulate normal brain activity, but results were nil.

No known treatment had the slightest effect on their mental condition.

THE phone jangled. Gaunt Johnny went to the instrument. "A man named John Mark Shrops to see you," he advised Doc.

Doc Savage was entirely motionless for several seconds; then he said:

"Shrops is the name of the man who frightened the girl away from Monk and Ham."

Johnny stared at his giant chief, and began: "How – "

"The girl cried out his name when she saw him," Doc explained.

"The guy has got nerve, coming here!"

"Tell them to send Mr. Shrops up," Doc said grimly.

John Mark Shrops arrived some seconds later. The Cockney's flashy clothing was immaculate, and his face had never been ruddier. He showed large, white teeth in an expansive smile.

"Not 'arf bad o' you t' let me come hup," he said effusively. "A lot o' toffs as famous as you wouldn't see a stranger."

Doc nodded politely, but did not offer to take the hand which Shrops extended. In order that the gesture might not be construed as impolite, however, he made a pretense of wiping chemicals off his fingers

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"A bloomin' lot, if you will," Shrops said. "Hi've 'eard that you make a business o' settlin' other people's troubles. 'Ave I been hearin' the truth?"

"Possibly," Doc admitted. "Are you in trouble?"

"In plenty o' it," muttered Shrops. "But it ain't me alone. There's a lot more poor devils sufferin'."

"Suppose you speak more concretely," Doc requested.

The Meteor Menace

"Ave you ever 'eard of Mo-Gwei?" queried Shrops.

"Mo-Gwei?" Doc repeated, as if he had not caught the name.

"Mo-Gwei, the devil-faced one," Shrops elaborated.

"Never heard of him," Doc replied.

'E's a bad un," muttered Shrops. "E's fixed thousands of poor devils, but the world ain't 'card of it because 'e's been workin' 'is deviltry in Tibet. The world never 'ears much o' what happens over there. But the world is gonna 'ear of Mo-Gwei if 'e ain't stomped on."

"Just who is Mo-Gwei?" Doc queried.

"The bloodiest criminal that ever walked the earth, and you can take my word for that," Shrops said earnestly. " 'at ain't 'arf, either. 'E's got the devil's own tool in is power. Nobody knows hexactly what it is, but they call it the blue meteor."

Johnny, the bony archeologist, fingered his magnifying monocle absently.

Striding swiftly to the bedroom door, Doc opened it and waved an arm.

"Does the blue meteor affect its victims in this fashion?" he asked in an expressionless tone.

Shrops came to the door and looked in. He gave every indication of having received a deep shock. His hands clenched, his jaw dropped, and air left his lungs in a horrified rush.

"Blimme!" he gulped. "Mo-Gwei is 'ere in Chile!"

"Does the blue meteor produce a condition of complete brain inactivity such as this?" Doc demanded.

Shrops nodded solemnly. "You said it!"

"Exactly what is the nature of the affliction?"

"Nobody 'as any idea," Shrops muttered.

"Do they ever recover?"

"Sometimes, yes; sometimes, no. Depends on 'ow close they was t' the bleedin' blue meteor."

DOC Savage considered for a time.

"You came from Tibet to get me to combat this Mo-Gwei?" he queried sharply.

"You 'ave it right," Shrops agreed. "In a way, Hi'm an emissary o' the Tibetan government. The right-'and man o' the Dalai Lama, who rules the country, sent me, and is payin' my expenses."

Doc's flake-gold eyes remained unwaveringly upon Shrops. He was studying the Cockney, judging him. Outwardly, the applelike fellow seemed a shallow, over-dressed dunce. The Cockney dialect enhanced this impression.

The Meteor Menace

But underneath, Doc discerned subtlety and cunning. He suspected this Cockney was one of the cleverest rogues he had encountered in some time. Doc was suspicious of the fellow, since mere sight of him had driven the girl to flight. Doc decided to drag the dead cat out in the open.

"Who is the girl, Rae Stanley?" he asked.

Shrops looked properly surprised, but came out with a glib explanation.

"She's a young lady who came from Tibet on 'er own 'look to get your 'elp," he said.

This was hardly the reply Doc had expected. He asked:

"Why does she want my help?"

"Hi 'aven't any idea."

"Why is Rae Stanley scared of you?" Doc persisted.

Promptly, Shrops explained: "She knows I came from Tibet, and she mistakenly thinks Mo–Gwei sent me to stop 'er."

Any one watching Doc's face would have thought he was believing every word. Actually, he was coming to the realization that he was face to face with one of the smoothest customers he had ever encountered. The Cockney was so slick that Doc was not even sure the fellow was telling falsehoods. And Doc was an expert at spotting liars.

"Why does the Tibetan government not send a detachment of soldiers to get this Mo–Gwei?" Doc questioned. "That is the manner in which they usually handle such customers over there."

"No bloke 'as ever seen Mo–Gwei's face," the Cockney replied. "'E's like the Irishman's flea: They can't put 'ands on 'im. That's why we're wantin' your 'elp in Tibet."

Doc Savage nodded as if a situation such as this was an everyday occurrence, and not one worth getting excited over.

"I prefer to think this matter over," he said. "If you will tell me where I may get in touch with you

"'Ow long d'you think it'll take to make up your mind?' Shrops asked.

Doc glanced at the window. The sun was low on the horizon; in twenty minutes there would be darkness.

"You can depend on my answer before midnight," he told the Cockney.

"That ain't 'arf bad, gov'nor," smiled Shrops. "Hi'll call for your answer at that hour."

The applelike little Cockney now placed his gray derby at a jaunty angle and departed.

The Taberna Frio was not equipped with an elevator, so Shrops had to walk down the stairs. Near the bottom of the staircase, he gave himself a verbal pat on the back.

"As a schemer, Hi'm quite a bloke!" he chuckled.

Chapter 7. THE DISAPPEARANCE IN TIBET

DOC Savage gave John Mark Shrops sufficient time to get well on his way downstairs. Then he addressed bony Johnny.

"You stay here and watch Monk and Ham and the others," he directed. "There does not seem to be a thing that can be done for them. We've got to find the exact cause of this devilish condition before we can get a cure."

Johnny nodded, juggling his monocle.

Doc produced the hypodermic needle which he had employed to quiet the victims earlier.

"Use this, if they get violent. It's an opiate. And, above all, do not untie them. They must be kept tied, for they are men without brains, to all intents and purposes."

Doc went to the window, eased through, and descended by using cracks in the wall for fingertip purchase. These cracks were not large, nor were they plentiful, but they seemed as serviceable as ladder rungs to the remarkable bronze giant.

A single-story building was below, and he ran across its roof. The structures were placed one abutting another for a distance, then came what amounted to a narrow vacant lot. The span to the next roof was a prodigious leap, yet the bronze man took it without unusual effort.

Never had the gigantic muscles in Doc's great body functioned with greater efficiency.

At the end of the block, he dropped to the sidewalk. He went to the corner, but did not round it.

From a pocket, Doc drew a metal tube which was but little larger than a darning needle. It was fitted at one end with an eyepiece. He drew the contrivance to a length of nearly two feet, telescope fashion, and projected it around the corner. He looked into the eyepiece.

The device was an ingenious periscope. Reflected in its mirrors and magnifying lenses, Doc could see John Mark Shrops.

The Cockney was walking down the street, away from the Taberna Frio. So swiftly had Doc come from the hotel room that Shrops had not had time to get out of sight.

Even as Doc watched, Shrops ducked into a recessed door. He waited there, bobbing his head out frequently, turtle-wise. He was obviously watching the hotel to see whether he was being followed. It had not occurred to him that a shadow might now be ahead of him.

Doc waited. Shrops seemed in no hurry. He lighted a cigarette and flipped the match out into the street.

To use the periscope continuously might draw notice, hence Doc employed the device only often enough to keep tab on Shrops. The rest of the time he leaned casually against the wall, as if loafing.

There were few people on the streets. Such pedestrians as were in sight were poncho-swathed Indians inspecting store display windows with the avidity of those who do not come to town often.

The Meteor Menace

The sun had almost deposited itself behind the Pacific.

Feet came clapping down the opposite side of the street. It was Long Tom returning from his visit to the telephone office.

The electrical wizard would have passed without noting Doc's presence, except for the fact that the bronze man's trilling note suddenly filtered through the twilight. Although not loud, the sound possessed a phenomenal carrying quality. It impinged upon Long Tom's ears.

Long Tom was clever enough not to betray excitement at the weird note. His eyes roved alertly under his hat brim, and he located Doc. When he crossed the street it was done naturally, as if he had contemplated that very thing all along.

The electrical magician joined Doc.

"Professor Stanley went to Tibet to investigate a mysterious blue meteor," he said grimly.

DOC nodded, as if he had expected information of this nature to result from Long Tom's long-distance phone call to New York City.

"Professor Stanley had headed several expeditions sent to investigate meteors," Doc told Long Tom. "Studying the composition of aerolites is his specialty."

"Professor Stanley has vanished in Tibet," Long Tom explained further.

"Vanished!"

They were keeping their voices down, in order that the lurking Shrops might not hear them.

Long Tom elaborated. "The society which sent Professor Stanley and his daughter to Tibet has ceased to hear from them."

"The daughter went along, eh?"

"Yes. She was official photographer on the expedition."

"What efforts have been made to locate them?"

"The usual sort – consular investigations and the like. And here's an unusual one, Doc: The scientific society which sent Professor Stanley to Tibet wants you to hunt him."

Doc used his periscope to make sure Shrops had not moved, but did not comment on Long Tom's last statement.

"The society was preparing to call on you," the electrical expert continued. "When my phone call reached them, they thought it quite a coincidence."

"Any detailed dope on Stanley's disappearance?"

"They took a caravan into the desert from Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. That was the last any one heard of them."

The Meteor Menace

"They had heard that the blue meteor had hit in the desert?"

"Yep. The society in New York told me a little about that meteor. They admitted, though, that the information was largely rumor. It seems that the blue meteor passed over parts of Tibet and struck somewhere several years ago. Fantastic stories came out of Tibet about the meteor – tales of people whose brains were dead after the thing went by."

"What happened to Monk and Ham proves the yarns are not so fantastic," Doc said grimly.

"The superstitious natives claimed the thing was a big blue devil coming to dwell on the earth," finished Long Tom.

Doc employed his periscope again. He saw Shrops showing signs of moving on.

"I'll get more details about this blue meteor story later," Doc said. "We're getting a line on what happened to Monk and Ham. It's something that has to do with the mysterious blue meteor."

"It's just about the most weird thing I ever ran into," Long Tom muttered.

"You go back to the hotel," Doc directed. "This bird Shrops is hiding in a door down the street, but he's getting ready to move on. When you pass him, don't pay him particular attention. We don't want him to become alarmed."

Long Tom, reluctant to lose out on possible excitement, began: "Doc, I might be of some help if I went along with

"You can assist Johnny in his efforts to revive Monk and Ham," Doc replied. "One of you work on Monk, the other on Ham. I showed Johnny what resuscitation methods to use. Two of you will be better than one at that work."

"O. K.," Long Tom agreed, concern for Monk and Ham overspreading his pallid face. "Listen, Doc: do you think that Cockney had something to do with what's happened to Monk and Ham?"

"Looks like it," Doc replied.

"Then why don't you grab him?"

"He's the kind of a fellow who could not be made to talk," Doc explained grimly. "If he knows a cure for the effects of the blue meteor, he could not be scared into revealing it. Our best bet is to trail him and see what can be learned."

"That's logic," Long Tom agreed. "Did Renny get back with a report on the Chilean Senorita?"

"Not before my departure. You'd better beat it. There goes Shrops." Doc was looking into his periscopic device again.

Long Tom strode off.

SHROPS swung away from the vicinity at a rapid pace. Keeping to the shadows, he glanced back often, hunting for a possible pursuer. He used numerous ruses to lose a shadow, taking short cuts across lots, entering stores and leaving by the rear door, and pausing frequently to watch.

The Meteor Menace

His behavior would have made trailing by ordinary methods an impossibility. But Doc's methods were not prosaic. He took to rooftops for the most part, negotiating ascents of walls with the ease of a great bronze cat, and taking tremendous leaps between buildings in silent, batlike fashion.

Long Tom, although his agility was a bit above the average, could not have managed the pace. Knowing this, Doc had refused him on his offer of assistance.

Long Tom's disappointment must have been great. Love of excitement was one of the main bonds which held Long Tom and the other four to Doc Savage. They were men who had reached the top in their respective professions, and hence no longer obtained a kick from more prosaic business lives. The zest of business competition was gone, for they no longer had competition.

Possessed of a desire for excitement, they found it aplenty in their association with Doc Savage.

ANTOFAGASTA, being a modern town, had telephones. Pay booths were installed in hotels and all the drinking places.

Shrops entered a booth, took down a receiver, and called a number. In order to make sure that no one was close enough to overhear what he was saying, he faced the glass door, speaking from the side of his mouth.

An electric light spread brilliance in front of the booth. This permitted Doc, using his periscope device from a side window, to read lips.

"Saturday Loo is the bloke Hi want t' speak wit'," Shrops said into the transmitter.

Evidently the straw boss of the Tibetans was not long reaching the other instrument, and the Cockney asked:

"What's 'appened since Hi left, if anythin'?"

The apple of a man listened intently. Elation overspread his face in the form of a grin that threatened to dislodge his cheeks.

"You say the bloody big-fisted 'un named Renny was investigatin' the Chilean Senorita, and your boys 'ad the luck to capture 'im?"

He seemed to get a confirmation of this from Saturday Loo.

"Not 'arf bad for us!" he chortled finally. "'old 'im, you tell your boys. If Renny gets away, Hi'll fix you so your ancestors won't know you, you son of a spavined yak. Hi'll be right down."

He started to hang up, but did not, and listened to more words coming over the phone.

"What am Hi comin' down for? Why, t' give this Renny bloke a taste of the bloomin' blue meteor. Maybe that'll persuade Doc Savage to lose no time goin' after this Mo-Gwei devil."

He kept the receiver to his ear for a moment.

"Why, after we treat Renny, Hi'll take 'im to Doc Savage an' say Hi found 'im wanderin' in the hills or somewhere."

Hanging up, Shrops left the booth. He headed straight for the steamer, Chilean Senorita.

The Meteor Menace

Doc trailed him.

THE Chilean Senorita was not large as ocean steamers go, but she had lines of beauty and speed. The craft was almost a yacht in appearance, with black hull, white superstructure, and much brightly polished brasswork. The lifeboats were capped with new-looking covers, and a lazy curl of smoke drifted steadily from her rakish funnel. She was anchored just inside the breakwater.

Numerous individuals of Asiatic extraction moved upon the Chilean Senorita's decks. This was not strange on the face of it, for Asiatic labor was common on ships plying the Pacific trade. It was cheaper.

Darkness had almost fallen when John Mark Shrops reached the water front. He produced a flashlight from a pocket, and blinked it several times. A small boat, manned by Tibetans, put off from the Chilean Senorita and was rowed to where he stood.

Saturday Loo himself occupied the stern sheets.

"So you come from the posada in the country t' take personal charge o' things on the boat, eh?" Shrops asked the moon-faced Tibetan. "You do show good sense about 'arf the time."

Saturday Loo accepted this as a compliment, and said:

"Even the lowest and most stupid of men have a brain which sometimes functions."

This seemed to strike Shrops as inordinately comical. He laughed harshly, uproariously.

"Hi can tell you a lot of 'em who 'aye brains that don't work any more!" he whooped.

"Words of wisdom," Saturday Loo agreed. "Men who saw the blue meteor."

"Where's the bloomin' girl, Rae Stanley?"

"A canary is safest from the cat while in its cage," said Saturday Loo. "No doubt, in this case, the bird greatly desires to be gotten by the cat. We left her at the posada, O Master. There is a strong guard."

"That's 'unky-dory," Shrops admitted. "Is the bloody 'ooker ready to sail?"

"As ready as the bar-headed goose of my native land, which is always prepared to flee its nest."

The boat now pulled out to the Chilean Senorita, with Shrops holding the position of honor in the stern sheets.

"Would you consider the cup of this lowly one's ear a fit receptacle in which to pour your thoughts?" Saturday Loo queried.

"Meanin' you wanta know my plans, eh?"

"Aye, Master."

"Sure, Hi'll tell you what my scheme is. Hi've just been to see this Doc Savage toff, an' Hi fed 'im a smooth line with just enough truth t' make it sound right."

The Meteor Menace

"I gather, O Master, that you told him he was needed to smash Mo-Gwei?" queried Saturday Loo.

"Hi sure did. An' bless your ancestors, you slant-eyed scut, 'e took it in like a bear lappin' up 'oney. Hi'm to go back an' get 'is final word around midnight."

"You think he will take the job of destroying the all-frightful Mo-Gwei?"

"Sure 'e will! Ain't 'is life work moppin' up on such blokes as Mo-Gwei?"

THE dory reached the landing stage suspended beside the hull of the Chilean Senorita. John Mark Shrops and Saturday Loo mounted to the deck.

Shrops, glancing around, chuckled.

"'Twas an 'appy idea of mine, buyin' this boat in China, an' puttin' my own crew on 'er!" he declared with evil pride. "That way, the whole slew o' us could come over without attractin' too much attention."

"If Doc Savage believes your story, O Master, and goes of his own accord to Tibet to seek Mo-Gwei, the boat will be of no great use to us," said Saturday Loo.

"Hi won't grudge the money it cost, in that case," grunted Shrops. "If 'e don't believe me, the Chilean Senorita may come in 'andy."

"It is indeed a wise squirrel who does not store all his nuts in one tree," Saturday Loo agreed.

"Nuts!" Shrops snorted, and burst out in rattling laughter. "Hi'll bet Doc Savage is wonderin' ow 'e's gonna fix up 'is nutty friends!"

Saturday Loo folded his arms in the fashion of the Orient, His face was entirely expressionless.

"Did you not say, O Greatest One, that you were going to use the blue meteor upon the big-fisted man named Renny?"

"Righto," Shrops agreed. "Hi'm gonna fix 'im up an' send 'im back to Doc Savage. That'll persuade the bronze toff to light out after Mo-Gwei without delay." "And what of our fair flower?"

"You mean the Stanley girl? We'll 'old onto her a while. We may need 'er."

Saturday Loo headed for a companionway amidships.

"Why did you bring the fair flower along in the first place?" he asked.

Shrops leered. "To 'ave 'er vamp the bronze man, if necessary."

"It is said that wise men are not affected by women."

This brought a laugh from Shrops. "Then there ain't no wise men in this 'appy world."

Chapter 8. BLUE MADNESS

SEVERAL Tibetans gave John Mark Shrops and Saturday Loo their tribal form of greeting as the pair went below decks – they stuck out their tongues as far as these organs of taste would go.

Saturday Loo and Shrops found big-fisted Renny in a stateroom. The chamber was an inside room, without portholes, and supplied with air piped from the big ventilators protruding from the decks.

A man could yell his loudest in the cabin, and never be heard out on the harbor. Renny knew this. He had tried it.

It calls for terrific effort to break the links of a handcuff chain which is fastened upon the wrists of the one making the fracturing attempt

Renny knew this, also. He had attempted it – and succeeded. The steel circlets had scraped skin off his wrists. Deep grooves had been cut in the pads of corded sinew. Indeed, the cuts were almost bone deep.

Crimson was creeping from these cuts. Renny was lying on his enormous hands to hide the scarlet drippage, and to conceal the fact that he had accomplished the almost incredible feat of breaking the shackles.

Shrops eyed Renny. The engineer's size was ordinarily dwarfed by the proportions of his great fists, but now he was reposing upon the hands. In the white electric light of the cabin, Renny looked gigantic.

"E's sure a whoppin' big bloke!" Shrops muttered.

"Yet he has but the stature of a youth when beside the bronze man whom he calls 'leader,'" murmured Saturday Loo.

Shrops drank in Renny's bulk with his eyes for a time, then wiped an ooze of sweat off his forehead.

"Ow'd you get 'im?" he asked Saturday Loo.

Renny took it on himself to answer this.

"Your brown hyenas had some blind luck!" he growled, and his voice was like the thump and rumble of a distant earthquake.

Saturday Loo smirked. "It is as the big-fisted one says. Honorable ancestors poured much luck upon the shoulders of one of my men. He came upon this man of the fists in the twilight, as the big-fisted one prowled our decks. My man had an iron bar. He swung it well. The big-fisted one awakened in this cabin, securely handcuffed."

Perhaps Saturday Loo intended to roll Renny over to show the handcuffs. Possibly he intended to give Renny a kick in the ribs by way of celebration. At any rate, he stepped forward.

Renny heaved up from the floor with blinding speed. One huge fist hurled out and met Saturday Loo's head. Fist and head seemed almost of an equal size.

Saturday Loo was knocked backward the entire width of the cabin. The shock of hitting the wall expelled breath from his lungs, causing him to spout teeth, bits of pulped tongue and lips, and a spray of scarlet. He

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fell forward upon the floor.

In the future, Saturday Loo's ancestors would have to look closely and long to recognize him.

"Blimme!" squawked Shrops, and fled.

He chanced to be near the door, 'so he got out before Renny's great mauls of fists could reach him. Shrops did not even attempt to draw a gun.

Several armed Tibetans were in the passage outside. The wily Saturday Loo had ordered their presence, just in case there should be an emergency.

"Elp!" Shrops bellowed, and sought refuge among his henchmen.

Renny charged. His monster hands popped two men over as if they had been dummies. He grasped an arm which was drawing a gun, twisted, and the bone crunched.

The corridor chocked with a great wad of fighting humanity. Expletives arose from the fighting cluster, profanity couched in p'al-skad, or low Tibetan.

It was Saturday Loo who brought the fray to a conclusion. He weaved out of the cabin, half-blinded with pain. His pawing hands encountered a cabinet holding a fire ax, for emergency use in breaking down stateroom doors should the Chilean Senorita sink.

Seizing the big ax, Saturday Loo sprang forward. He lifted the ax high and brought it down.

With a hideous bubbling sound, Renny collapsed. Shrops and the Tibetans – such of them as were conscious – picked themselves up from the floor and felt for injuries. For a few seconds, the passage crackled with p'al-skad profanity. Then they looked at the prone form of Renny, and began to feel better.

"Dead!" chortled one man.

"Blessed be an ax!" said another.

They gathered around, exchanging condolences and reviving those who had been knocked senseless in the fight. No one was seriously damaged, the man whose arm Renny had broken being the greatest sufferer.

Shrops, standing aside and wrinkling his apple face in thought, seemed to become rather unhappy.

"Bad!" he muttered. "The worst that could 'ave 'appened!"

"No, O Master," Saturday Loo said through almost ruined lips. "The big-fisted one could have escaped."

"That wouldn't 'ave been as bad," Shrops said gloomily. "This lowly one's brain must be in a fog, O Master, for I do not see how it could have been a lesser evil."

"You don't know Doc Savage's reputation, you 'arf crocked scut!" snarled Shrops, suddenly becoming enraged at Saturday Loo for wielding the ax. "Why didn't you use your 'ead? Doc Savage will bust the bloody world wide open to punish us for killin' 'is man, Renny. 'E's the kind of a bloke that can get us, too!"

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Saturday Loo squirmed uneasily. Well did he remember his own disastrous experience with Doc Savage, when the bronze man had rescued Rae Stanley at the hospital dedication ceremony.

A buttery-looking perspiration appeared on Saturday Loo's Asiatic countenance. He mopped at his scarlet-running mouth and nose.

"Ni kan!" he howled suddenly. "Look!"

Shrops stared at Renny.

"Glory be!" he chortled. "The big-fisted bloke ain't dead!" Saturday Loo folded his arms piously. "Some kind ancestor, watching over me, must have turned the ax so that it struck flatwise."

They pounced upon Renny and tied him securely, using inch-thick hawser which they carried down from the deck, and literally swathing him in the manila cable. Then they felt to see if his skull was fractured. It was not.

"Go get the bloomin' launch ready!" Shrops ordered. Tibetans stumbled out to comply with this command. Like most Asiatics, they showed a marked lack of mechanical ability as they lowered the launch. The task took them some moments.

The launch was long and slender, ornamented with brasswork, and equipped with a powerful engine. Forward was a small covered cabin, the sides of which were fitted with long, lidded boxes which served as seats and storage receptacles.

The lowering was accomplished with the aid of flashlights, for it was now quite dark.

The Tibetans returned below decks. Saturday Loo was guarding Renny, but Shrops was not in sight.

"Where is the Master?"

"He has gone to the radio cabin," Saturday Loo replied.

WHATEVER Shrops was doing in the radio cabin, the undertaking occupied him some ten minutes. He rejoined his men in a great hurry.

"Urry up, lads!" he barked. "Grab this big-fisted bloke an' clap 'im in the launch!"

The Tibetans hastily complied with the order. Four of them, grunting and stumbling, carried Renny out on deck.

"Tie 'im on top!" Shrops directed.

This was accomplished by the simple process of lashing Renny to the riding lights atop the cabin. While not extraordinarily solid, the bindings would nevertheless keep Renny from rolling off.

"Shut the gas off at the bleedin' fuel tank!" Shrops ordered. "An' hurry, you thumb-fingered scuts!"

"The launch will run but little more than half a mile upon the gas which is in the fuel lines and the carburetor, O Master," reminded Saturday Loo.

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"Don't Hi know it?" Shrops growled. "Ump it, you poor blokes. Get a move on!"

The launch engine was started. The valve at the fuel tank was closed.

A Tibetan headed the craft toward the open sea, threw the throttle wide, then sprang overboard. The launch streaked ahead, bows lifted, propeller throwing foam.

The lights of the craft had been turned OIL The little cabin, however, was dark.

Inside the gloomy cabin, the lid of the long box, which formed a seat, lifted swiftly.

Doc Savage arose from the recess.

Renny, lashed to the roof, was conscious. He sat up feebly as Doc's corded fingers plucked the ropes from his arms and legs.

"Holy cow!" he rumbled thickly. "I woke up tied onto this thing. How'd you get here?"

"Followed Shrops," Doc replied, stripping off the remainder of the ropes. "Swam out to the ship, and as a consequence, did not get below in time to help you out on your fight. You were down, and they were bewailing your death. It was a simple matter to hang around, keep out of sight, and stow away in the launch."

Doc whipped inside the instant he had Renny free. He clicked off the lights, then stopped the engine.

From the not-so-distant Chilean Senorita, a Volley of p'al-skad profanity came.

"They sound mad," Renny muttered.

"And with reason," Doc replied. "They obviously sent the launch away from the ship so that it would be in the path of their infernal blue meteor."

"Were they gonna expose me to that thing?" Renny gulped.

"They were," Doc told him. "Shrops summoned the thing in some manner, probably by radio."

Doc turned the launch engine over, got it running, opened the valve at the fuel tank, which the Tibetans had closed, and sent the craft knifing toward shore.

They covered less than a hundred feet before Renny emitted a thumping cry.

"Holy cow!" he gulped. "The blue meteor!"

IT came up awfully out of the east. It might have been a thing spawned by the Andean mountain fastnesses. Only the faintest of ultramarine flushes marked its first appearance. But the balefire brightened with appalling swiftness, and there became audible the tiniest of whistling noises, which might have been the note of some distant, harpy piper. The sibilant note loudened.

Doc snapped switches. A searchlight sprang out on the launch snout. This waved as Doc jockeyed the rudder and picked up the breakwater, then the shore.

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The water front ahead was a particularly bleak stretch. There were no large warehouses, and only a few shacks.

Doc suddenly swerved the launch toward the Chilean Senorita.

"We can get to shore before that blue thing arrives!" Renny yelled.

"But there's nowhere to conceal ourselves!" Doc told him.

"It's dark! They couldn't find

Renny left the rest unsaid and clutched for the gunwale, as the launch heeled far over in making a quarter turn. It was now driving in under the Chilean Senorita's bows.

Rifle muzzles lipped flame at them from the steamer decks. The slugs scooped splinters off the launch, or made whupping noises in the water. They were not wanted in the vicinity.

Then the shooting slackened off. Men began to yell p'al-skad words, first with a vague uneasiness, then with a growing terror. Shriller and shriller became the shouts, until they were a maddened bedlam.

Around the Chilean Senorita, around the launch, the blackness of night took on a corpse-blue tinge. This turned slowly to azure.

Renny looked at Doc.

"Holy cow!" he gulped, and his pet expression was a double thump of horror.

Renny's enormous hands drifted up and made lids over his ears. The screaming whistle was beginning to cut. There was something about it that made men want to open their mouths and shriek.

Up on the Chilean Senorita's deck, men were doing just that. They parted jaws to their utter widest and drove shriek after shriek that ripped at vocal cords and threatened to tear the very lining from throat passages.

They knew the full horror of what was coming, did these men. They could not have vented louder or more awful shrieks had fiendish animals been consuming them by slow mouthfuls.

Doc and Renny exchanged glances, for they could now see each other clearly in the unearthly blue glitter.

"You figured the blue meteor would not come close to the steamer," Renny questioned.

"That was reasonable to believe," Doc told him. "They sent you away in the launch to make it unnecessary for the thing to come near while it was affecting you."

The cobalt horror of the skies seemed to be headed directly for the Chilean Senorita'

OVERHEAD, against the rail of the boat, a man appeared. The fellow was a Tibetan, and he backed against the rail, facing the whistling blue meteor. The fellow's arms were rigid, trembling, and he crossed them in front of his eyes as if to fend off some monster.

His jaws were distended wide, contorted; no doubt he was screaming, but no words came down to Doc and Renny in the launch.

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Renny stared. There had come into his eyes a weird, awful glitter, a glassy hardness. He made vague gestures with his huge hands, and showed his teeth in a snarling grimace which was sinister and animal-like.

He opened his mouth. His words – Doc leaned close to catch them over the meteor crescendo – were without articulation. They were an unintelligible babbling.

The blue meteor's spell was gripping him!

Doc Savage leaped for the cabin. There was an uncertainty about his movements which contrasted greatly with his usual smooth agility. Once, he all but fell. His corded, supple hands seemed all thumbs as he picked up the rope which had secured Renny.

Coming back with a weaving unsureness, Doc looped the stout hemp over Renny's angular shoulders, and jerked it snug.

Renny did a strange thing. He struck himself foolishly where the rope touched. He bent over, teeth bared, as if to bite himself. Utterly appalling was the thing which had happened to the splendid physical specimen and great engineer.

His brain seemed no longer to function.

Doc Savage kept at his tying. Time after time, he encircled Renny with rope, for he had knowledge of the terrific strength which came with the suspension of mental power. Monk and Ham had been unnaturally powerful.

When Renny was bound, Doc Savage looped the rope about himself. He began at his ankles and worked up; then, using his hands, he managed to tie his arms down.

Perspiration shimmered in the unholy blue luminance. It soaked through his clothing. He kept his eyes closed tightly, as if to cover the gruesome effects of the blue meteor which were mirrored there.

He finished the last knot and drew the rope end tight. He was tied now as securely as he could manage, for he had used all of the rope. It might restrain his mighty muscles after the blue meteor accomplished its gruesome work, or it might not. There was no way of forecasting what would happen.

With no possible escape from this unholy blue thing of the skies at hand, Doc had used his last vestige of mental firmness to tie Renny and himself, that they might be helpless to do harm to themselves when fully afflicted.

The meteor scream by now had grown so frightfully loud that ears registered no sound, only pain.

Renny fell over. He had succumbed; his brain had suspended its functioning.

The blue light was hurting Doc's eyes. The frightful irradiation seemed, in its power, to penetrate through solids, to pierce the very bull of the Chilean Senorita as if it were not there, or as if it were transparent glass.

Doc Savage closed his bronze eyes more tightly than ever. His lips seemed to weld, so firmly did he press them together, and there was hardly a visible line to show where they met.

The bronze man bowed his head.

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As though a monster bullwhip had been popped overhead, the blue meteor passed. The wind of its going caused a violent flapping of the limp flag on the Chilean Senorita's stern.

The bronze man toppled slowly over. His gigantic muscles were drawn so rigidly that the sound as he crashed upon the launch floorboards was that of a great metal statue falling.

THE blue meteor, after it had passed, swept a whistling semicircle in the sky. Few living beings looked at it, and remembered the act in the hours immediately following. It was a path of awful ruin that the blue meteor left behind as it streaked over Antofagasta.

Physical injury – torn bodies, broken legs, rent flesh – men knew how to combat. But the spell of the blue meteor, being new, and affecting only the minds of its victims, mystified those who sought to help the afflicted.

The blue meteor swooped low over the Taberna Frio, then shrieked a glittering way on toward its western lair.

It was certain that the men in the Taberna Frio had fallen a victim to its inhuman power.

Chapter 9. THE AWAKENING

SOMEWHERE temple gongs were banging. Voices were chanting, singsonging four words over and over unceasingly.

"Om mani padme hum!"

Weird musical instruments wailed, torturing the eardrums with their dissonance, and the air shuddered to the coughing roll of drums. Men shrieked, howled like maddened creatures, but their banshee outcries were submerged beneath the monotonous roll of voices chanting the four words which never varied.

"Om mani padme hum! Om mani padme hum!"

It rose and fell, that interminable mouthing; it became shriller as the voices making it grew preponderantly tenor, and it turned deep as bass tones outnumbered.

The uncanny sounds throbbed through low mortared stone rooms, seeming at times to come with such power as to stir heavy draperies and tapestries.

Somewhere in the rooms a pig squealed, then made a rapid succession of grunting noises.

"Holy cow!" said a hollow voice, which might have been a disturbed lion in a deep den.

"Huh!" muttered another voice, surprisingly wee and childlike. "That sounded like our Habeas Corpus squealing."

Monk sat up slowly and inspected his own hairy hands. They seemed to puzzle him, for he flexed the furry fingers, then felt of his short, bowed legs, his barrel of a chest, and his homely features. He acted as if he were checking up on his gorilla-like body. He saw that he was on a bed.

Once more, he inspected his apish frame.

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"It's all there," said a faint, sarcastic voice. "And it's uglier than ever."

Monk turned his head. Beside him was another bed. On this, Ham sat.

Both men wore pajamas. Monk's garment was bursting at the seams. Ham's was greatly oversized, purple-striped, and entirely unlovely.

Ham glanced down at the awful raiment.

"The pajamas prove it," he said thickly. "In my normal mind, I'd never be caught in such horrors. I'm crazy!"

Monk neglected this wide-open chance for a pointed crack about Ham being late in making the discovery. The fact that he did so showed something momentous was in his thoughts.

"Where are we?" he asked.

Ham peered at Monk hopefully. "Maybe I'm not crazy after all! I just woke up, Monk. I have no idea where I am."

"Same here," Monk said slowly. "The last thing I remember, we were in that valley in South America, and some devilish blue thing was coming through the sky. We were running from it, but we couldn't get away."

Ham stood up. He flexed his arms, stretched, and seemed to be sound enough. He listened to the chanting and gouging sounds.

"What is that infernal racket?" he asked. "They're hollering something over and over."

"Sounds like 'Oh Monty pad me home,'" Monk grunted.

"Om mani padme hum!" corrected Ham.

"Huh!" exploded Monk. "That's a Buddhist religious chant! You hear it in the Asiatic countries."

Two doors led out of the room. Both were closed.

Suddenly there was a loud explosion of splintered wood! From one panel shattered pieces jumped away to permit a colossal, rust-colored knot of a human fist to project through.

The door opened under another great blow, and big-fisted Renny appeared on the threshold.

"Did you guys just wake up?" he asked, anger in his great voice.

"Su-sure," Monk replied wonderingly.

"So did I!" Renny thumped. "The last thing I remember is being in a launch with Doc alongside a steamer named the Chilean Senorita, and a whistling blue thing was coming through the sky."

"The blue meteor of a thing is our last memory, too," said Ham.

Renny held out his corded wrists.

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"Look," he rumbled.

"They seem all right," Monk told him.

"Sure they do," Renny agreed. "That's the strange thing about it. Just before I passed out from the effects of the blue meteor, I broke a pair of handcuffs apart on my wrists. The steel cut deep into my arms."

"So what?"

"So there's no trace of the gashes now," Renny boomed.

"They were so deep it would take more than a month for them to heal. Take a close look, and you can barely see the scars."

"We've been unconscious more than a month?" Monk howled unbelievably.

FROM an adjacent room a voice called: "Listen, you guys, come In here and tell us that we aren't batty."

The three men stumbled to the other room. It held a slender, pale Long Tom, and tall, bony Johnny. Johnny had his monocle-magnifier In one hand. He made vague gestures with it.

"I just awakened," he began. "And darned if –"

"Darned if you ain't concluded you've been asleep more than a month," interrupted Monk.

Johnny looked somewhat stunned. "I was hoping I was wrong."

"We must be nuts!" Monk muttered. "It ain't reasonable!"

Johnny drew out a watch. This was a costly timepiece, and in addition to the hour, minute, and second, it registered the day, the month, and the year.

"Over a month is correct!" he said. "You fellows Inspect each other closely, and you'll see something else, too."

The men complied with this suggestion.

"Holy cow!" gulped Renny. "We've all lost some weight!"

Monk's eyes rolled In their little pits of gristle. "Hey, guys!" he said. "Don't you catch another thing!" The others stared, uncomprehending.

Monk made an elaborate shivering gesture. "Kinda frosty."

"Right!" Ham rapped. "The air is very cold. We hadn't noticed it in our excitement."

"And it was hot in South America," Monk pointed out.

"Was!" Ham choked. "You mean you think –"

Not finishing the ejaculation, Ham dashed to the handiest window.

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"For the love of Mike!" he yelled. "We ain't in South America any more!"

The men jammed heads together to peer through the small aperture. The window itself was not fitted with glass, but with a panel of oiled paper in a hinged frame. This was open for ventilation.

Before them was a strange spectacle – a panorama altogether startling and weird, considering that they had until a moment before thought themselves to be in moderately civilized South America.

The uproar – the gonging and shrieking – came from a structure some distance away. This seemed to be a shrine of sorts, and around it a queue of fantastically masked men were winding. They kept going steadily, and their chanting was unending.

"A lamasery!" declared gaunt Johnny, who knew much of the races of the world, thanks to his work in archaeology. "They march like that and chant appeals to the departed spirits. Brothers, we're in Tibet!"

"In Tibet!" Monk gulped.

FOR some minutes, the five men stood there, staring at the lamas and their convolutions, listening to the interminable, "Om mani padme hum!" and exchanging stunned looks.

The pig, Habeas Corpus, entered the room, trotted up to Monk and sniffed a trouser cuff as if it were some strange animal.

"Habeas, you're in Tibet," Monk said slowly.

Renny waved his great fists like clubs and thundered: "I don't see how we got here! Tibet is a plateau averaging around twelve thousand feet above sea level. It's the highest country in the world, and it's surrounded by the tallest known mountain ranges. It's a hard place to get into."

"Is it hard to get out of?" Monk muttered.

"This beats me!" Ham yelled, waving his arms in baffled disgust. He went into the room where he had awakened, and came back bearing his sword cane. He flourished the weapon.

"How'd I bring my sword cane here without knowing anything about it?" he asked. "The last I saw of it, was in that crowd in Antofagasta, Chile, at the dedication of Doc's hospital. And say, what about Doc?"

The men looked at each other uneasily. Their bronze chief had been in their thoughts, but they had been slow to speak, hoping Doc would put in an appearance, bringing an explanation of this fantastic mystery.

"The last I saw of Doc was in that launch alongside the Chilean Senorita," rumbled Renny. "He was with me. He had the foresight to tie me, and tie himself, before the blue meteor came."

"Why was it necessary to do the tying?" Monk asked.

"If you could have seen yourself after the blue meteor got you, you wouldn't ask that," Renny told him. "You cut up terribly."

"He does that without seeing meteors," Ham said sarcastically.

The situation rarely got so tense but that Ham seized every chance to stick verbal thorns into Monk.

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"You weren't so meek, yourself," Renny told Ham.

"Let's go hunt Doc!" snapped Long Tom.

The somewhat unhealthy–appearing electrical wizard led the way to a door covered by an elaborate and gaudily colored curtain. They filed down a corridor.

Long Tom halted and said: "Say, I noticed stuff that looked like our baggage in our rooms. D'you reckon our weapons are still with the junk?"

"Not a chance!" snorted big–fisted Renny. "We were obviously overpowered by the devils controlling that blue meteor. They'd have taken our guns."

"We were overpowered over a month ago," Long Tom reminded him. "I'm going to look."

They retraced their steps. With eager fingers, they opened bags.

"Huh!" gulped Monk. "They're here!"

From the bags they drew weapons which were slightly larger than ordinary automatics, but which were infinitely more intricate. These were guns of Doc's own invention – tiny machine guns with a super–rapid rate of fire. In action, they sounded like the moan of gigantic bull fiddles.

The weapons were charged with drums holding what big game hunters term mercy bullets – slugs producing unconsciousness in lieu of death, due to a potent drug, and shell–like construction which collapsed against instead of penetrating flesh.

The men slung the rapid–firers under their coats, and left the room. They advanced down the hall, opening doors to other rooms.

They shoved through the fourth door and came to a startled halt.

"Holy cow!" exploded Renny.

Entrancingly pretty Rae Stanley asked: "What is it, gentlemen? What would you like?"

SHE stood in the center of the crudely furnished room, and she was dressed much differently than when they had last seen her.

She wore typical garb of a Tibetan woman. Her robe was long, high–collared, gaudily hued, with a wide sash of contrasting color about her slender waist. Her feet were encased in brocaded Tibetan boots – knee–length affairs with a slit in the back, and garter–like tyings three or four feet long.

On her forehead was a band studded with what appeared to be gold nuggets, and she wore earrings which did not match, the one on the left being long and narrow, with a pendant string of turquoise.

For several seconds the five men said nothing. They almost held their breaths, for Rae Stanley's beauty was made even more exquisite by her unusual raiment.

"What do you want?" she repeated sharply.

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Monk swallowed to loosen his tongue.

"Where's Doc?"

The entrancingly pretty girl pointed to a door down the corridor.

"My fiance has that room," she said.

Monk's bulging chest seemed all that kept his jaw from falling entirely off his face, so far down did surprise make it sag.

"Your – what?" he gulped.

"Doc Savage – my future husband!" Rae Stanley retorted sharply. "What ails you, anyway? You look as if you had just heard of our engagement, instead of knowing about it for more than a month."

Monk swallowed several times, but it did not free his surprise–frozen tongue. Monk was probably as astounded as he had ever been. Awakening to find they had been unconscious for more than a month was a shock. Learning they had gone to sleep in South America, and awakened in mysterious and forbidden Tibet, on the other side of the world, was more disquieting still.

The thunderclap, though, was this word that big bronze Doc Savage had indulged in the preliminaries of taking himself a wife. It was unbelievable.

Never had there been provision for feminine partnership in Doc's perilous career. Doc strictly abstained from anything smacking of an affair of the heart. Some amazingly pretty and intelligent young women, smitten by the bronze man's undeniable handsomeness, had openly sought to captivate him, but always with results strictly nil.

Doc had a good reason for this attitude. He could not allow a woman to share the dangers which accrued from his career of punishing evildoers in the far corners of the earth. His enemies would not hesitate to strike at him through a wife or sweetheart. So Doc was careful to fall for none of the feminine charmers.

At least, he had been careful!

Rae Stanley surveyed Doc's five astounded aides. She seemed puzzled at the unbelief and stupefaction on their countenances.

"Gentlemen," she queried, "are you ill?"

"I dunno what ails us," Monk said thickly.

RENNY suddenly lifted his two huge fists, eyed them intently, then spread them wide and banged them together. They met with a loud report. It seemed a miracle that no bones were broken.

Rae Stanley raised her attractive brows. "What was the idea of that?"

"Just to wake myself up in case I was dreaming," Renny said, entire sobriety on his long, puritanical face.

Gaunt Johnny, fumbling with his monocle, stared at Rae Stanley.

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"Doc proposed marriage to you?" he questioned solemnly. Rae wrinkled her petite nose. "How else could we become engaged? You don't think I popped the question, do YOU?"

Johnny said gloomily, "Doc must have been caught in a long nap, too."

"Well, I like that!" Rae Stanley snapped.

Coloring uncomfortably, Johnny said hastily: "I'm sorry – I didn't mean –"

"What he meant was that we want to see Doc," interposed Ham.

Rae Stanley glanced at Ham. Her eyes twinkled, and she hastily averted her face. Over her shoulder drifted stifled laughter.

It was Ham's turn to grow red as he realized he was parading the corridor in the atrocious, purple-striped pajamas. In his excitement over going to sleep in South America and awakening in the center of Asia, he had forgotten his garb. Ham was very touchy about his clothing.

"It seems strange that you don't know where to locate Doc's room," Rae Stanley said. "You've been in there often enough. But I'll show you. Why are you acting so strangely? Is it some kind of a game?"

The five men exchanged thoughtful boes. It was slender, frail-appearing Long Tom who voiced the general thought

"I wonder," said the electrical wizard.

Rae Stanley moved down the corridor and rapped on a door.

"Yes," said Doc Savage's powerful, controlled voice.

Rae Stanley opened the door. She crossed rapidly to Doc. The giant bronze man stood! in the middle of the room, an impressive and inspiring figure in the pale light which penetrated through the small window of oiled paper.

Rae Stanley went straight to Doc, lifted on tiptoe, and gave him a resounding and amorous kiss.

"Your friends wanted me to show them your room, darling," she said. "They are acting very strangely."

Wheezing, the young woman skipped outside. She drew the door shut behind her.

Doc's flake-gold pools of eyes rested upon his five men.

"Do me a favor," he requested.

"What kind of a favor?" Monk queried in a tiny voice.

"Haul off and sock me one," Doc directed. "This must be a dream, and I'm entirely ready to be awakened."

Chapter 10. SOME UNREMEMBERED PROMISES

"SO it happened to you, too?" Renny asked Doc. "If you mean lapsing into unconsciousness in South America' and awakening here in Tibet," Doc said, "that is exactly what occurred."

For a few moments, nobody seemed to have anything further to say. Their faculties were employed in trying to delve into the past few weeks. None of them could remember a thing.

"We seem to come out of it better than Doc, at that," Monk said slyly. Monk seldom lost his sense of humor.

"How d'you figure that?" Renny asked.

"Doc seems to have about collected himself a wife in his sleep," Monk replied. "We didn't."

"You better not crow too soon," Ham told the homely chemist, gathering his gaudy pajama coat tighter about his slender frame. "All of us may have collected sweethearts or even wives"

"We may have seven or eight wives a piece," offered the bony Johnny. "A man can have more than one wife over here."

Every one but Monk looked very gloomy at this possibility. Monk grinned widely at the idea of several wives, however. The thought seemed to appeal to him.

"In case we have turned Brigham Youngs in our sleep," he snorted, "I only hope we picked as nifty lookers as Doc did."

"This is a terrible situation, brothers," Doc announced. Strangely enough, this statement on Doc's part caused every one to smile. Doc's announcement that he considered the situation dire, in the face of the recent kiss by such a dazzling beauty as Rae Stanley, was so foreign to the reaction} another man would have displayed that it was comical. Doc was appalled. Another would have been elated.

"I notice you didn't duck when she planted that kiss," said the sharp-tongued Ham.

"I got more of the same thing a little earlier," Doc said gloomily.

"Huh?"

"My awakening came about an hour ago," Doc explained. "Shortly after that, I went out in the corridor to look around. The girl collared me there."

"How many times?" Ham asked.

"Times what?" Doc queried.

"Times did she kiss you?"

"We don't discuss that," Doc said.

There was something so uncommon about the mighty bronze man's pronounced sheepishness of expression that his five friends could not restrain their mirth. The weirdness of their situation, the memory of a

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mysterious monster known as Mo-Gwei, and a devilish, whistling blue dig of the skies, were all forgotten as they gave way to uproarious laughter.

Doc Savage heard them through without cracking a smile. "Go ahead and get it out of your systems," he said. "You can afford to cackle. You didn't, as far as we know, promise to marry anybody in your sleep."

SOBRIETY came finally.

"The blue meteor must have made us go around in a daze for weeks," big-fisted Renny said thoughtfully. "Could it have had that effect, Doc?"

"The affliction caused by the blue meteor is something entirely new to my experience," Doc replied evasively. "It is hard to say exactly what might happen."

"Wonder what town we're in," said the skeleton-thin Johnny.

"We might go out and see," Doc declared.

The bronze man moved for the door, trailed by the others. "Wait!" Ham said hastily. "Let me get out of these awful pajamas!"

He departed, and was back shortly, clad with neatness, even to a necktie which he was knotting.

"All of our baggage and equipment seems to be here," he remarked. "Some of my clothes are crumpled and soiled, as if they had been worn. The pajamas and some shirts are strange, though."

"Our scientific equipment is practically intact," Doc added. The apparatus to which Doc referred consisted of a compact and extremely complete chemical laboratory belonging to Monk, a set of electrical devices and materials for making almost any known electrical contrivance that was the property of Long Tom, and to various mechanisms and chemical concoctions which the bronze man himself always carried.

They stepped outside, into air that was filled with a biting cold. Their breath steamed before their eyes.

Buildings around them were of crude stones, set in mud. Roofs were flat, or nearly so, and seemed to consist of dried mud upon poles and sticks, with a thin layer of flat stones to break the violence of falling rain. White and gray was the predominating color scheme. Window glass was conspicuously absent.

Streets were narrow, paved with dirt and ruts. Houses were a single story in height, with here and there a building towering two stories. Big, fierce dogs prowled by the dozens.

Several long, barrack-like structures stood near the center of the small settlement.

"They look kinda like plane hangars," offered long Tom, the electrical expert.

"They're chanting halls, used by the lamas," Doc explained.

That the bronze man should identify the structures at a glance caused only a flicker of surprise among his five men. They knew that Doc's fund of knowledge was incalculable, covering the remotest ends of the earth. Practically all spare moments of his life Doc had spent in intensive study, in order to acquire his fabulous lore.

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They encountered a Tibetan in huge boots, gaudy gown, and tremendous fur headgear. He carried a long-barreled flintlock rifle of ancient vintage.

Doc addressed the Tibetan. "What village is this, O knowing one?"

The Tibetan showed surprise at having a white man speak perfect rje-sa – the "respectful speech" used by educated Tibetans. Too, some of his astonishment was probably caused by the nature of the question.

"It is the village of Tonyi," he replied.

"Where is that, Doc?" Long Tom asked.

"In the Konkaling sector in eastern Tibet."

The Tibetan was eying the five men curiously. He was a stalwart fellow, clear-eyed and polite without being cringing.

"He looks kinda like Daniel Boone with that fur cap and squirrel rifle," Monk grunted.

"I wonder what you look like to him," Ham said unkindly.

Doc now put another question to the Tibetan in rje-sa.

"Have you, O knowing one, ever heard aught of a sky visitor called the blue meteor?" he asked.

A marked change swept the Tibetan. His eyes protruded, his olive-brown face blanched, and he gripped his flintlock tightly. He opened and shut his mouth, and seemed unable to speak.

"He's heard of the blue meteor," big-fisted Renny thumped.

Doc addressed one more query to the Tibetan.

"O knowing one, can you tell me aught of a man called Mo-Gwei?"

This had an even more astounding effect on their source of information. He emitted a cracked yell at mention of the name of Mo-Gwei. Then he spun and fled, terror-stricken.

MONK promptly started after the retreating Tibetan. But Doc's bronze hand, coming to rest upon his shoulder, stopped the homely chemist as if he had run against a stone wall.

"I'm only gonna grab that squirrel hunter and make 'im answer our questions," Monk explained.

"Look!" Doc directed.

About them, scores of gowned Tibetans had popped magically from low doorways. All were heavily armed, bearing weapons ranging from swords and spears, to extremely modern high-powered rifles. They bent dark scowls upon Doc and his men, and stared questioningly at the running Tibetan whose yell had drawn them.

"Try to grab the fellow, and you would have a riot on your hands," Doc pointed out.

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"Yeah – you're right," Monk admitted, eying the plainly hostile Tibetans. "What makes these fellows so touchy?"

"They don't take to white men," Doc explained. "It was only a little over ten years ago that the Tibetan Government invited the first white man to visit the capital, Lhasa. And a couple of years later, they permitted a telegraph line to be strung to Lhasa from India."

The crowd ahead of them increased, grew more threatening.

"We had better go back," Doc advised. "There's no point in fighting these fellows just because they don't like the looks of white men."

The group of adventurers retreated for the house in which they had awakened after their long siesta. The Tibetans made no gestures actually hostile, their hands evidently being stayed by the huge size of Doc, Renny, and Monk, and the determination of the other three.

"The blue meteor and Mo–Gwei are both known here," Monk muttered. "That's a cinch."

"Let's collar that Rae Stanley girl and see if she'll cough up the truth about this mess!" suggested Ham, waving his sword cane for emphasis.

"We'll talk to her," Doc agreed. "But we'll not let on that we have just come back to our senses. You fellows didn't tell her you had just awakened, did you?"

"Nope," said Ham. "The hussy!"

"She's Doc's fiance," Monk reminded.

The faintest suggestion of a red tinge showed under the bronze hue of Doc's neck. The bronze man's five aides stared at this faint flush in astonishment. They would hardly have been more amazed had the sun changed color.

To their recollection, Doc had never before shown embarrassment.

"We'll let on like we've been in our right minds all of the time," Doc said. "If she's tricking us, a know–all air will worry her."

Monk emitted a low grunt.

"look!" he ejaculated. "There she is in the door, waitin' for us!"

RAE Stanley eyed Doc and his five men severely when they came up. If she was acting, she was doing a perfect job.

"You courted a riot, going out in American clothing!" she said, reproof in her pure voice. "Why did you do it? You knew better. Until today, you always wore Tibetan garb."

"We saw a fellow," Doc told her. "We were anxious to talk to him."

The young woman stiffened in the doorway. Her hand drifted up into the vicinity of her heart.

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"Was it some one connected with Mo-Gwei?" she asked. "He got away," Doc explained. "We're not certain about him."

"Oh," said Rae Stanley, and walked ahead of them into the rather dark Tibetan residence.

Doc's five men kept in the background. They intended to let Doc carry on the conversation.

"Let us discuss your father," Doc told Rae Stanley. At this blunt statement, the girl stumbled. Had Doc not reached out swiftly and caught her, she might have fallen. He could feel her tremble under his hands.

"Oh!" she gasped. "You've found some trace of him?"

"No," Doc said. "But will you please repeat the whole story from the first."

"I have told you before!" the girl said swiftly.

"We may have overlooked some details. Let's make sure."

The attractive young woman seemed to consider, then nodded.

"We might have missed something, at that," she admitted. "Where shall I start?"

"With the beginning of the expedition in search of the blue meteor," Doc directed.

The other five men exchanged glances and microscopic nods. Doc was acquitting himself handsomely. His voice held perfect assurance, and he was using the few facts in his possession to give the impression that he knew a great deal more.

Rae Stanley took a full breath and launched into her story.

"Nothing of importance happened until we reached this village of Tonyi," she said. "We did not know where the blue meteor had landed, so we had traced the fantastic stories of its striking to their strongest point which was here in Tonyi. The blue horror went directly over Tonyi, and the whole population lost the use of their brains for months. Even yet, some of them are irresponsible."

The last sentence about mental irresponsibility moved all five of Doc's men to squirm uneasily. They were wondering what they had done while under the blue meteor spell.

"Professor Stanley concluded the meteor struck near this village?" Doc queried.

"To the north," Rae Stanley replied. "It is a very wild region of desert and mountains, infested by outlaw tribesmen. Father did not wish to take me into danger, so he forced me to remain here with a missionary and his wife. He took a caravan into the north to search for the meteor. That was the last – I ever saw of him."

"You do not know his exact destination?" Doc asked.

"No. He was only going to hunt the meteor. He was wild to find it and examine it. He took an enormous quantity of scientific apparatus and chemicals along. He had heard enough to know this meteor was unlike any other ever to hit the earth."

"Where is the missionary and wife with whom you were left?"

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Rae Stanley hesitated the briefest instant. "They have returned to England. They were English missionaries."

Doc did not change expression. "Go ahead," he directed. "Include the Mo-Gwei angle in your story."

"Mo-Gwei is the strange chief of the outlaw tribesmen in the region where father vanished," Rae Stanley replied.

In the pause which followed, the interminable chanting of the lamas assumed greater loudness, seemingly, and the squeak of an occasional portable prayer wheel was audible.

"I tried to hunt for father," Rae Stanley continued, "but I was driven back by Mo-Gwei's followers. So I hit on the idea of appealing to you for help. I learned from the newspapers in India that you were in South America, so I went to Antofagasta."

"Detail your meeting with Shrops," Doc requested. "And with Saturday Leo."

The young woman, if she was surprised at Doc's order to repeat something he was supposed to have heard previously, did not show any emotion.

"Shrops and Saturday Leo were Mo-Gwei's men," she replied. "They were sent by Mo-Gwei to prevent my reaching you."

Doc nodded. The small whirlwinds that perpetually stirred the flake gold of his eyes seemed to slacken their pace. The bronze man's five aides, looking on, realized that Doc was debating the best manner of drawing out the rest of the story.

Rae Stanley solved that problem by continuing speaking, "It was very fortunate that the blue meteor had only a temporary effect on you in Antofagasta," she said. "Had you not killed Shrops and Saturday Leo, they would certainly have slain you."

The tiny whirls in Doc's flaky eyes almost came to a stop at the information that he had slain Shrops and Saturday Leo. It was against Doc's creed to take human life directly.

"I shall never be able to repay you for rescuing me," said the entrancing young woman. "Shrops and Saturday Leo were holding me prisoner in that tavern on the outskirts of Antofagasta, where you found me. And I owe you a lot for coming over here to hunt father, too."

She hesitated, colored in a way that enhanced her beauty, and added:

"As I said, I cannot repay you – even if our marriage lasts forever."

Doc took this without a flicker of emotion. In fact, a marked change had settled upon the mighty bronze man. He was no longer embarrassed. He seemed sure of himself.

It was as if something in the conversation had brought Doc to his old self, as if he had read the girl's true mind.

"Anything about Mo-Gwei will help," he said.

THE girl spread her hands to indicate futility.

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"I have told you all that I have been able to learn," she said. "I'm sorry it is so precious little. Mo-Gwei, as far as I can ascertain, has never been seen face to face, even by his outlaw tribesmen."

"How long has he held sway?"

"Not very long. In fact, he was unheard of at the time father vanished."

"He has a very potent weapon in the blue meteor," Doc said in a low voice.

Rae Stanley shuddered.

"As I told you, he is using it to extort money from Tibetan villages," she said. "When a settlement refuses to pay a tremendous sum of money, the blue meteor passes over, and all are stripped of the use of their brains. And it is reported that he intends to extend his sway to cities in more civilized sections of the world."

Doc did not inform her that she had told him nothing of the grisly story – to his present memory. Instead, his handsome bronze face remained impassive.

"I think we had better advance our marriage date," he said unexpectedly.

Rae Stanley looked startled. "But we were planning to wait until we found father!"

"We will have the ceremony this evening," Doc announced. This plainly shocked the young beauty. She put her hands over her lips, took them away, and blushed as red as the proverbial beet.

"I'll have to think that over!" she gasped.

Wheeling, she fled the room. The door banged loudly behind her.

Chapter 11. SCHEMERS

DOC Savage's five aides stared at their bronze leader in a stunned fashion.

"Holy cow' Doc!" gulped Renny. "Supposin' she had taken you up?"

"That wouldn't be such a calamity!" chuckled the homely Monk. "She's a pippin! I believe she's the prettiest girl I ever saw."

Doc's powerful voice interrupted what promised to be a wordy discussion of his matrimonial prospects.

"You fellows get into Tibetan garments," he directed. "From what that girl said, there are probably some here that will fit us. She claimed we had been wearing them."

The men scattered, searching. Within a few moments, they reassembled.

"The duds are here, all right," Monk muttered. "Don them," Doc repeated. "Johnny, you speak the best Tibetan, thanks to your experience as an archeologist. Or are you up on it?"

"I conducted an expedition into northern Tibet to hunt dinosaur eggs, once," Johnny said. "Sure. I remember the language."

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"Drift around over town," Doc directed. "Make inquiries about this blue meteor and about Mo-Gwei. In other words, check up on the girl's story, and see what else you can learn."

"C).

"Another thing – look into that missionary yarn. See if there ever was a missionary couple here, with whom Rae Stanley stayed, and who returned to England."

"Righto," said Johnny.

"The rest of you fellows trail along and guard Johnny," Doc directed. "These Tibetans are not savages or anything of the kind, but they do like to bait a foreigner, and that starts fights. Avoid trouble if you can."

"The fact that we are in native garb will simplify matters," said Johnny.

The men hastily donned the Tibetan robes, high boots with great garters, and fur caps.

Ham was fortunate enough to have an outfit which fit him. It was also flashier than the others.. He strutted proudly.

"Nifty, eh?" he asked Monk.

"Sure," Monk said unkindly. "You look like a canary that fell into a paint bucket."

Ham frowned critically at Monk's habiliments, which were many sizes too small.

"An ape in a sausage skin!" he snorted.

"Bless me!" ejaculated bony Johnny. "Where did Doc go?" The men glanced around in surprise. Unnoticed in the bustle of dressing, Doc had left their midst.

After the first astonishment, the five men showed no great anxiety. The giant bronze man often departed in this ghostly fashion. Usually, he did it when going upon some secret and all-important mission of his own.

The homely Monk had an expression which fitted the situation.

"Doc's got a hen on," he said.

Monk gathered up Habeas Corpus, the pet pig, tucked the laughably ugly specimen of a porker under an arm, and trailed Johnny outside.

The five of them rambled off, hunting an information mine in the person of a Tibetan loafer.

INTENT brown eyes watched the party out of sight from one of the small windows. Rae Stanley had employed a pin to jab a tiny hole in the oiled-paper pane, and to this she kept an eye pressed.

She exhibited an expression of relief when the crooked village street swallowed Doc's men. Walking swiftly, she went to one room after another, peering behind curtains and into recesses. When she had examine the last room, she nibbled her lips uncertainly.

"Doc Savage!" she called at last. "Doc Savage!"

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No reply came from the gloomy rooms.

Rae nodded, as if satisfied that Doc was not in the house. She drew a small but businesslike revolver from one ample sleeve of her Tibetan gown, examined it to make certain it was charged with cartridges, then replaced it.

She stepped outside. The air was appreciably colder than it had been less than an hour ago. This was due to the fact that the sun had been speared by one of the high mountain peaks to the westward.

The lamas encircling the shrine were moving faster, probably to keep warm. The shadows of Tibetan twilight were fattening blackly in the cramped streets.

Rae Stanley kept in the murk and went furtively. Not many wayfarers were abroad, but she took great pains to avoid meeting even those. The hue of her garments, being deep of color, blended with the night much more effectively than would lighter yellows and blues.

Once, the young woman clamped herself against the wall of a compound and permitted a file of Tibetans to pass, weapons aclatter, so close that she could have touched them.

Rae Stanley's stealthy way led to the outskirts of town. Here, hillmen and desert nomads, who were paying a visit to Tonyi for the trading season, had pitched their yurts.

The yurts, a type of structure which housed practically all Tibetans who were not village dwellers, were like inverted bowls, varying from a dozen to twenty feet in diameter. They consisted of a light wooden framework, which could be taken down in a hurry for transportation. Over this was fastened large sheets of felt, or mumdahs. Four-foot holes in the center of the domes permitted the escape of smoke and fumes and provided ventilation.

The young woman approached one of the yurts and made a tapping signal on the mumdah covering. A moment later she repeated it – two short taps, a pause, then three single taps, widely spaced.

The flap of a door was lifted and a voice said: "C'mon in!"

Rae Stanley, bending low, entered.

The place was not possessed of an inviting odor. A fire of leyzak burned blue in the center of the floor. Over this, a kettle of tea bubbled. Near by stood a churn and other ingredients for making the national drink of Tibet, buttered tea.

Great yellow-and-brown spotted robes of Tibetan leopard lay on the floor. Several dukor, or hill partridges, hung from the roof, and bowls of yak milk stood in a corner, near containers holding raisins, dried apricots, and kernels of apricot stones.

Rae Stanley peered at the man who admitted her, squinting in the pale-blue light.

It was Saturday Loo.

Another man arose from beside the teyzak fire. His face was greasy, soot-smearred, and his Tibetan garments were devoid of decoration and none too clean. His appearance was that of a beggar.

A close observer might have recognized John Mark Shrops.

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"Did you tell the bronze bloke we are dead?" Shrops demanded, anxiety in his whanging Cockney tones.

"I told him," Rae Stanley replied coldly. "I told him everything, just as you directed."

"Then what 'as brought you 'ere?" Shrops snapped. "You're takin' a chance!"

"I want more instructions," said the girl. "I don't think Doc Savage believed a single one of the string of fibs that I told hi –"

OUTSIDE the yurt, dogs set up a terrific barking.

Saturday loo sprang nervously for a rifle, then scuttled outside, the weapon cocked and ready in his hands.

Rae Stanley and Shrops waited, nervously silent. Perhaps two minutes later, Saturday Loo returned. The Asiatic shrugged.

"It has been said that the Creator of the world and the things upon it, had an appetite and a barking noise left over, so he made the dog," he said sheepishly. "Verily, that must be true. I found naught. Perhaps the dogs were barking at a yak."

"Sure, that was it," Shrops said, as if reassuring himself more than the others. "Nobody in Tonyi suspects that we ain't traders who brought in a load of yak tails and fleece from the shawl-wool goat for a China-bound caravan."

"I don't think my story fooled Doc Savage," said Rae Stanley.

"Why?" Shrops demanded.

"He made no mention of the fact that he had just awakened," Rae explained uneasily. "And he seems to know a great deal about the situation. Several times, I wondered if he had actually been under the influence of the blue meteor all the way from South America."

"E was!" Shrops granted. "Ain't no livin' man proof against the blue meteor!"

"There's another thing," murmured the young woman. "Doc Savage suggested that the marriage be performed tonight."

Shrops snorted. "So what?"

"That shows he was playing with me. He knew very well that the engagement story was not true. He called my bluff. What am I going to do?"

"Marry 'im," said Shrops.

"You cad!" gritted the girl.

Shrops chuckled heartily. "Don't go pretendin' you don't fancy the idea, me darlin'. Hi've been watchin' you make sheep eyes in 'is direction while we was bringin' 'im from South America, along with 'is men. Go ahead an' marry 'ins. You'd be collectin' a bloomin' famous 'usband, young lady."

Rae bit her lips angrily.

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"I won't do it!" she snapped. "Not under conditions like this!"

Shrops suddenly shed his mirth. He juttred his head forward. His face was evil in the blue glow from the fire in the center of the yurt.

"Are you forgettin' what Hi can do if you don't play along with me?" he growled.

The girl paled. "You mean – "

"Hi mean that we're 'ere in Tibet now, an' Hi don't 'ave to send no cable to 'ave the little job done!"

Rae Stanley shuddered.

"All right," she said. "I'll go through with it. But you've got to keep your part of the bargain."

"Hi will," Shrops grunted. "You just keep on tellin' that bronze bloke that 'e's been conscious an' doin' things all the time. You can make 'ins believe it!"

"Very well," Rae Stanley agreed reluctantly. "But I wish this was over. Haven't you got some clew to Mo–Gwei's whereabouts?"

"Not yet," Shrops told her. "The bloody swab is like a ghost. Nobody knows anything about 'ins. But Hi've got Saturday Loo's men workin' an' snoopin' for information. When Hi gets any, Hi'll give it t' you, an' you can pass it along t' Doc Savage."

This terminated the interview. Rae Stanley left the yurt with its stifling atmosphere and its two evil tenants.

As she walked off, a bedlam of dog barking arose to her right. The yipping uproar subsided quickly, however.

Haunting shadows, the young woman retraced her way toward the stone house in which Doc Savage and his men had awakened.

AT the precise moment that entrancingly pretty Rae Stanley quitted the yurt, Doc Savage's five men were re-entering the stone dwelling. They glanced about in search of their bronze chief.

"Doc isn't back yet," Renny rumbled.

"If as Monk said, Doc has a hen on, I hope it hatches out something," Long Tom grunted. "It's little enough information that we collected."

The unhealthy-looking electrical genius went to the room in which he had awakened. From his stacked baggage, he extracted a rather bulky case. Opening this, he brought to light a compact and remarkably powerful short-wave radio transmitter and receiver.

He set this up, clipped the receivers over his ears, and rattled the key.

"What're you tryin' to do?" Monk asked.

"Shut up," Long Tom suggested.

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For some minutes, Long Tom alternately transmitted and received. A satisfied expression on his pallid countenance, he finally doffed the receivers.

"I got in touch with a newspaper radio station in Calcutta," he reported. "First, I asked him for dope on the appearance of the blue meteor in Antofagasta, Chile, more than a month ago. He had it. That meteor spread havoc in South America. Passing over the town, it made thousands of people mentally sterile. And here is the surprising part none of the victims have recovered."

"That, brothers, is an important point," said Doc Savage's remarkable voice from the door.

The five men spun in astonishment. None had heard Doc's return, just as they had not detected sounds of his departure. The giant bronze man had the ability to move about with ghostly silence.

"The fact that we have recovered and those in South America have not," Doc continued, "strengthens a suspicion which had already occurred to me."

"What?" asked Long Tom.

"Didn't the fact that we all regained consciousness at about the same time strike you as strange?" Doc countered.

"I'll tell a man!" rumbled big-fisted Renny. "That was almost as strange as our long sleep. It seems that those of us with the strongest physiques would have recovered first, such as you or Monk or myself."

"That's the point," Doc agreed. "All indications are that we were given a cure for the effects of the blue meteor. Otherwise, it is highly unlikely that we would have revived at the same time."

Long Tom nodded. "I learned something else, too. That steamer, the Chilean *Senorita*, was found abandoned near one of the mouths of the Ganges river. The spot was about south of here. No trace was found of the crew, and investigation disclosed that the recent purchasers of the boat had given fictitious names."

"That probably indicates how we came across the Pacific," Doc offered. "Shrops, Saturday Loo, and Rae Stanley brought us over."

The five men gaped at Doc.

"How d'you know the girl is in with those two thugs?" asked Renny.

"I just followed the young lady on a visit to Shrops and Saturday Loo," Doc advised them.

WHEN the first surprise subsided, Renny straightened out his long, puritanical face and said, "So that's where you were."

"Shrops is masquerading as a Tibetan, and he and Saturday Loo are occupying a yurt on the outskirts of town," Doc explained. "I had a little trouble overhearing all that was said, because all of the dogs that passed insisted on barking at me."

Doc made a slight gesture, and the five men ringed in close. Doc dropped his voice to a wispy note that only the five could hear.

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"The girl will be back soon," the bronze man announced. "I came on ahead – for she was going slowly, in order not to be seen."

"Have you any idea what is behind all this?" Long Tom asked.

"Saturday Loo and Shrops seem to want me to wipe out this Mo–Gwei," Doc replied. "They are forcing the girl to aid them. They seem to have some hold over her. Whenever she becomes rebellious, Shrops threatens to do something, and the threat brings the girl to terms."

"Huli!" granted the homely Monk. "It's about time we persuaded that young lady to talk!"

"That's exactly what we're going to do when she shows up," Doc replied. "Now, what dope did you fellows pick up about Mo–Gwei?"

Ham took it upon himself to answer this question. He punctuated his statements with jabs of his innocent-looking black sword cane.

"We found a talkative Tibetan very soon after you sent us out," he explained. "The fellow could tell us little, except for one point that explains why the residents of this village are particularly hostile to all white men they meet."

"What is that?" Doc asked sharply.

"They consider the blue meteor a curse sent by white men."

"Where did that belief originate?"

"Our source of information didn't know."

Doc considered. "What about the missionary with whom Rae Stanley said she stayed?"

"The missionary part of her yarn was true," Ham replied. The bronze man was silent. He seemed to be listening. "The girl should be arriving," he said thoughtfully. Clapping thunderously on the heels of his words came the reports of four shots, fired rapidly. Then, a five-count later, two more banged. Mixed with the pitching echoes of the gunfire was a long, piping wail of terror.

It was Rae Stanley's voice.

Chapter 12. THE PHANTOM MO–GWEI

THE low stone room, in which Doc Savage and his men stood, was lighted by a crude, chimneyless copper lamp. During the first thumping uproar of shots, Doc extinguished the lamp with a wave of his hand that stirred a breeze.

Ham and the others started a simultaneous charge for the door.

"Wait!" Doc's powerful voice commanded.

"But the girl

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"It may be a trick. Long Tom, stand by your radio!"

Obediently, the electrical expert found his apparatus in the darkness, switched the circuit on, and clamped the receivers to his ears.

Doc Savage did not quit the house immediately. Instead, he whipped to the chamber which held his own equipment. Using a flashlight which played a white, cordlike beam, he extracted several devices from boxes and bags, and stowed them within his garments.

He did not depart by door or window. Leaping upward, he accomplished the extremely difficult feat of grasping a ceiling beam with one hand and clinging to it, while his corded, metallic fist drove a series of terrific blows against the roof. Sun-baked mud and rocks were loosened. Doc opened an aperture large enough to pass his mighty frame. Enemies might be watching the doors.

Gliding lightly across the rooftop, Doc came to the edge and dropped to the rutted dirt street. From many parts of the village, excited howls came. Men had been aroused by the shots. Being of a fighting race not at all loath to join a fray for the pure love of a scrap, they popped into the streets with weapons in hand.

From among these sounds, Doc picked certain significant scufflings and low commands. He advanced, making no more noise than the darkness itself.

He distinguished several men. All were Tibetans. They were fellows whom Doc had never glimpsed before; this he realized when he was very close to them.

Shrops and Mo-Gwei were not among them.

Three of them held Rae Stanley. Another had thrust a wad of felt, torn from a mumdah, between the young woman's jaws, and was industriously tying it in place.

Beside them stood a coffin-shaped wooden box. The lid of this was open, apparently to receive the girl.

Rae kicked at them, tried to strike them with her fists. An evil-faced Tibetan bounced around with the girl's revolver. It was evidently this weapon which had been fired, for two of the men were nursing minor bullet wounds.

"Kwi sheeay!" hissed the man with the gun. "Hurry up!"

Rae Stanley managed to spit out the gag by flailing her head.

"Help!" she screamed.

The shriek rang in Doc's ears, conveying genuine horror. It told him what he had been waiting to ascertain – this was not play acting.

"Mao!" grated the Asiatic with the gun. "Cat!" He prepared to knock the young woman senseless.

Instead of bringing the gun against the girl's temple, however, the Asiatic's arm was all but jerked from his body as a corded bronze hand seized it. The gun flew away, clattering against a stone house.

The man shrieked. The other Tibetans howled and sprang into the fray. They dropped Rae Stanley to have their hands free.

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"Doc Savage!" the young woman gasped.

She leaped erect and closed with the nearest Tibetan, swinging her fists and kicking.

THE Tibetans had nerve, and they piled into the combat with the greatest of confidence. Doc was one man against several.

"This will be simple!" howled a brown man.

Doc's fingers drifted out and seemed barely to flick the fellow's cheek. An astounding thing happened. Lids closed over the man's glittering eyes. His jaw sagged. He seemed to go to sleep on his feet.

He fell over slowly, and crashed his full length on the ground.

An instant later, Doc's finger tips touched the skin of another Tibetan, and that individual also gave an excellent imitation of going to sleep in the midst of the fight.

A third moon-faced villain met an identical fate. Confidence seeped out of the yelling Tibetans, and horrified surprise took its place. The manner in which their fellows dropped at the bronze man's mere touch, smacked of black magic.

Only two of the gang were now on their feet. This pair sought to flee. But they might have been sluggish yak calves striving to escape a mountain leopard. Doc was upon them instantly.

One Tibetan collapsed from the fantastic magic in Doc's touch.

A great bronze beam of an arm gathered in the second runner. The fellow screeched and struck, but the blows only bruised his knuckles on the metallic man's muscles. His yelling became one long peal of terror. He felt as if he were imprisoned in a nest of steel girders.

"Dang hsin!" he screamed. "Be careful! You will crush my bones!"

"Ease the pressure with many words, rapidly spoken," Doc advised in the flowery native tongue.

"What kind of words?" wailed the prisoner.

"Words giving the name of your master and his whereabouts," Doc directed.

Pretty Rae Stanley came close.

"That's it – make him talk!" she gasped. "He's one of Mo-Gwei's men. He may be able to lead us to Mo-Gwei!"

The Tibetan apparently did not fancy the idea of telling tales on his sinister master, Mo-Gwei. He threw back his head and voiced one of the most ear-splitting screams Doc had ever heard.

That sound covered the oncoming of disaster. Through it, even Doc's super-sensitive ears failed to detect the approach of a man.

A rifle barrel levered downward in the darkness. It struck Doc's head, and the bronze giant dropped his captive and sagged prone.

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FULLY a dozen other Tibetans charged out of the night. They bristled with guns. Two of them grasped the girl and held her tightly.

The fellow who had struck Doc raised his rifle for a second blow.

"Listen to his skull burst!" he grated, and struck.

His rifle barrel struck the hard ground, for Doc was magically not there when it fell. The barrel broke free of the stock, with a crunching of rending mechanism and splintering wood.

The Tibetan moaned, probably more from grief over the mishap to his rifle than regret because Doc had escaped. Rifles were scarce and costly in Tibet.

"Chung feng!" he bellowed. "Charge! Seize the bronze devil!"

That, however, proved an impossible deed. Doc Savage, mighty man of bronze, had obviously been but slightly stunned by the rifle blow. He had drifted like a bat into the surrounding night.

"Pursue him not," commanded the straw boss of the gang. "We have the fair flower, which is all we were ordered to get."

Rae Stanley was now gagged, dumped in the coffin of a box, and the lid fastened. Four men shouldered the receptacle.

Other men lifted the thugs who had succumbed to Doc's fantastic touch. From their grunted opinions of their comrades' ability, it was apparent that all belonged to the same gang. The late arrivals had been posted in the background.

"One would think you were worms in a chicken coop," growled the leader.

"The bronze man has devil-magic in his hands," groaned the man whom Doc had started to question.

Indeed, this man was the only one of the first party to seize the young woman who was now conscious.

"How did he overcome you, O inefficient one?"

"I do not know," replied the other. "At his touch, my companions went to sleep."

"Kwai hsie!" snapped the man in charge. "Hurry up! Let us remove ourselves from this accursed spot!"

The party hurried off, bearing the coffin-box holding the girl, and carrying their unconscious and injured fellows.

A TIBETAN citizen thrust his head out of a door and yelled a p'al-skad equivalent of "What's going on here?"

His answer was a shot. But the curious one held his ground. He carried a gun, a monstrosity of a thing with a hewed stock and a crude, octagonal-bored barrel. This weapon was accompanied by a pitchfork-like supporting stick.

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The Tibetan dispensed with the rest. Planting his weapon against the side of a door, he struck a match and applied it to a bit of tinder which protruded from a small breech hole – in the fashion of ancient cannons. There was time enough between the application of the flame and the explosion to permit taking an aim.

The blunderbuss filled the street full of smoke and deafening noise. The bullet, a hand-hammered lump of lead, missed its target at least fifty feet.

The men bearing the coffin-shaped box swore their best p'aI-skad oaths.

"We are followers of Mo-Gwei!" howled their chief.

At this, the fellow with the portable cannon whirled and fled, terrified. Mere mention of the name of Mo-Gwei had been sufficient to puncture his balloon of courage. As he ran, he bellowed the alarm.

"Men of Mo-Gwei, the devil-faced one!" he broadcast. "They number a thousand! And the blue meteor is coming!"

This last was stark exaggeration, induced by the fellow's fear of Mo-Gwei.

Such was the awe in which the mysterious master of the blue meteor was held, that Tibetans disappeared from the streets. Crannies and doorways seemed to absorb them in the fashion that drought-ridden earth soaks up the first drops of rain.

The Mo-Gwei henchmen advanced rapidly, making for the edge of the settlement.

"It is well," said the man in charge. "We shall leave the village without difficulty. Then we will hurry with the fair flower to Mo-Gwei, master of masters, who wears the mask of Bron, the half-king of hell."

Bolting about in the coffin-like box, Rae Stanley wondered why Doc was making no attempt to rescue her. She did not believe the bronze man had been wounded. And after the terrific effort which Doc had made at freeing her, it did not seem reasonable that he would give up.

Suddenly, her heart leaped.

To her ears came a note like a gigantic bullfiddle. The sound – one short roar – was deafening. Men screeched. Rae sustained minor bruises as her prison box was dropped from the bearers' shoulders.

Three Tibetans were down. They were not moving; but a close observer might have noted that their breath was coming freely.

They were victims of the mercy bullets with which Doc's men had charged their small, super-firing machine pistols. It was these weapons which had made the bullfiddle roarings.

Monk came charging out of the night. Disdaining the use of his rapid-firer, he clutched with hairy hands for a foe.

"An ape!" bawled the prospective victim. He managed to evade Monk and fled, calling upon his ancestors to forgive his numerous sins.

Monk veered left and collared another man. He lifted the fellow without apparent difficulty, and slammed him among his companions.

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Renny, monster fists sledging tremendous blows, bounded in from the side. Ham trailed him, his sword cane unsheathed and making sounds not unlike a plucked banjo string.

Johnny, an animated skeleton, and Long Tom, his pale face a gray blur in the night, trailed into the scrap. Their guns emitted deafening hoots, and more Tibetans caved down.

The attack was too sudden, too violent, for the men of Mo-Gwei. They retreated wildly.

MONK and the others followed the frightened Tibetans. The tiny machine guns continued to moan. But, strangely enough, all of the shots seemed to miss.

No more Tibetans were dropping.

The unearthly roaring of the weapons, a sound totally new to the ears of the round-faced Asiatics, brought great fear, however. They raced down a gloomy alley of a street, intent on getting away from the fearsome little guns.

After covering a hundred yards, their leader awakened to the fact that they had slightly outdistanced the pursuit.

"Lih ding!" he barked. "Halt! We dare not run away in this fashion. Mo-Gwei's band falls heavily upon cowards!"

The others came to a stop. Now that the first surprise was over, they realized they feared Mo-Gwei more than the amazing guns wielded by Doc's aides. They unlimbered their own pistols and rifles and opened fire.

Powder flame flushed the street a gory red. Sounds of the shots rolled over the town and came bouncing back from the near-by hills in chains of echoes.

Doc's aides returned only scattering shots. None of the bullets hit human targets. The rapid-firers did not blast out their appalling noise.

"They have exhausted the ammunition for their strange guns!" shouted a Tibetan. "Charge them before they can reload!"

The stocky men rushed, firing recklessly. Resistance melted away magically in front of them.

"They flee!" howled a moon-faced man delightedly.

"They are dogs who lose courage after one loud bark!" screeched another.

It was noticeable, however, that the men of Mo-Gwei refrained from pursuing Doc's five aides, whose retreat was so surprising, considering their fierce attack.

The Tibetans ran to the coffinlike box. The ropes were still about it. One man started to undo these, intending to learn if their captive was still inside.

Shoving his comrade aside, another fellow grasped the end of the box and lifted. He grunted under the weight.

"It is heavy; hence the fair flower is still within," he stated.

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The men shouldered the coffin box, gathered up the victims of conflict – they numbered quite a few by now – and quitted the confines of Tonyi in great haste.

"THIS one's small wisdom fails to fathom why our unworthy attackers fled so hastily," puzzled a Tibetan when the last house was left behind.

"Cowards have white skins, occasionally," he was reminded.

They mounted a narrow, rutted road. The going here was difficult, and there was much complaining about the weight of the unconscious men.

"What manner of magic brought senselessness at the bronze man's touch?" muttered a man.

"That is truly a mystery," said another. "They seem only to sleep, yet they cannot be awakened."

"Stuff thy mouths with mumdah felt!" snapped the leader. "Such an act would bring on silence, which is much to be desired."

After this, there was a general conserving of breath for the climb. They came at last to a thicket of larch trees.

Here waited an arabas. Upon this cumbersome two-wheeled cart, the coffin-shaped box was lashed. Clambering upon the wheels, which were nearly six feet high, the Tibetans piled their strangely unconscious comrades atop the case.

The arabas was drawn by five horse – three at the wheel and two in tandem.

A Tibetan loaded the bloused upper portion of his robe with small rocks, then mounted the arabas. The vehicle set off at a great pace, the charioteer employing his supply of rocks to keep his five horses in fast motion.

Here in the open country, there was ample moonlight to disclose the trail.

The driver glanced frequently at his sleeping cohorts.

"Strange, this sleep which has gripped them," he mumbled.

Chapter 13. PROFESSOR STANLEY

DAYLIGHT saw the arabas and the cavalcade of Tibetans far to the northward. They had been traveling steadily. Traversing a mountain pass, they had encountered a snow flurry, for at this great altitude, no month was entirely free of a wintry touch. White flakes stuck to their clothing and to the shaggy fur of the ponies pulling the arabas.

They were crossing a sai, a great stretch of sand and boulders. Horsehair, which, with the first appearance of the morning sun, they had hung down over their eyes as a precaution against snow blindness, was still in place.

"My legs have become as dead yaks," groaned a man, who was having difficulty lifting one foot and putting it ahead of the other.

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They were all on the point of exhaustion, for there had been few halts for rest.

Due to their haste, and the necessity of untying and removing wounded men from atop it, the coffin-shaped box had not been opened. Nor had any of the strangely-sleeping men awakened.

The leader now advanced and rapped on the box.

"Are you comfortable, O fairest flower?" he demanded.

"Of course not!" replied a muffled, angry voice from within the box. "Let me out!"

The Tibetan smiled and dropped back among his men. The voice in the box he had recognized as Rae Stanley's. He had, in fact, tapped on the box numerous times during the night. He wanted to make sure their prisoner did not freeze to death, for it was very cold.

The little caravan reached the edge of the sai. Below, in a valley, was a small, ramshackle village.

In architecture this settlement was not unlike the pueblos of certain American Indian tribes. The roofs, however, were of the sweeping Asiatic style.

It was evident the village had been long abandoned, and that the present tenants abided there only temporarily. Shaggy ponies were picketed near by, and riding yaks were to be seen.

Men came from the decrepit pueblo and stuck out their tongues at the newcomers by way of extending a polite greeting. More substantial welcome appeared in the form of yak horn goblets full of kumis. Having downed this beverage of fermented mare's milk, the late arrivals immediately felt better.

"Is the all-wise Mo-Gwei present?" one asked.

"He is," was the reply. "And he will see the fair flower at once."

The coffin of a box was hurriedly unlashd from the two-wheeled cart. The wounded thugs were hauled off, together with the men who were strangely asleep.

"What evil magic has befallen these slumbering sticks?" growled a Tibetan.

"That, O-man-who-asks-questions, is a mystery."

The weirdly quiescent fellows were dragged away to their quarters. Among the injured men, broken arms were the worst hurts.

"Come!" grunted a man. "Mo-Gwei awaits you."

The casketlike box was carried toward the door of this village which was so remindful of one many-roomed house.

A particularly cold blast of morning wind came squealing across the sai and down into the canyon.

"Blessed be Mo-Gwei for selecting this abandoned Village of the Mad Ones for our temporary headquarters," muttered a man. "I have no liking for the cold of these high places."

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THEY bore the box down a narrow passage. One Tibetan, going ahead, lighted the way with a flaming bundle of tushkin, or mountain sage. There were no windows here in the depths of the dead town, and the way was inky.

The air smelled of the inevitable buttered tea, fermenting barley beer, and of men badly in need of a bath. An aroma of incense became noticeable and grew stronger, until it entirely overcame the less pleasant scents.

The cavalcade descended crude stairs, and wheeled into a room which was very large and lighted by two guttering copper lamps.

The chamber had been hewn from solid stone. There were no windows or other doors. No rugs padded the floor; no tapestries blanketed the walls.

The incense odor was almost overpoweringly strong here in this bare room.

"Lower the box, offspring of silly partridges!" rattled a shrill, quarrelsome voice.

No one had appeared. The piping voice was very loud, however. It penetrated to all corners of the room.

The men lowered the coffin-shaped case.

"Is the fair flower in that box?" asked the strident voice.

"Yes, all-wise Mo-Gwei."

"Goats!" shrilled the weird voice. "Address me as Mo-Gwei, The Devil-faced, Master of the Blue Meteor, and Future Master of All Mankind!"

"It is the fair flower in the box, O Mo-Gwei, The Devil-faced, Master of the Blue Meteor, and Master of All Mankind to be," the Tibetan repeated obediently.

The disagreeable voice rang out in laughter. Somehow, it sounded as if a guinea hen were cackling. Its owner was unseen.

"That has a sweet sound, my sons," Mo-Gwei said when his mirth subsided. "I will be master of all that lives, and I will share richly with you who have cast your lot with me."

The Tibetans licked lips, and looked greedy and pleased at this.

"Empty-headed ones!" shrieked the voice, suddenly changing from delight to squawking rage. "Do not stand there! Tell me, did you find any trace of those offspring of fishing worms, Shrops and Saturday Loo?"

"No trace, O Master."

An irate screeching filled the room. It was not a guinea hen sound this time, but more of the racket which might be expected from a shrewish parrot.

"I should give you to the blue meteor!" it squawked. "Such dotards are of no use to one who will soon be master of all the world!"

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The Tibetans blanched at this. Evidently Mo-Gwei was in the habit of carrying out such threats. They fell to their knees. Each man protruded his tongue as far as he possibly could.

Although ludicrous to an unknowing onlooker, such an exhibition was the most abject form of humility to these tribesmen.

"We searched industriously, O Future Master of Mankind," whined a frightened villain. "But of Shrops and Saturday Loo, we could find no trace at all."

"They are in Tonyi," asserted Mo-Gwei. "The fact that the girl was in town proves Shrops and Saturday Loo were also present. They brought her."

"They are concealing themselves cleverly, then, O Master."

"I will dispatch more intelligent men to search for them," declared Mo-Gwei. "Now dullards, open the box which holds the fair flower."

The Tibetans pounced upon the coffin case. While untying the bindings, one man dared to look upward.

Mo-Gwei crouched on a bedlike platform which was suspended from the ceiling by four chains.

The platform was obviously of modern bullet-proof steel. Above it was a square opening through which Mo-Gwei no doubt clambered to reach his hanging perch.

The ceiling aerie was a simple device, but it guarded against attack by knife or rifle.

Of the master fiend himself, only a hideous purple mask was visible. The mask had a red clot of a nose, villainous yellow eyes, and two great upturned horns. It was intended to represent the yak demon, an ogre Tibetans consider among the worst.

"Here is the fair flower, O Master!" A Tibetan opened the box.

Had surprise possessed the power to kill, every disciple of Mo-Gwei in the chamber would have dropped dead.

INSTEAD of Rae Stanley, the mighty frame of Doc Savage raised from the coffin container. His bronze hand lashed out, the finger tips brushing the jowl of the man who had opened the box. The fellow collapsed.

A second Tibetan, chancing to have in his hand the sharp dao with which he had cut the bindings of the box, hurtled forward. He struck fiercely.

It seemed to the moon-faced fiend that nothing could prevent the steel thorn of his dao from finding the bronze man's heart. He had knifed other men, and he had whetted his blade to a razor edge on his boots of yak hide. Experience and a sharp knife, he felt sure, would finish the bronze giant.

He even started a yell of triumph. "Ni kani! Look! Watch him die – "

The blade gashed thin air. In a manner that seemed beyond human ability, the bronze man had moved aside.

The yell still pumping from his throat, the knifeman fell across the coffin of a box. But, as he went down, Doc's fingers stroked his exposed skin. The wielder of the dao did not arise from his sprawled posture across

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the case, but lay perfectly motionless. A rather windy snore fluttered his lips.

The first man to fall also seemed asleep.

Both men had succumbed instantaneously to the magic in Doc's touch.

Consternation gripped the other Tibetans. They fell backward, pawing for weapons. Two bolted unashamedly for the door.

Overhead, Mo-Gwei cackled like a guinea hen being forced to watch a hawk gobble up its chicks.

Doc scooped up the knife which had missed its mark in his heart. His gold-flake eyes drove a glance upward, but Mo-Gwei had prudently drawn all parts of his person from view. Doc threw the knife at a copper lamp, and the lamp hopped end over end and extinguished.

Stripping the bulky fur cap off the second unconscious man, Doc flung it at the other lamp. That, too, went out.

A monster of blackness seemed to swallow the room, Silence fell.

The Tibetans, with their guns drawn, were waiting for some sound from Doc. No doubt they were wondering, as well, how Doc had managed to take the girl's place in the box.

In the excitement in Tonyi, of course, they had not noted the change in weight.

Not knowing of the tiny, portable radio transmitter which the bronze man carried, and with which he had directed his men to stage the attack in Tonyi, the Tibetans had reason to be puzzled. Eventually, it would dawn upon them that the assault had been made to draw them away from the casketlike box, so that the substitution of Doc for Rae Stanley might be accomplished without detection.

For a long time, probably, they would ponder how the voice of Rae Stanley – or a voice sufficiently like it to fool them – had spoken to them from the box.

The mystery would be clarified, however, to those who learned that Doc Savage, through unremitting practice, had developed an ability to imitate any voice, including even the thriller feminine tones.

DOC Savage, positioning himself silently under the banging, bullet-proof steel bed of Mo-Gwei, crouched low and leaped upward. His arms were extended high above his head. He hoped to reach Mo-Gwei's bower.

The distance was too great. Dropping back to the floor, Doc made no sound. He heard Mo-Gwei stirring. The master of villainy seemed to be clambering up through the hole in the ceiling.

Doc pushed a hand inside his clothing and brought out an object of metal, approximately the size of a pigeon egg. He wrapped an arm around his head in such a manner that his ears were covered. He flipped the metallic egg across the room.

The entire earth seemed to jar apart, so terrific was the report which followed. The object had exploded in mid-air, and its blast, while doing no damage to walls or ceiling, almost ruptured eardrums. The flash of the blast was blinding, as well

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Doc removed his arm from his ears. His eardrums were singing. The Tibetans, with no protection over their aural organs, would be deaf to ordinary sound for some seconds.

Seizing upon the coffin box, Doc upended it under Mo-Gwei's platform. He mounted the case, then used his flashlight briefly to locate the hanging bed of steel. He leaped, caught the contraption, and swung atop it. The deafened Tibetans did not hear him.

Mo-Gwei, however, had long since retreated through the ceiling hole.

Doc followed after him. He found himself on a level floor. His flash beam, waving like a white-hot wire, picked up mortared stone walls and a door. Doc whipped through the aperture.

Ahead, he caught a scuttling sound. He spiked his flash beam at the noise. Ugly flame licked at him, and he doused his light and weaved aside barely in time to let lead whistle past.

The bronze man went forward. He twisted through another low door.

The feet ahead were running. Obviously, it was Mo-Gwei in flight. Then came a grinding of rusty metals and a thump, noises which indicated a door was closing.

An instant later, Doc encountered the panel. It was solid, ponderous, and fastened on the opposite side. He rammed it with a Herculean shoulder. The cumbersome door only squeaked.

From his finger tips, Doc stripped tiny bronze caps. These were thimble-like, and so cleverly constructed that only closest scrutiny would reveal their presence.

The thimbles held tiny hypodermic needles containing a drug which induced instant unconsciousness. These devices held the secret of Doc's magic touch.

With his finger tips freed of the caps, Doc drew another of the pigeon eggs of metal. He wedged this in a cranny in the coarse timbers of the door, released the time-trigger, and leaped back, hands covering his ears.

There was a flash, an ear-splitting roar! Parts of the ceiling came down. The door was turned into a cloud of flying beams and massive cedar planks.

Doc waded through the subsiding storm of wreckage and glided down the black corridor beyond.

Stairs led him downward. He listened as he descended. There was silence. He went on more rapidly.

The passage zigzagged right, then left, and dropped in a twenty-foot flight of stairs. Once more, Doc halted to listen.

There came a shriek, hideous with terror. It was followed by a slip-slap-slup of a sound. This terminated in a louder thump.

Doc ran forward, his flashlight gorging the gloomy subterranean corridor with light. He passed numerous closed doors.

"Help!" cried a feeble voice from behind one of these doors.

The word was in English.

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Doc went on. More stairs dropped away steeply. He scooted his flash beam down these.

A man sprawled at the bottom of the steep stone staircase. He was folded in the middle, jackknifed backward in a fashion that meant a broken spine.

A repulsive mask of Bron, the yak demon, lay beside the awfully hinged body.

Doc descended swiftly, using his flash. Long before he reached the sprawled figure, he saw steam curling from the mouth and nostrils, from distended eyeballs, and from various oozing strings of crimson where skin had been broken in the fall. It was very cold, even in these depths, and the steam was formed simply because the body was moist and warm.

The man was dead, killed in the fall down the stairs.

Doc turned him over to get a look at the face. The features were altogether unlovely, being round and cheese yellow, with black pencil dots for eyes and a tiny puncture for a mouth.

The dead man's jaw sagged as Doc turned him over, and the small mouth came open to its greatest extent. Doc cast his light within. He sank to a knee and examined the interior of the lifeless one's mouth.

Then, arising, he went back to the door at the top of the stairs – the door from behind which a voice had called in English for help.

The panel was secured on the outside by a stout bar. Shouldering the bar back, Doc prepared to open the door, but delayed the movement while he called out a question.

"Who is in there?" he demanded.

"Stanley," quavered the voice. "Professor Elmont Stanley."

Chapter 14. THE STANLEY STORY

DOC Savage planted his flashlight upon Professor Elmont Stanley.

Stanley hardly looked like the leading world authority on the composition of planetoids and the scientist who went to the ends of the globe to investigate meteors.

His frame had never been robust, probably, and now it was virtually fleshless. His skin was a sickly hue, as if it might have been washed with a pale solution of nicotine. His eyes were sunken far back in their sockets, as if the supporting substance had leaked away from behind them.

Not a hair grew on his head. He had no trace of beard, eyebrows, or cranial hirsuteness. The effect was that of a big yellow skull.

Doc Savage had seen Professor Stanley's picture in a scientific journal more than two years before. This was the same man, but Doc was barely able to recognize the fact.

Stanley had apparently undergone great suffering.

The wreck of a man clasped his hands together in hysterical delight as he stared at Doc.

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"Take me out of here!" he screamed weakly. "Save me!"

"Calm!" Doc advised quietly. "Can you move about?"

"A little," Stanley mumbled. "The devils have fed me well. It's only the accursed blue meteor that has sapped my strength."

"Come on!" Doc directed.

Professor Stanley seemed anxious to explain just what horror he had been undergoing.

"They've been using me as a subject for experiments," he wailed. "They expose me to the blue meteor, then try out different cures on me."

"Then they have a cure?" Doc asked.

"Yes. Otherwise I would be a stark, raving maniac."

They moved into the corridor.

"When were you seized?" Doc asked.

"Shortly after my caravan left Tonyi," replied the wasted scientist. "That must have been months ago, maybe years.

I have lost all track of time. My confinement has been hideous."

"What is the blue meteor?" Doc persisted, after listening. Professor Stanley shook his head. "It seems incredible, but I do not know. It is some horrible, glittering thing, and it produces an absolute suspension of brain activity."

"What about the cure for its effects?"

"I do not know what that is, either. They gave it to me when I was – under the spell of their hideous blue thing."

Doc led the way toward the stairs, at the foot of which lay the body of the man with the broken back.

"I was pursuing Mo–Gwei," he said. "Have you ever seen his face?"

Professor Stanley shuddered. "N–never. And few of his men have seen it, I understand."

Doc reached the head of the staircase and trickled his light down to the body.

"Is that the mask Mo–Gwei wears?" he asked.

"Yes!" yelled Stanley. "Is he dead?"

"Broken back," Doc replied.

"Mo–Gwei – dead!" Stanley mumbled. "The world has been rid of an incredible monster."

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"That is not Mo-Gwei," Doc advised.

"Not – "

"Mo-Gwei had a voice," explained Doc. "That fellow down there is a mute – his tongue was cut out some time in the past."

WORKING rapidly, Doc began opening rickety doors and whipping his flashlight around the rooms beyond.

"The dead man was probably Mo-Gwei's bodyguard," he decided. "Being a mute, and possibly unable to write, he could not spread tales of his master's doings."

Professor Stanley offered hoarsely, "Mo-Gwei had a shrill, parrot voice. Perhaps this tongueless man could speak of – "

"Not a chance," Doc retorted. "Mo-Gwei gave his bodyguard the mask somewhere along this passage, and ducked into a door. The guard went ahead. Being unaccustomed to the mask, he stumbled and fell going down the stairs."

"Listen!" Stanley gulped. "The devil's men are coming!" The gloomy passage was starting to throb with running feet, to echo with distorted yells. At the far end, a gray flush of light appeared and danced. It was a torch of tushkin.

Doc extinguished his own light. He was a trifle slow. To the accompaniment of coughing thunder, a bullet snapped down the rocky corridor.

"We'll have to neglect Mo-Gwei for the moment," he advised Stanley.

"I'm afraid we'll never get out of here, as it is," the wasted scientist quavered.

They descended the stairs and came to the broken-backed body of the mute man.

Doc scooped up the mask of the yak demon. Then he carried the corpse itself into the handiest room and placed it in a remote nook where it was unlikely to be discovered.

The pursuers were much closer now.

"Quiet!" Doc warned, and set out down the passage.

Professor Stanley seemed too feeble to travel silently, for his feet made faint scuffings. Doc lifted the scientist bodily and carried him, juggling the yak mask under his free arm.

Stanley felt like an armload of bones.

At the first opportunity, Doc mounted. He turned to the left. His going was without noise, and the pursuers soon lost the trail. They spread like hounds, baying to each other in voices that rattled through the underground passages.

Ahead of Doc, daylight appeared. It came through a ragged hole in the ceiling. Wind whistled in the opening, and a sugary stream of snow poured down.

The Meteor Menace

Doc lowered Stanley. Then he leaped, caught the rim of the hole with his hands, and looked outside.

Rooftops were around him. Holes gaped where more than one roof had fallen in. Snow was drifted behind parapets.

Doc dropped back. He grasped Stanley and tossed him up until the thin scientist's hands clamped the roof edge, and the fellow could wriggle outside.

"Catch," Doc directed, and flung up the purple yak mask. Doc followed. He guided Stanley across the roofs, leaping from spot to spot to avoid the snow.

"Why bring the mask?" Stanley quavered.

Doc did not answer; instead, he selected a spot behind a chimney where snow was drifted waist-deep.

"I'm going to leave you in hiding and do some reconnoitering," he told the gaunt expert on meteors. "Stay exactly where I place you, understand?"

"Is that necessary? Why can I not go – "

"Getting out of this place is not going to be a simple matter," Doc advised. "The sides of the valley are without cover, and these fellows have modern rifles. You stick here while I look around."

"Very well," the cadaverous man muttered unwillingly.

Lifting Stanley, Doc skidded him feet-first into the snowdrift back of the chimney. Then, using his Tibetan gown, which he removed, Doc fanned the snowdrift smooth.

No casual eye could detect evidence that it had been disturbed.

Keeping low, and moving with furtive speed, Doc crossed the snow-spotted rooftops.

IN surmising that the slopes of the valley were being watched by Tibetans with modern rifles, Doc had been correct. The guards were on all sides. The shouts of their comrades within the pueblo-like structure had alarmed them. Every man was alert.

The watchmen overlooking the pens holding yaks and shaggy ponies, were especially surveillant.

"Could the bronze one but reach the ponies, he might conceivably escape," said a rifleman.

"Your words come from the well of deep wisdom," agreed another. "We will watch closely."

A high-pitched, querulous voice came from behind them, "It would seem the sons of Mo-Gwei were wise men," it said.

The riflemen whirled and found themselves confronted by an unlovely purple mask of Bron, the yak demon. They could distinguish little of the personage wearing the mask, because he was peering around a door jamb.

They recognized the squawking voice as belonging to Mo-Gwei.

The watchmen instantly sank to their knees, protruding their tongues as they did so.

The Meteor Menace

"Thy will, O Mo-Gwei, Master of the Blue Meteor, and Future Master of All Mankind?" one muttered.

"Keep a sharp lookout," ordered the unpleasant tones back of the mask. "The bronze man has seized upon Professor Stanley, and will attempt to rescue him. They may come this way. In that case, I will call out – "

A guard sprang to his feet.

"Lik-dieng!" he shrieked. "Look out! This man is not Mo-Gwei!"

He discharged his rifle at the hideous mask of the yak demon. Only the fact that the mask wrenched back with lightning speed kept the bullet from lodging in it.

Doc Savage – it was he who had been imitating Mo-Gwei – wrenched off the mask and discarded it. He retreated swiftly.

Doc's idea had been to lead the guards to think Mo-Gwei was in the vicinity, then to call out for assistance, causing them to desert their posts long enough to permit an escape. That they had seen through his trickery had profoundly surprised Doc. His voice imitation of Mo-Gwei had been as perfect as he could, with all of his consummate skill, make it. The guards had not been able to see enough of his person to discern that Mo-Gwei was not behind the mask.

Yet the ruse had been fathomed.

Doc bounded out on the roof. He intended to get Professor Stanley. But he had hardly faced the snowdrift where he had left the gaunt scientist when he came to an abrupt halt.

Stanley was now in the grip of half a dozen moon-faced Tibetans. They were hauling him to a roof opening.

Doc started toward them. A storm of rifle and revolver lead drove him down flat on the rooftop, seeking shelter.

PROFESSOR Stanley, it was mortally certain, had disobeyed Doc's admonition to remain hidden in the snowdrift. Otherwise, he would hardly have been discovered.

Doc was sure that no Tibetan had seen him conceal Stanley. He had kept a close watch against such a possibility.

On all fours, Doc worked away from the vicinity. Men swarmed upon the roof. A moment later, a group discovered the bronze man. Rifles set up a clapping uproar, and bullets kicked up snow, gouged rocks and dried mud, and made screaming, ricocheting whines.

Two slugs actually opened rips across the back of the robe Doc wore, although he was half buried in the snow which spotted the rooftop. He hastily scrambled to the nearest hole in the roof and dropped through.

Red flame plunged at him from a doorway. He had all but fallen into the arms of a party of Tibetans.

Another door was a black rectangle across the gloomy room. Doc, moving with a speed that kept rifle sights from finding him, ducked through.

Three times, in the next five minutes, he was shot at. The pursuit became hotter and hotter. Spreading in a great semicircle, the man hunters worked toward him.

The Meteor Menace

Getting Professor Stanley out of the pueblo-like village was an impossibility now. The place was swarming with the satellites of Mo-Gwei. There must be at least two hundred of them.

Doc halted, discovering a small door to one side. He entered the room.

Thirty seconds later, he was out again. Moving with great caution, so as not to be seen, he left the vicinity.

He had covered perhaps two hundred feet when a loud report sounded behind him. There came a second one. Tibetans yelled, discharged their rifles, and rushed the spot.

They were met by a deafening bang from inside the room in which Doc had tarried. It sounded like a shot. The roundfaced men began pumping bullets into the chamber.

They kept up the shooting for fully two minutes. Loud reports answered them from within the room. Then a man stared at a bit of reddish, scorched paper which had flown out of the room and landed at his feet.

"Ni kan!" he shrieked. "Look! It is paper off a firecracker!" The men dashed into the room. They found remnants of many exploded firecrackers, and others with long-time fuses still fizzing.

"A lowly donkey has a learned brain compared to the sand which fills our own heads!" wailed a man. "We have been tricked!"

They scattered to hunt Doc Savage.

They did not find him. All had been interested in the uproar which had resulted when the men fired upon the exploding firecrackers, and no eyes had kept watch on the valley sides.

By the time the search started, Doc was over the hill and whipping across the sandy rag'. The bronze giant ran with a distance-eating stride.

Although he had been carried from Tonyi in the box, he had, thanks to an excellent sense of direction and a small wrist compass, a good idea of where the village lay. He set a course for it.

He had been fortunate to escape from the pueblo-like village infested by Mo-Gwei's thugs. To rescue Professor Stanley at this time was beyond even the fabulous abilities of Doc Savage.

Doc was a veteran of many campaigns, and well did he know that retreat under certain circumstances is desirable. He had, moreover, certain highly important ideas which he wanted to work out.

Chapter 15. RAE CONFESSES

TIBETAN citizens of the town of Tonyi were consuming their midday meal when Doc Savage appeared in the settlement. The meals were very alike for rich and poor, consisting of yak steaks, or possibly a yak roast, bowls of warm yak milk, cheese made from yak milk, and tea in which plenty of yak butter had been added. The lowly yak provided almost everything.

Doc went directly to the house in which he had awakened from the mysterious period of senselessness.

Making no noise, he visited several rooms. None of his five men were in evidence. Doc heard a stir in the corridor and stepped out.

The Meteor Menace

"Oh!" gasped pretty Rae Stanley.

She stared at Doc, and radiance overspread her attractive features.

"I'm so glad you're back," she said. "I was worried. You took such a chance in substituting yourself for me in the box."

"Where are Monk and the others?" Doc asked.

"Searching for Shrops and Saturday Loo," Rae explained. "Shrops and Saturday Loo were not in the yurt when I guided your men there last night. That spoiled our hopes of seizing them."

Doc nodded. "Have you decided to give up that engagement story?"

The young woman colored and showed embarrassment.

"Shrops and Saturday Loo made me deceive you," she replied. "They have my father a prisoner, and they threatened to kill him unless I did as they wished."

Doc did not tell her that he had come upon her father, Dot as a prisoner of Shrops and Saturday Loo, but as a tenant in a barred room in Mo-Gwei's temporary headquarters.

"Their purpose was to trick me into wiping out Mo-Gwei, eh?" Doc asked.

Rae Stanley nodded. "Shrops and Saturday Loo were once partners of Mo-Gwei. They double-crossed him, taking part of the blue meteor, as well as a cure for its effects."

"Intended to use it to do some pillaging on their own initiative, eh?" Doc surmised.

"Exactly. They want Mo-Gwei out of the way. They're afraid of him themselves, and in addition, do not know his actual identity. So they hit on the bright idea of getting you to polish off Mo-Gwei for them. They went to South America for that purpose. They forced me to go along to aid them."

To this, Doc said nothing. His flake-gold eyes rested steadily upon the young woman. She shifted uneasily.

"Whether you believe it or not, I intended to tell you the whole truth the instant you captured Mo-Gwei," she said earnestly. "Of course, I was not such a fool but that I knew Shrops and Saturday Loo would try to kill you when you had Mo-Gwei out of the way."

Doc still made no reply.

"Don't you believe me?" wailed the girl.

"The part of your first story about your father going into the desert by caravan and leaving you here with a missionary

"Was true!" insisted Rae Stanley. "I swear it was true."

"What do you know of this blue meteor – of its actual composition?" Doc questioned.

"Nothing at ail! Absolutely nothing. Shrops and Saturday Loo kept it from me."

The Meteor Menace

Loud voices came from an outer room. Feet thumped and scuffed the hard earth floor.

MONK came in, his big-eared pet pig, Habeas Corpus, under an arm.

"Well, well," the homely chemist grinned, "I hope I didn't bust into no private talk between fiance and fiancée."

"The engagement is off!" snapped Rae Stanley. Then she looked at Doc, and her neck became faintly pink.

"Great!" Monk said gallantly. "That gives the rest of us a chance, except for Ham, here, who is handicapped by his wife and thirteen halfwit children."

The sartorially perfect lawyer, trailing Monk into the room, scowled darkly and fingered his sword cane.

Whenever a race for a young woman's favor was in prospect, Monk invariably told the wife-and-thirteen-halfwits story. While this preposterous yarn was not generally believed, a girl was inclined to doubt Ham after hearing it.

"One of these days I'm gonna shave you and see if there's really a man under that hair!" Ham told the furry Monk.

Renny entered, huge fists dangling like buckets of reddish concrete, on the ends of his arms. Long Tom, even paler by daylight, and the bony Johnny followed.

"What about Shrops and Saturday Loo?" Doc demanded. "We looked into every yurt around town," replied gaunt Johnny. "They've skipped."

Without the slightest hesitation. Doc began issuing orders. Long Tom was to assemble his electrical devices; Monk was to concoct grenades filled with a gas which would produce unconsciousness, but not death.

Renny was instructed to negotiate for the purchase of two yurts, and sufficient extra felt mumdahs for bed coverings; Johnny was to buy yaks, and Ham collect food.

Money for all this came from one of Doc's bags. Miraculously, the funds had not been disturbed.

"Saturday Loo and Shrops didn't want to handicap us," Doc decided.

"What's the idea of the outfitting?" asked Monk. "We're going after Mo-Gwei, as well as Shrops and Saturday Loo."

"You have a line on Mo-Gwei's whereabouts?" Doc's only reply to this was a brief nod. His five men, although they would have liked mightily to hear their bronze chief's story, did not press questions. They knew very well that it would be of no use.

Rae Stanley, however, was not so well acquainted with Doc's ways.

"You haven't told us your own story," she reminded Doc.

The metallic giant seemed not to have heard.

The Meteor Menace

"Did you learn anything of my father?" Rae persisted. Doc might have been afflicted with a sudden deafness. He busied himself assembling his own scientific equipment.

Rae Stanley stamped a foot angrily. "Say, what – "

Monk caught her arm. "Sh–h–h!" He guided her outside, then explained. "You're wasting your breath!"

The girl wrinkled her attractive brow. "Hut what got into him? Why wouldn't he answer my questions? Is he miffed because I tried to fool him with that engagement fib?"

"Nothing like that," the homely chemist told her.

"Then what ails him?"

The beauty was evidently not accustomed to having men ignore her queries.

"It's just Doc's way," Monk explained. "In some ways, the big fellow is beyond understanding. But what he does always turns out right. You can depend on that."

"That's not a clear explanation."

Monk mentally threw up his hands. "All right, all right," he chuckled. "I can't explain why Doc does things. He's too deep for me."

"He's wonderful, isn't he," the young woman said perversely.

"You said it!" Monk grinned. "Me and these other four palookas have been around Doc for years. Yet there ain't a day passes but that we're amazed at something he accomplishes."

"Where does he get his marvelous ability?" Rae Stanley asked wonderingly.

"He takes two hours of terrific exercise every day," Monk told her. "Exercises that develop all his senses."

The mahogany-haired girl considered this. "He must study a lot, too."

"Sure," Monk agreed. "But he does something else even more remarkable. He disappears completely for long periods, and not even the other four or myself know where he goes."

"Disappears?"

"For weeks, or even months. And always he comes back with some great scientific discovery. All we know is that he goes to his 'Fortress of Solitude,' where he studies and carries on scientific experiments without possibility of an interruption."

"I can understand how such a remarkable man would suit himself about answering questions," said Rae Stanley.

Her tone, however, said she understood nothing of the sort, and that she was still piqued at Doc.

"Want to help me mix chemicals?" Monk asked.

The Meteor Menace

"Sure."

Much to the dapper Ham's disgust, Monk and Rae proceeded to get along excellently. Ham hated to see his homely sparring mate make a hit with anything feminine.

Grumbling, Ham rambled off to purchase food.

"We'll meet near the yurt formerly occupied by Shrops and Saturday Loo," Doc advised. "Load the food and other stuff on the yaks Johnny will purchase. Leave the pig, Monk. Too cold in the mountains. Hire a Tibetan villager to take care of him."

DOC'S men had a manner of moving swiftly when on the trail of gentlemen such as Mo-Gwei, Shrops or Saturday Loo. An hour had not yet elapsed when they gathered near the yurt which Rae Stanley had visited the night before.

Monk had located a custodian for Habeas Corpus.

"That's it," said Rae, indicating the yurt.

Doc eyed the young woman levelly.

"You," he said, "are not accompanying us."

"And you," retorted the girl, "are mistaken! I'm going along!"

Doc glanced at the homely Monk. On occasions in the past, the bronze man's aides had noted a weird quality about Doc's flake-gold eyes – a strange ability to convey orders with their glance. Just now, Doc's gaze suggested that Monk return the young lady to town, whether or not such was her wish.

Monk took Rae's arm. "Doc's right," he said. "It's too dangerous for you."

Ham, gesturing with his sword came, interrupted.

"Hey, Doc," he rapped. "Have you checked up on the attitude of the people in this village? For some reason, they're particularly down on white people. We had to pay a dozen prices for food, yaks and two yurts. Otherwise, we wouldn't have gotten them. It might be dangerous to leave the young woman among them."

Without a word, Doc wheeled and strode into the town of Tonyi.

Ten minutes later, he was back.

"You're right, Ham," he said. "These people have an actual mania against whites. We will take the young lady along."

"Thank you," said Rae Stanley.

She gave Monk a cold look, and smiled ravishingly upon Ham as a reward for his intercession. She walked off on Ham's arm.

Monk, glowering after the couple, asked Doc, "Say – what has riled these villagers against whites?"

The Meteor Menace

Getting no answer to this, Monk looked around. Doc had either not heard the query, or had ignored it. The bronze man was over beside the yurt.

In Doc's hand was a tank device, to which was attached that which resembled a small spray nozzle. There was a pump for forcing compressed air into the tank. Doc was operating this pump.

He pointed the nozzle at the earth and turned a valve. With a hissing, an almost colorless spray poured out. Doc fanned this back and forth over the earth in front of the yurt entrance.

In magical fashion, grayish footprints sprang out. It looked as if some one had stepped in whitewash, then walked out of the yurt.

"Holy cow!" boomed Renny. "What's that?"

Conducting them into the yurt Doc pointed out, near the inside of the floor, a film of liquid the color of water, but as sticky as molasses.

He turned his sprayer on the colorless stuff. Instantly there was formed, by the union of chemicals in the spray and in the sticky material, a gray precipitate.

"I placed this chemical mixture inside the yurt door last night, after Rae Stanley departed," Doc explained.

Rae Stanley, seeming somewhat dazed by the manner in which the giant bronze man pulled figurative rabbits out of hats, gasped, "Why, this enables us to follow Shrops and Saturday Loo!"

"Let's go," said Ham. "It looks like they beaded straight away from town."

As Ham had pointed out, the grayish tracks left by Shrops and Saturday Loo bee-lined away from Tonyi.

Doc followed them swiftly, the others trailing with the yaks and the supplies. Only occasionally did Doc find it necessary to use his chemical device, for his eyes, trained by scientific exercise from his cradle days, possessed an ability to read sign beyond that of other men.

At times, villagers had crossed the trail, however, and on such occasions the spraying apparatus was essential.

Approximately a mile from the settlement, it was evident that a sizable force of men had joined with Shrops and Saturday Loo.

"Their gang," Monk surmised, reading the now easily distinguishable evidence of the meeting. "They all lit out to the north. Wonder what they're up to? They've got yaks and ponies."

Ham, who was riding a yak beside pretty Rae Stanley, hooted his ungainly steed up and suggested, "My idea is that Shrops and Saturday Loo, knowing Doc was onto their game, or suspecting that he might get onto it, decided to try some pot-shooting at Mo-Gwei on their own hook."

"Nobody asked for your idea," growled Monk, who was not pleased by the manner in which the dressy lawyer was monopolizing the young woman's attentions.

"I think he is right," said Rae, fixing Monk with a frosty eye.

"O. K.," Monk groaned. "Let's trail after 'em. Maybe they'll clean up on each other and save us a lot of trouble."

Chapter 16. THE TRICK

SUNSET found Monk still groaning. Now, however, his laments had to do with yaks in general, and their riding qualities in particular.

"I've traveled in lots of ways," he howled, "but this takes the cake by a long stretch. Such a gait!"

Monk evidently meant the peculiar manner in which a yak in motion seems to trot with its front legs and amble with the rear legs.

The fact that attractive Rae Stanley had shown a marked preference for Ham's company through the entire afternoon, did not tend to soothe Monk's temper.

Rae now glanced about.

High mountains jutted up about them. These were absolutely bare of vegetation, and an uninviting brownish-red in hue, not unlike the peaks of Arizona.

"That's strange," she remarked. "Or maybe it's not strange, either."

"What are you talking about?" Ham asked her.

"My father listened to all the legends he could dig up concerning the blue meteor," the young woman replied. "The general consensus seemed to be that the meteor struck in mountains such as these."

"We've been going steadily northward," Ham agreed. "I wouldn't be surprised if we were in the region where the infernal thing hit."

Ham might have been surprised, however, had he known that they were now in the vicinity of the pueblo-like village to which Doc Savage had been carried in the coffin-shaped box.

Doc had told no one of the existence of the Village of the Mad Ones. In fact, he had spoken no word concerning his encounter with Mo-Gwei, or with Professor Elmont Stanley. They were still on the trail of Shrops and Saturday Loo.

The sticky chemical, of course, had long since worn off the shoes of those they followed. But it was a simple matter for Doc to follow a trail such as was being made by Shrops and his party.

Doc Savage was ranging ahead of the others, picking out the trail.

They were not heading directly for the Village of the Mad Ones, but circling around it.

Doc appeared suddenly in the twilight. He approached Monk.

"How about playing bait in a little trap?" he asked, his voice so low that none of the others heard it.

"Huh?" Monk grunted.

The Meteor Menace

"It's dangerous, Doc said frankly.

"Count on me!" Monk grinned. "What d'you want me to do?"

"Just drop behind the party," Doc told him. "And don't take chances. By that, I mean don't do anything reckless."

"You know me," Monk chuckled.

"Sure," Doc told him dryly. "That's why I'm warning you not to get reckless."

Doc now moved forward until he came alongside Long Tom, the electrical wizard.

"Can you keep tuned in steadily on your portable radio receiver?" Doc queried.

"Easily," Long Tom replied.

By way of demonstration, he removed his bulky fur cap – they were all wearing Tibetan garb, which was best fitted to these high altitudes – and donned a radio headset. The outfit was compact, and he was able to draw his fur cap on over it.

Long Tom switched on the receiving side of the portable outfit.

"All set," he advised Doc.

Doc Savage nodded. He visited other members of the party, but the words which he addressed to them had only to do with their comfort.

A few minutes later, the bronze man went on ahead, and the oncoming night swallowed him.

"RIDIN' this yak is like sittin' on a hump of hair!" Monk complained.

Monk was referring to the manner in which yaks walk with beads held low, making it seem to the rider that his steed has no head.

"Giddap!" grunted Monk, and booted his yak in the ribs.

The yak promptly came to a complete stop.

Monk had known the animal would do this, having learned something of yak temperament during the afternoon ride. The creatures balked when tired or angry.

The rest of the caravan drew ahead, mounting a small hill. There was a sly delight on Monk's pleasantly ugly features. Doc had said there would be danger, and when the bronze man mentioned danger, he usually meant extreme peril. Monk, however, was unworried. This was the sort of thing he thrived upon.

He was quite happy, although not possessed of the slightest idea of what was due to happen.

Getting off his yak, he made a show of trying to get it in motion. A rope was tied to a ring in the animal's nose. Monk pulled on this. The yak's nose stretched, rubberlike, a surprising distance.

The Meteor Menace

"I'll walk," Monk growled, and threw down the rope.

The remainder of the cavalcade had topped the bill and become lost to sight. Monk strode after them. Looking around within a few seconds, however, he saw his balky yak following closely after him.

"The life of adventure!" he complained, and went back to have another try at riding the Tibetan version of a charger.

He snapped to an abrupt halt. Two squat, tobacco-colored men had appeared, one on either side of the trail. They held efficient automatic rifles, and these were trained on Monk.

"Silence is a food on which men thrive – under certain conditions," one murmured softly.

Monk understood the long-winded command for silence, and the gentle tones did not fool him. He elevated his furry hands.

The stocky fellows stepped close and removed Monk's weapons in a cautious manner, as if he were some ferocious beast which they were afraid of prodding into activity.

Monk recognized them. They were some of the swart gentry who had seized himself and Ham in South America, weeks before.

"Shrops's gang!" he grunted.

"Silence, big monkey!" ordered a rifleman.

"Shrops left you two behind to watch the trail, huh?" Monk ruminated.

One of the rifles cocked with a distinct click.

Monk hastily subsided, remembering Doc's admonition to avoid recklessness. Doc, of course, had foreseen this, had guessed exactly what would happen.

One of the dark men smirked.

"We talked the situation over, out there among the rocks," he said. "We have decided to take you to the all-wise Shrops."

"He'll be the all-to-pieces Shrops, if I ever get my hands on 'im!" Monk promised.

Inwardly, the hirsute chemist was elated. He understood now how Doc had foreseen this. Doc's sharp gaze had detected these guards left behind by Shrops, and the bronze man had overheard their decision to take any prisoners, they might catch, to Shrops, alive.

"It is to be regretted that we could not capture more than one of you," said one of the two captors. "You see, to secure your release, Doc Savage will have to eliminate the most-awful Mo-Gwei."

"Doc will wring your necks!" Monk growled.

"To cook a chicken, it is first necessary to catch it," chuckled the Asiatic. "Ni chu ba! Be off! Walk ahead of us."

The Meteor Menace

Monk complied with the command, making an effort to seem worried.

Doc, he realized, was somewhere out there in the darkness. The bronze man would follow Monk and his captors to Shrops and Saturday Loo.

Monk could hear Renny's deep voice rumbling beyond the hilltop as he moved off the trail. Distance made the cavernous tones unintelligible.

RENNY was saying, "It looks like things are starting to happen at last."

Attractive Rae Stanley, who had failed to notice anything peculiar in recent developments, turned her head.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Long Tom, the electrical magician, held up a hand in the murk.

"Quiet, please," he requested.

For some moments, he listened intently to what was coming over the portable radio.

"Shrop's men have seized Monk," he announced. "Doc is trailing them, believing he will be led to Shrops."

"Oh!" gasped Rae Stanley.

The young woman was astounded that so much had taken place almost under her nose, without catching her notice.

"Was Monk hurt?" Ham demanded.

The anxiety in the carefully dressed lawyer's voice was in marked contrast to the tone which he used to address Monk when they were face to face.

"Monk is O. K.," Long Tom replied.

"But how are you learning all of that?" Rae Stanley asked.

"Doc has a portable radio transmitter and receiver with him," the pallid electrical expert told her.

"But I didn't notice it!"

"Did you notice this one?" Long Tom asked, and threw open his robe. Secured to a webbing belt which encircled his chest were three compact, flat cases.

"No – I hadn't noticed!" said Rae, surprised.

"Transmitter, receiver and current supply," Long Tom told her, indicating each of the diminutive containers in succession. Doc's outfit is like this. They're not efficient over any great distance, but they serve us to keep in contact with each other."

"What're we to do?" Renny boomed.

The Meteor Menace

"Doc says leave the trail and head due west," Long Tom announced. "That's the direction Monk's captors are taking."

The party hastily followed this suggestion.

Night had descended in its entirety, and a brilliant moon and diamond-fleck stars had alleviated the murk somewhat. It was not going to be a bad night for traveling.

The group moved slowly, letting the sure-footed yaks pick their way.

"I hope poor Monk makes it all right!" Ham groaned.

MONK, at the moment, was hardly as worried as Ham over his prospects. He was keeping up a conversation which seemed rambling and inane, but which was actually calculated to draw morsels of information from his unwelcome hosts.

"You fellows are pretty smart," he said flatteringly. "I'll bet some of you managed to get yourselves hired by Professor Elmont Stanley when he made up his caravan to go in search of the blue meteor."

Monk, who did not know that Doc had located Professor Stanley, was trying to learn the whereabouts of the meteor expert.

"We have never seen Professor Stanley," replied one of the brown men in answer to Monk's query.

"Huh?" Monk ejaculated.

"At no time have we seen him."

"But I thought you guys had him a prisoner?"

Both of the homely chemist's captors laughed harshly.

"All wise men know that dangers which exist only in thought are as terrible as those which exist in reality," one of the pair explained long-windedly. "We fooled the girl."

"You mean Shrops lied to her about having her dad?"

"Thy small brain has grasped the truth, hairy one." Monk ignored this insult while he considered what he had learned.

"Is Mo-Gwei holding Professor Stanley?" the chemist demanded.

The Tibetans did not answer immediately.

"We know not," they replied at last. "But there are rumors of a hairless white man of great learning who has surrendered his brain to the blue meteor."

"That would be Stanley!" Monk shuddered. "You say the blue meteor has got him? Do you mean that Mo-Gwei has been usin' Stanley as a subject for experiments?"

"The information you wish is not in our brains," answered the other.

The Meteor Menace

"You don't know, eh? For the love of mud! Weren't you members of Mo-Gwei's gang before you sided in with Shrops and Saturday Loo?"

"Mo-Gwei's men know not their master, nor do they know much of his movements, or affairs."

"Did you guys have much trouble makin' off with a piece of the blue meteor?"

"We were clever," said the Tibetan proudly. "We escaped with the blue meteor and with the cure for its effects, before we were discovered."

Monk made his voice elaborately casual. The pair were talking much more freely than he had expected. He had visions of learning exactly what the hideous blue meteor was.

"Is it heavy to carry, this blue meteor?" he asked.

"Men do not carry it," retorted the dark man. "It is hauled upon yaks, except at times, when it –"

"Would thou like to lose thy tongue, fool?" snarled the other captor. "This hairy one is sucking information from you as a yak calf draws sustenance from its mother."

Monk learned no more.

THEY worked down into a deep canyon and crossed a rapidly-running stream. A peculiar point about the rivulet was the fact that anchor ice had formed on the bottom, although the water itself was moving too fast to freeze.

Wading the stream was a slippery process. They climbed on upward.

Monk kept his ears attuned in an effort to catch some sound which would indicate Doc Savage was trailing them. He heard absolutely nothing. Contrarily enough, this did not worry Monk. He knew Doc's ability. Indeed, had he heard any sound, he would have reflected that Doc must be slipping.

"Lih ding!" rapped a voice. "Halt!"

Monk's captors came to a stop.

"Would thou shake down the mountains with thy voice?" growled one of the pair. "Not so loud!"

Men materialized out of the darkness. Some of these Monk recollected having seen in Antofagasta, Chile. others were strangers. But obviously all were Shrops's men.

"We have a hairy morsel for the all-wise Shrops," said one of Monk's captors, giving the furry chemist a prod with a rifle barrel.

"Let us hope it soothes his temper," muttered a sentry.

"Is he not at peace with himself?"

"He is in a great rage."

"Why?"

"Saturday Leo has disappeared."

Monk, listening to this with great interest, put in, "Saturday Loo probably went over to Mo-Gwei's side."

A moon-faced thug promptly kicked Monk in the middle. The kick, thanks probably to long practice at booting yaks, was hard and painful.

Monk lost his temper. With a backslap of a huge, hirsute paw, he knocked the kicker head over heels.

A man lunged in, swinging a rifle. With a bewildering speed, Monk grasped the weapon, twisted it from the man, and dropped the former owner with a swing of the barrel.

To Monk's ears came a low sound. It was a note which seemed strangely to fit the bleak, towering mountain surroundings with their bitter cold and snow and ice.

It might have been some chill wind from the fastnesses of the Himalayas, that sound. It was a low trilling which drifted lazily up and down the musical scale, then slowly sank into complete nothingness.

Monk recognized it as the sound of Doc Savage. He stopped struggling. The trilling meant Doc was warning him not to get himself killed.

"What was that?" asked a Tibetan in a quavering voice. "A wind, O fool," grunted a comrade. "Come! Let us take this hairy one to the all-wise Shrops."

Chapter 17. BLUE TERROR

A YURT, strikingly like an inverted gray bowl a dozen feet in diameter, had been erected in the lee of a cluster of housesized boulders. The chill wind whooped and moaned. It seized the numdah covering of the Kurt and clapped it against the wooden skeleton. It made the fire of teyzak burn more briskly – more blue than it should have.

The Cockney, Jolin Mark Shrops, crouched over the fire. He was not there for comfort exclusively. He was warming belts of machine gun ammunition. In this intense cold, the fulminate in the detonators sometimes froze, causing a cartridge to misfire. Three machine guns lay where the heat would blow upon them, in order that the grease in the mechanism would not become too stiff.

Shrops looked up and scowled when Monk was shoved into the Kurt.

"Blister me!" he exclaimed sourly. "So you've joined my 'appy family."

"T'blazes with you!" Monk growled.

Soberly, Shrops listened to his two henchmen tell, not without much bragging, how they had captured Monk. The pair made their feat sound like a tremendous accomplishment.

"Hum-ph!" snorted Shrops when they had finished.

"But are you not pleased, O Master?" one of the two asked anxiously.

"Get outa 'ere!" Shrops snarled, then translated the command into profane p'al-skad.

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The brown men retreated out into the cold, minus the praise they had expected for their work in apprehending Monk.

"You don't seem happy to see me," Monk said dryly.

"Shut up!" gritted Shrops, and whipped a gun out of his clothing.

For a moment, Monk had visions of receiving a bullet. But Shrops reconsidered, and restored his weapon to its hidden holster.

A rather brittle silence followed. Occasionally the wind popped the numdah against the yurt frame. The fire smoked and smelled up the habitation.

A Tibetan squirmed into the yurt.

"The scout which you sent to examine the Village of the Mad Ones has returned," he reported.

"Send 'im in, you barmy goat!" rapped Shrops. In his ill temper, the Cockney spoke English. The Tibetan only looked puzzled, not comprehending the words.

"Usher him to my presence, 0 one without sense," Shrops said, lapsing into the language of the country.

A scrawny, yellowish fellow entered. Considering the chill of these heights, he wore astoundingly few clothes. He was breathing loudly and heavily from a long run.

"The Village of the Mad Ones is deserted," he reported. "But there are signs which show Mo-Gwei's men were there only to-day. Cooking stones were still warm when I felt of them."

"Gone to 'is other 'angout!" snapped Shrops. The messenger took his departure, after looking longingly at the teyzak fire.

"What is this Village of the Mad Ones?" asked Monk, who had listened curiously.

"It's a town where everybody went barmy," Shrops growled.

"They went mad because the blue meteor had buried itself somewhere near?" Monk persisted.

"What d'you think, you 'airy ape?" Shrops grunted. "Now, keep still! Hi've got me worries, Hi 'ave."

"You're afraid Saturday Loo has gone over to Mo-Gwei, huh?" Monk asked.

The resounding Limehouse profanity which this elicited from Shrops told the homely chemist that his guess had been correct. The Cockney was fearful that his partner had double-crossed him.

TIME dragged. Twice, Shrops went to the Kurt door and bellowed a question.

"As any word come from the other scout – the one Hi sent to Mo-Gwei's second 'angout?"

In each case the answer was a negative, and the Cockney scowled, muttered, and stamped about the Kurt.

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Monk watched the fellow. Several times he saw Shrops feel of a certain pocket. Once, the Cockney drew from the pocket what seemed to be a metal cylinder with a screw-on cap. Whatever the material in that cylinder, it was evidently important.

Monk fell to wondering when Doc would go into action. The bronze man, he believed, was lurking somewhere near. Possibly Doc was biding his time, in order to gather more information before closing with Shrops.

The Cockney, it appeared, had scouts out seeking to locate Mo-Gwei.

Monk's thoughts were interrupted. A shout mingled with the whooping wind.

A Tibetan dived into the Kurt, breathless, perspiration steaming on his tobacco-colored features.

"Saturday Loo has turned traitor!" he howled.

Shrops had shown a command of profanity before, but it was nothing to the repertoire which he exhibited now. The air crackled, jarred and sang. Finally, he calmed down.

"The yellow scut!" he gritted. "Hi should 'ave known 'e'd fail in a pinch."

The messenger shifted feet uneasily and panted.

"There was something strange about what I saw, O Master," he said.

"Whatcha mean?" Shrops growled.

"Saturday Loo did not go in fear and trembling," reported the scout.

At this speech, a blank look overspread Shrops's applelike features. He sank down on a rolled sleeping munidah, and his jaw sagged. Steam poured out of his open mouth for a time, then he swallowed.

"Blime!" he gulped. "Twas Saturday Loo who first came to me an' invited me t' join Mo-Gwei."

"It was the same in my case, O Master," said the scout, who evidently understood English. "It was Saturday Loo who recruited much of Mo-Gwei's force of men."

Shrops's eyes roved and finally came to rest upon Monk. In his perturbation, the Cockney seemed to forget that Monk was a prisoner.

"D'you know what it looks like?" he asked hoarsely.

"No," said Monk. "What?"

"It looks like Saturday Loo is Mo-Gwei," Shrops mumbled.

AFTER this statement, the Cockney took several stamping turns around the Kurt, expressing an opinion of Saturday Loo and all of his ancestors back to the legendary monkey, abode of the chen-re-si or Compassionate Spirit, which mated with a she-devil to produce the first Tibetan, according to the local belief.

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"Saturday Loo is Mo-Gwei!" he yelled angrily. "What a blind 'arfwit Hi've been! The clever devil fell in wit' my suggestion to steal part 0' the blue meteor an' some 0' the cur"

Shrops paused to feel of the pocket which Monk had noted him exploring earlier.

"We are in danger here, 0 Master," reminded the scout, "The location of our camp is now known to our enemies."

"Righto," Shrops agreed. "An' we'll blame well move. Tell the bloody men t' break camp."

The scout went out. Then, as if he had been struck a great blow, he came flying back inside.

"The blue meteor!" he bellowed.

Monk shed his lethargy. Heedless of the fact that he was a prisoner and that any sudden move might draw a bullet, he plunged outside. His gaze roved, then fixed on the northern sky.

what he saw might have been a blue sunrise, had it been in the east. It was faint now, the most lucent of zaffer flushes, but the color was becoming more pronounced. Soon the boulders began to cast pronounced shadows in the unearthly luminance.

Monk's ears picked up a faint squeal, a whistling note such as had characterized the blue transient in South America.

Shrops had not come out of the yurt. Wondering about that, Monk wheeled and peered inside.

The Cockney was on all fours above a cluster of boxes over which a numdah had been reposing. The boxes had black insulating panels, dials, knobs, and switches.

With a frenzied haste, Shrops manipulated the controls on the mechanism.

Leaping to his feet, the Cockney dived out of the felt tent of a shelter. He glanced to the north, from whence the blue glow was approaching. Then he peered fixedly into the west. It was apparent that he expected something to come out of the west.

Nothing appeared.

"Blimme!" he wailed. "Blimme!"

His apple of a face blanched. He kneaded his hands together in an agony of suspense.

Still nothing came out of the west.

The blue in the northern sky changed from a haze to a glare, and this became a glitter which ached the eyes.

"Blimme!" croaked Shrops. "Saturday Loo 'as taken my part 0' the blue meteor. It should be comin', but it ain't!"

Brown men were yelling in excitement, and shielding their eyes against the screaming blue terror in the north.

They ran toward Shrops. "The cure, master!" they cried.

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Shrops slapped his left hand against the pocket which he had touched so often.

"Hi ain't got enough t' go around!" he barked. "The main supply o' the stuff was wit' our part o' the blue meteor. An' Saturday Loo must've made off wit' that!"

"Divide what you have!" barked a swarthy man.

Shrops dived a hand into his clothing and brought out a revolver.

"Back, you bloomin' dogs!" he grated. "Hi've only got enough t' fix one man up!"

The Tibetans milled in front of him. Some were belligerent, casting longing eyes at their weapons. Two or three fell on their knees and stuck their tongues out in attitudes of meek supplication.

Monk, taking advantage of the tension, sidled toward Shrops.

Shrops saw him.

"Blarst you!" the Cockney yelled. He juttied his gun at Monk and pulled the trigger.

The bullet, however, climbed off in the direction of the oncoming blue meteor, its sound a feeble squeak in the face of the overpowering scream which the blue mystery was making.

A rock, small and jagged, had collided with Shrops's wrist, and knocked the gun aside. Agony made Shrops drop his weapon. He looked in the direction from which the flung stone had come.

A giant of bronze was approaching, seeming to move with the terrific speed of light.

Shrops whirled, yelling in fear, and ran.

Monk had ducked at the prospect of receiving a bullet, although the act would never have saved him, had Doc not thrown the rock. Down on all fours, he tried to rear up and pursue the Cockney. But small, rounded stones under him rolled and delayed him.

Doc whipped past.

Terror had lent speed and cunning to Shrops's flight. Several yaks were near by. Shrops sprang upon one of these.

The yak is ordinarily not a speedy animal, but this one was scared. It bounded away from the vicinity with an agility which no horse could have equalled on such precarious, rocky footing.

Doc pitched in pursuit. Monk also followed, but was soon left far behind.

The blue glare in the north became more painful to the eye, and its shriek racked the ears.

For some seventy yards, Doc barely held his own with Shrops and the cowlike steed, for the going was especially treacherous. Then he gained rapidly. Without slackening his pace, he scooped up a rock and flung it.

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There was no sound as it hit Shrops – the thump was as nothing compared to the banshee squawl of the blue meteor. Shrops, his breath jarred out, toppled off the yak.

An instant later Doc was upon him. A short mauling stroke of a bronze fist reduced the Cockney to senselessness. Doc dipped a hand into Shrops's pocket.

He brought out the metal cylinder with a screw-on top.

STRAIGHTENING, Doc sprinted back toward Monk. Possibly he intended to administer some of the antidote for the blue meteor's evil spell to Monk.

Perhaps, also, he hoped to be of some assistance to his other four aides and Rae Stanley. The latter, following Doc's radio directions, had kept close to Monk's captors, and were now lurking near the Kurt.

Doc could see Rae Stanley in the shelter of a boulder where, until the azure glitter had come out of the north, there had been darkness. The young woman had both hands pressed over her eyes to shut out the awful light.

The bronze man stumbled, almost fell. Recovering his balance, he went on more sluggishly. His metallic features bore frozen determination.

Again, he tripped. His usual agility seemed to have vanished. The weird power of the blue meteor was descending upon his brain.

It came to Doc with certainty that he could not reach his friends in time. Long before he could even gain Monk's side, he would be down, overcome by the power of the meteor. And even should he accomplish the impossible and join them, there was, by Shrops's attestation, only enough of the antidote in the metal cylinder to save one man.

However, not until he went down a third time and could not arise, and unintelligible rumbling sounds came from his great lungs when he tried to make words, did he open the metal tube. He had waited nearly overlong. His fingers, possessed of a strange aimlessness, could hardly remove the cap.

The instant the cap was free of the cylinder, a fantastic blue aurora appeared at the mouth, a glow brighter even than the hell-blue in the northern heavens. The flare leaped upward like flame, played there a moment, then vanished.

Doc Savage seemed to lose all vestige of his remaining might and vitality. He sank as if stricken between the eyes with a sledge swung by a brawny arm.

He was on a steep slope at the moment – the region where the pursuit of Shrops and the yak had been so difficult. He collapsed, and there was no level spot to prevent his huge frame from rolling.

Over and over, he tumbled downward. Boulders were loosened, and bounced against other boulders, and all the rocks joined in a dancing procession down the declivity. Dust climbed up from the turmoil, and snow mingled with it in a gray swirl as drifts were disturbed. The giant bronze body of Doc Savage was lost to sight.

There grew a great landslide which traveled for thousands of yards down the mountainside before it piled stone, shale, clay, sand and snow in the valley to a depth, in spots, of a hundred feet.

But long before the avalanche ceased moving, the blue meteor betook itself overhead with a whiplike snap and was gone into the night sky.

Chapter 18. THE DEVIL'S NEST

MEN poured over the mountaintop from the left. They were Mo-Gwei's followers, and they had been far to one side, so that they might escape the hideous effects of the blue meteor.

Despite the fact that none of them had been under the uncanny sky visitor, however, several individuals of weaker Constitution stumbled erratically and seemed a little insane. They had not avoided the spell entirely.

In the lead bounded an apparition in brilliant yellow robes and a purple mask of Bron, the yak demon.

Mo-Gwei himself! He cried out in squawking tones like those of a magpie.

"The bronze man! Find the bronze man! Kill him instantly!"

A thug evidently took this to mean that all of the group overcome by the blue meteor were to be slain. He plucked a long sword, sprang to the side of Rae Stanley and lifted the blade.

The young woman stood perfectly motionless in the moonlight. Her eyes were wide and glassy. Although the sword blade was suspended before her eyes and murder rode the face of the brown fiend wielding the weapon, she gave no sign that she comprehended peril.

Her brain had ceased functioning.

The swordsman gathered his muscles for the stroke that would end her life.

There was a rap of a sound like that of a brittle stick breaking, only louder. The swordsman gave a small jump, and fell flat on his back, and spots on opposite sides of his skull began to turn red and moist, and to steam in the intense cold.

Mo-Gwei waved the automatic pistol with which he had killed his follower.

"Keep the prisoners alive for the time being," he ordered; and his unearthly, cackling voice was even stranger than usual.

At the shot, every one had halted. They stood and stared at the dead man, at Mo-Gwei, at the girl and the others whose brains had suspended functioning.

"Find the bronze devil!" Mo-Gwei cackled again. Round-faced men scattered hastily to comply with the order. They stood on the mountainside and peered downward, where boulders still gnashed together like great teeth. They strove to pierce the boiling fog of dust and snow.

"No one could live in that," they muttered.

But they did not take Doc Savage's demise for granted. Gingerly, making a human chain by holding hands, they descended the treacherous slope. They used powerful flashlights for illumination.

Over the settling debris in the valley, they scrambled. They peered into cracks and tried to lever boulders

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aside.

"It would be the work of an army to move all of this," they decided.

So they went up to Mo-Gwei and reported. "The bronze devil, who has the lives of a cat, is assuredly dead," they said.

"If he is not dead, each of you will have a chance to try life without his head," Mo-Gwei promised in his high, irrational gobble.

The men shivered, but stood their ground.

"We will not lose our heads," they declared. "For the bronze man met his end in that landslide."

"Good!" gibbered Mo-Gwei. "Tie all of these prisoners and bring them along."

"Why not end their lives now?"

"Because, O men of small wits, the bronze devil may still live. In such case, we will buy him off with the lives of these others."

"But the bronze one is dead."

"It will do no harm to hold these friends of his. They are without their brains."

"And what about Shrops?"

A horrible cackle of mirth came from behind the purple yak mask.

"I have a special hell to which I wish to consign Shrops," said Mo-Gwei. "Come. Let us return to our castle."

TWO hours later, the men of Mo-Gwei filed into their chief stronghold bearing Rae Stanley, Doc Savage's five men, Shrops, and Shrops's Tibetan aides.

The party made a great, evil cloud of humanity, which swarmed up one of the numerous mountain peaks of the region.

Atop the peak stood Mo-Gwei's aerie. The place was not unlike a castle minus moat and drawbridge.

Walls were of brown rock, mud-mortared, and windows were almost nonexistent. The place towered fully three stories, and judging from the amount of debris below the walls, there must be numerous subterranean chambers. Roofs were of hardened mud.

Much of the south side of the peak on which the great structure stood, had slid away into a valley below in some past landslide, leaving a great sweep of loose rock and exposed clay.

Mo-Gwei stood beside the gate and watched the pitiful Captives carried in. Toward the end he flew into a rage, wailing, "Where is their baggage?"

"We left it, O Mo-Gwei, The Devil-faced, Master of the Blue Meteor, and Future Master of All Mankind. Their luggage was too much of a burden to carry."

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"Return and get it, O-man-who-made-the-mistake-of-thinking-for-himself. And take with you a force of men to search that landslide thoroughly for the body of Doc Savage."

"It is cold and not pleasant – "

"Silence! Go!"

The moon-faced man nodded, but not cheerfully. He glanced at the sky. It was very cold tonight, and moreover, indications were that a buran, one of the violent windstorms of central Asia, might strike before dawn. He knew better, though, than to argue with Mo-Gwei.

Gathering a squad of assistants, he shuffled off in the chill moonlight.

Mo-Gwei supervised the placing of the prisoners, following as they were carried down gloomy passages and through cavernous rooms that smelled of buttered tea and, farther on, of incense. The floors were of stone, and did not show great wear.

The entire structure had been built a long time, obviously, yet did not seem to have been much tenanted.

The captives were dumped in a large, windowless room, the door of which was crossed by a great bar.

"Guard them closely," Mo-Gwei directed from behind his purple mask. Then he ambled off, yellow robes swishing, cackling demoniacal mirth.

SILENCE fell within the confines of the ancient building. Occasionally low, guttural words of p'al-skad were spoken.

Several times, meaningless bawling sounds rattled through the subterranean runways and cavernous rooms. These noises were human, yet without any quality of saneness.

The sounds were made by the victims of the blue meteor, and the Tibetans exchanged uneasy glances after bearing them. Calloused though they were, and familiar with the effects of the screaming blue thing, nevertheless the noises got under their thick hides.

Two hours ticked into eternity.

The men sent to get the baggage returned. They had made a quick trip, for it was cold, and running and keeping warm was easier than loafing and freezing. Anyway, they were excited.

"Mo-Gwei!" they shrieked. "Bad news, O Master!"

Mo-Gwei, still in yellow robes and purple Bron mask, came shuffling out of a passage. He might have been an evil animal exiting from its burrow.

"What?" he cackled.

"The baggage was gone."

Mo-Gwei was ominously silent.

"Master, we looked in all places, but nowhere was there trace of what you sent us for," insisted one of the party uneasily.

Mo-Gwei continued to say nothing. Back of the yellowish eyes of the Bron mask, the orbs of the man glittered. The yellow pupils of the mask were evidently colored glass, through which vision was possible. The upturned horns, great things that appeared like a set of needle-pointed handlebars, added to the villainous aspect of the masquerade.

"What else did you find?" he demanded.

His men squirmed. "There is naught, except that we could not find the baggage. It had vanished."

The tone in which these words were spoken, however, revealed that they were not the truth. The men were not good liars. Mo-Gwei had spotted their uncertainty with the first speech.

"The truth!" he ripped.

"It seems that we will lose our heads, O Master," a man wailed. "The bronze man still lives! We found a path where he had leaped clear of the landslide, and had stumbled through snow."

"Did you not try to follow?" Mo-Gwei demanded ominously.

"We did. But the bronze man became stronger as he went on, and soon we lost the trail. It must have been he who carried off the baggage."

Mo-Gwei launched into a cackling tirade which moved his followers to recoil in horror.

"I shall boil each of you in yak tallow, and crack open your skulls that the ravens may feast!" he snarled. "I shall –"

Abruptly, he fell silent, apparently Considering.

"Your punishment can wait," he said. "It may be that you can escape your just fate, if you do my bidding well."

Every man went to his knees and stuck out his tongue to indicate his abject obeisance.

Chapter 19. THE METEOR THAT FAILED

MO-GWEI gestured to his henchmen, urging them erect.

"Go," he commanded. "Bind all of the prisoners most solidly, and bring them to the large central room – to my personal quarters."

The men scuttled off, falling over each other in their haste to obey. Visions of death, which they had held a moment ago, had faded, had even turned to dreams of a rosy future, the chief attraction in which would be much wealth extracted from rich American cities. This would be done by threats of sending the blue meteor over, or by actually sending it, then entering and robbing the helpless towns.

Mo-Gwei himself marched to a portion of the vast structure which was more pretentiously furnished than the

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outer rooms. A man occupied this. He was not a Tibetan, but of some other Oriental strain, with a mingling of Caucasian blood.

"You will send the blue meteor up," commanded Mo-Gwei. "Cover all of the surrounding country. That bronze devil, Doc Savage, is at large, and we must eliminate him."

Mo-Gwei's manner as he addressed this man was slightly more courteous.

The man departed hurriedly, making his way to the roof of the mountaintop stronghold. The roof was flat, and of no inconsiderable size. At one end was a small shed.

when the door of the shed was opened, a pale blue glare came out. It was very dark where moonlight did not penetrate, and the glare was not pronounced enough to permit a view of what the shed held.

Clanking sounds issued from the structure, noises which indicated wrenches were being used.

Soon the man scampered out of the shed. He carried a small portable radio transmitter, to which was fitted a complicated-looking device. He carried this down from the roof and through the outer door of the ancient building. He had left the shed doors open.

Then he turned dials and switches on his apparatus.

Up on the roof, a whistle started. It was low at first, but became louder after the fashion of a siren.

The man turned another dial. With a scream, something left the rooftop – an object of a pale blue color. This receded rapidly.

when it was almost a mile away, the expert operated still another dial.

A great blue blaze covered all the sky. The blue meteor was abroad!

Manipulating dials, the man sent the blue meteor scooting back and forth across the sky, skimming close to the mountaintops and even dipping into such valleys as were clearly defined in the moonlight.

It seemed like a living hunter, did that hideous blue thing of the skies, as it sought for Doc Savage.

MO-GWEI saw the blue meteor off. Then he betook himself to the innermost recess of his castlelike headquarters. At his order, half a dozen men trailed him.

The cavalcade turned into a room. Doubtless the men with Mo-Gwei had been present in the chamber before, but so great was the Oriental splendor of the place that they stopped to stare, a bit breathless.

Rich rugs overlay the crude stone floor. Costly tapestries covered every exposed inch of wall. The number and plumpness of the pillows scattered about made the place resemble a movie director's idea of a harem interior.

The most striking feature, however, was a square opening in the floor. A low wall surrounded this.

Blue light came from the opening, a plume of it so brilliant as to cause the eyes to pain.

Arrayed near the shaft mouth, from which poured the azure glitter, were tightly bound figures.

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Monk and Ham were close together, and Rae Stanley was next to them. Long Tom came next; then Johnny, more skeleton-like than usual in the unearthly blue glow of the meteor, and big-fisted Renny.

John Mark Shrops occupied a position of honor well to one side.

Expressionless faces and blank eyes showed that none of the captives knew what was going on.

Mo-Gwei strode over and peered into the shaft. The blue light on his purple devil mask made a revolting combination.

"I see many bodies," he cackled. "Who are they? Not, I hope, any that I would have enjoyed disposing of?"

"Only the men who helped Shrops," replied one of Mo-Gwei's cohorts.

Mo-Gwei backed from the evil opening.

"These shall be awake to enjoy themselves," he said, his parrotlike voice unusually raucous. He indicated the bound and mentally inactive prisoners. "Bring me the cure-cylinders, that I may make them normal."

A man scampered out, and came back with an armload of the screwcapped metal tubes. Seizing one of these, Mo-Gwei held it close to the head of big-fisted Renny and backed the cap off.

There was a blinding blue flash; a plume of flame seemed to play about the top of the tube, then vanished.

The blankness slowly faded from Renny's eyes. The expression on his long, puritanical face became sane. He stared at the hideous apparition in the mask of Bron, the yak demon. He noted particularly the long, upturning, needle-pointed horns.

"Holy cow!" he muttered.

Mo-Gwei went rapidly to the other prisoners, opening a cylinder close to the head of each. All regained their senses.

He had just revived Shrops when an interruption came. A man dashed in.

"Die Ii Iai!" he cried. "Come here! Something is wrong!"

"Wrong with what, O stupid one?"

"The blue meteor behaves not as it should!"

"Watch these prisoners!" Mo-Gwei ordered, and ran out, yellow robes fluttering, using both hands to hold his purple mask on. The hands were purple-gloved.

THE man with the radio apparatus was perspiring and working over his dials and knobs.

"Look!" he said, and pointed at the distant sky.

The blue meteor was still emitting its piercing whistle and crawling back and forth in the sky. But, as Mo-Gwei watched, the meteor darted to one side.

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"I did not do that," muttered the man at the controls. "There must be something wrong with the radio control apparatus."

"Let me see," snarled Mo-Gwei. "I do not see how anything could go awry. I perfected this apparatus myself. It is foolproof."

He swooped upon the boxes containing the wireless transmitter and the attendant devices necessary for remote control by radio.

The distant blue meteor whipped off its course again. This time it did not return to its route. It came directly toward the mountaintop stronghold.

"The control transmitter is perfect!" Mo-Gwei shrieked.

"Then what—"

"The bronze devil!" wailed Mo-Gwei. "He is using a transmitter of his own upon it. He has listened to our own sending signals, gotten their wavelength, and adjusted his apparatus accordingly."

A wild scene now ensued. Repeatedly, Mo-Gwei sought to steer the blue meteor away from the mountain. Twice he almost succeeded, only to have the squealing sky terror head straight for him once more.

"The bronze man's transmitter is the stronger!" he squawked.

With frenzied fingers, Mo-Gwei felt in his yellow robe for one of the metal cylinders. He found only one specimen in his possession.

Holding the canister in his hands, he watched the blue meteor come toward him.

Behind Mo-Gwei, moon-faced men dashed madly about. It seemed that few of them carried the cylinders which held the cure for the blue meteor's spell. A mad scramble ensued as they sought to get them.

Only a few succeeded. For, with a deafening wall, the blue meteor screeched overhead.

As it went over, Mo-Gwei opened his canister, holding it close to his face. The pluming blue blaze and the glitter of the azure sky-traveler intermingled.

Mo-Gwei swayed, but managed to keep his feet. Going on, the blue meteor hit the slope of an adjacent mountain. There was a great burst of blue fragments. Like sparks, they poured down the mountain slope. And like bits of blue-hot metal, they glowed even after they stopped rolling.

Mo-Gwei stared about anxiously.

He was not surprised at what he saw – a Herculean bronze man coming up the mountain side with great leaps.

"Dih-gun!" Mo-Gwei shrilled. "Our enemy!"

WHEELING, Mo-Gwei dived into the huge old building. He called out loudly to his men.

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"The roof! We can shoot the bronze man from the roof!" He scrambled up ramshackle stone stairs, trailed by such of his followers as had managed to get possession of the metal cylinders before the blue meteor passed overhead.

From the rooftop, they opened fire.

Men firing downward are prone to overshoot, and Doc Savage heard the first bullets make rat-squeak sounds in the moonlight over his head.

Doc doubled aside, seeking the shelter of rocks. He had gotten closer to the building than he had expected before being fired upon. The walls of the castlelike structure were perhaps a hundred yards distant.

He dipped a hand inside his clothing and brought out a globular metal object two inches in diameter. He flipped this a few feet ahead.

A tremendous quantity of black smoke poured from the metal globe. The chill night wind swept it upward toward the hilltop fortress.

Doc had been careful to choose for his assault the side from which the wind blew.

The giant bronze man arose under cover of the black pall and glided forward. Bullets were searching for him, but few of them came close – especially after he swerved far to the right and approached the high stone walls from the side.

Doc's garments were torn. In numerous places his bronze skin was broken. In fact, he was more battered than he had been for a long time. It had been no simple task to escape from the landslide which he had started.

Just why he had keeled over when opening the cure-cylinder, it had taken him some time to figure out. He had concluded it was because he had been inexperienced in use of the cure. The stuff, of course, was highly potent.

Doc wore a leather vest which had been in his luggage. This was fitted with innumerable pockets. From one of these, he drew a tiny gas bomb. He lobbed it atop the roof.

No mask was necessary with this type of gas. The stuff, although it produced sudden unconsciousness, became ineffective after mixing with the air for somewhat less than a minute. When using it, Doc had merely to hold his breath until the gas did its work and dissolved in the air.

From another of the vest pockets Doc drew a silken cord, to one end of which was affixed a grappling iron. He sprung the grapple open.

Reaching the walls, he flung the hook upward. It caught somewhere and held. He mounted the silken line as agilely as a spider climbs its web.

Only two rifles were firing from the roof, now. The other gunmen must have succumbed to the gas bomb.

Without hesitating, Doc swung over the roof edge. He came face to face with one of Mo-Gwei's men.

The swarthy fellow whipped his rifle around, shrieking at the top of his voice as he did so, and pulled the trigger.

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Doc toppled backward off the rooftop.

"I HAVE done it!" howled the rifleman. "My bullet brought death to the bronze one!"

The squat man jumped up and down several times to celebrate his feat, then scuttled forward to see if he could discern the crumpled body of the bronze man through the smoke and night murk. He got down on all fours and peered over the roof edge.

His eyes all but fell out. His mouth popped wide open to let out a yell of horror. The howl ended, as if his head had been lopped off below the vocal cords, when mighty bronze hands clamped his neck.

Retaining his clutch on the man, Doc Savage regained the roof. He had been clinging to the silk cord, after being forced to dive off the roof to evade the rifleman's bullet. It had been a narrow escape.

Doc belted his prize alongside the temple with the edge of a hand. The fellow gave one tremendous kick, then became limp. Doc dropped him.

From across the roof a gun coughed lead.

Doc, twisting down, weaving to one side, then the other, drew his flashlight. He scooted the beam across the roof. The luminance picked up Mo-Gwei's purple Bron mask and yellow robe.

Mo-Gwei had fired with an automatic, but he had a stubby submachine gun under the crook of an arm. Changing to this, he hosed bullets across the roof.

Long before the fellow made the shift from automatic to submachine gun, however, Doc had doused his light and drifted to the left.

A square building reared there. He wrenched the doors open, thinking perhaps that a stairway led downward from the interior.

A weak blue glow met him. He squirted his flashlight beam inside.

Revealed was the secret of the blue meteor.

The thing was a tiny monoplane, too small to carry a man. To this was fitted a large, tubular device. The contraption, secured beneath the fuselage, was fitted with hinges. No doubt it opened wide, actuated by mechanism within, when in the air.

Opening, the cover exposed the substance which composed the blue meteor itself. A faint glow even penetrated the Container itself.

Doc took time to glance closely at the metal which composed this cylinder. He decided it was principally of lead, a metal most resistant to strange ray phenomena.

The engine exhaust, after leading into a tank which smoothed out the pressure, was discharged through a simple whistle. That, then, accounted for the weird sound.

The plane was obviously radio-controlled. That in itself was not remarkable, radio control devices having been in use for nearly twenty years.

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There were other things of interest: for instance, a parachute which could be opened by a radio impulse, lowering the craft safely where there was no landing field.

Doc, however, did not have time to make a lengthy examination.

Mo-Gwei began peppering the little hangar structure with his machine gun.

Doc studied the guttering powder flame, getting Mo-Gwei's location. Then he drew a small metal container from his capacious leather vest and flung it.

The thing burst softly near Mo-Gwei's feet.

Chapter 20. THE BLUE PIT

DOC Savage shouldered the hangar doors more widely Open. He bent over the radio-controlled plane. After only a short glance, his vast mechanical knowledge told him how the thing operated. He threw a switch and twisted two wires together.

The engine started automatically, and the exhaust, pouring through the whistles, made an ear-splitting din.

Doc drew back. The whistles, of course, had been installed merely to heighten the eerie effect.

He played his flashlight on the wheels before the thing began to move. Stooping swiftly, he disengaged a weed fragment from the air valve. The weed was a South American variety.

This, then, was the stolen "blue meteor" which Shrops had carried across the Pacific and back again in the Chilean *Senorita*. Mo-Gwei had recovered it.

Apparently, there were no more of the devices.

The monoplane scooted out of the hangar and mounted from the roof. It was so tiny as to be hardly distinguishable in the fitful moonlight – the smoke had now blown away from the mountaintop fortress.

Mo-Gwei had stopped shooting. Apparently he feared Doc was up to some fiendish trick with the blue meteor.

Doc watched the bluish blur that marked the position of the monoplane. The plane dived for a distant mountain-side, struck, and showered azure sparks down the steep slope.

Certain the thing was destroyed, Doc glided across the roof.

Mo-Gwei had gone below.

Doc reached the spot where the Bron-masked fiend had stood, and swept the packed mud with his flashlight. The metal container which he had flung at Mo-Gwei had contained a sticky liquid, something like the stuff which he had planted at the entrance of Shrops's yurt, but of a more grayish color.

Mo-Gwei had walked through the fluid.

Again, the pockets of Doc's vest yielded a tiny device. This resembled a magic lantern, made to fit the palm

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of the hand. Doc switched it on. Apparently, nothing happened. Certainly no visible light appeared.

He turned the lantern on the roof. Mo-Gwei's tracks instantly sprang out. They glowed like pale green flame.

Doc followed the trail.

His lantern device was a projector of ultra-violet light rays of a wave-length outside the spectrum visible to the human eye. The material Mo-Gwei was tracking was a substance which fluoresced, or glowed, when exposed to ultraviolet rays. This was not an unusual property, being possessed also by such common substances as vaseline and aspirin.

Doc made great speed, for the trail could hardly have been easier to follow. It was marked ahead in green fire.

He came to the vast room which was tapestried and floored with luxurious rugs – the room in the center of which gaped the open shaft with its blinding halo of blue glare.

Doc's first view of that shaft maw was not pleasant.

Mo-Gwei stood at the shaft lip.

High above his head, ready to fling into the shimmering azure depths, Mo-Gwei held a bound man – John Mark Shrops.

Nowhere else on the rug-padded floor were there signs of the other captives.

Blue flickered from the shaft maw like from a dragon mouth.

DOC Savage carried no gun. He had two reasons for not doing so: In the first place, he never took human life directly, no matter how great the provocation. Secondly, Doc considered the possession of a firearm bad psychology. A man with a gun in his pocket would come to depend upon the weapon, instead of upon his wits. Relieved of the gun, he would be accordingly helpless.

Hence, when Doc found Mo-Gwei holding Shrops over the pit, there was no gun at hand with which to drive lead at the fiend in the Bron mask and yellow robe.

Doc tossed a hand forward in a throwing motion. A small pigeon egg of metal left his fingers and sailed toward Mo-Gwei.

The object burst with a terrific report in the air in front of Mo-Gwei. The blast was deafening, and flash blinding, for this was one of the little noise-and-glare bombs which Doc had used on his visit to the Village of the Mad Ones.

The concussion knocked Mo-Gwei and his burden back from the shaft lip. Both fell to the stone floor. So great was the wind of the explosion that rugs were scooped aside, exposing the stones of the floor.

Doc hurtled forward. The blast of the little bomb should have temporarily blinded and deafened Mo-Gwei.

But the mask must have saved Mo-Gwei. The yellow eye glass in it had probably kept the glare away to a degree. Mo-Gwei twisted to his feet, clawing his submachine gun from a sling beneath his robe.

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His hand found the firing lever. The rapid-firer muzzle spouted flame, noise, bullets. The breech spewed smoking cartridge cases which rained about the foot of the yellow robe.

The slugs gouged mud off the ceiling. Mo-Gwei had started firing without aiming. As a fireman directs a hose stream, the Bron monster swayed the lead torrent toward Doc Savage.

The bronze giant, knowing very well his own ability, realized he could not get to Mo-Gwei before the bullet stream found him. He swerved and doubled low. This put him behind the upraised stone wall around the shaft lip.

Mo-Gwei cackled shrilly and danced over to get Doc in view. He was a trifle slow. Doc got to a side door and dived through.

Doc fell over a not-too-yielding form on the floor.

"Holy cow!" grunted Renny's voice.

The bronze man scooped the big-fisted engineer up and moved him to one side of the door.

Faint blue light came in from the other room. It disclosed more bound figures.

Rae Stanley, Monk, Ham, Johnny, Long Tom – all were there.

"The guards ran out," Renny rumbled. "We managed to flop in here. Shrops tried to go the other direction. Mo-Gwei met 'im."

Doc untied his five men.

"All of you but Monk scatter," he directed. "Go over this place and clean up such of the outfit as are still on their feet. Monk, you'll stick here and help take care of Mo-Gwei."

DOC passed gas bombs to his men, and they darted away. Mo-Gwei was still behind the shaft-mouth parapet in the other room. From this shelter he drove occasional bullets. He seemed afraid to flee, doubtless believing Doc had a gun.

Pretty Rae Stanley crouched behind Doc.

Monk peered into the other room – then drew back as lead popped about the door.

"What'll we do?" he asked.

"Let him make the first move," Doc suggested.

Silence fell. It was a deadly quiet. It seemed to get on Monk's nerves; he broke it with conversation.

"What kind of a joint is this, anyway?" he asked. "Surely Mo-Gwei didn't build it."

"It's a monastery erected above the spot where the blue meteor buried itself, many years ago," Doc explained.

Monk nodded in the pale blue light reflected from the other room. Doc's vast knowledge of architecture had undoubtedly informed him of the nature of the building.

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"Probably lamas noted the effect of the buried meteor, thought it was an evil spirit, and erected this structure to combat it," Doc continued. "Then, after many of them were driven insane, they concluded the evil spirit was too strong, and quitted the place. That's only a surmise on my part, however."

"Sounds reasonable," Monk replied.

Mo-Gwei's gun howled, and its lead battered rock fragments off the edge of the door.

"So the blue meteor is at the bottom of that shaft," Monk grunted.

"Obviously. It struck just below the tip of the mountain and penetrated deeply. This devil— Mo-Gwei — dug down to it. He is a clever scientist. He evolved a reactionary agent which nullifies the effects of the blue meteor. That is the stuff in the metal cylinders."

From distant parts of the stronghold loud yells were drifting. The nature of these howls indicated that Doc's men were overpowering such of Mo-Gwei's followers as had not been trapped by the blue meteor.

"what is that blue meteor?" Monk asked.

"A highly radioactive substance," Doc told him. "To answer more specifically will require a lengthy examination in a well-equipped laboratory. My general information I got from observation."

"You mean it's somethin' like radium?"

"On that order," Doc agreed. He listened intently for any move from Mo-Gwei. "Scientists do not know too much about atomic emissions and ultra-ray phenomena, there being much doubt, for instance, about the source of so-called cosmic rays. It is possible certain stellar bodies give off such rays, just as the sun emits light visible to the eye."

"When the blue meteor went over, it was a case of meteor stroke instead of sunstroke, huh?" Monk grunted.

"Broadly speaking, it was like that," Doc agreed. "Even radium has a terrible effect on the brain, as all medical men know, if brought in too close proximity. This blue meteor undoubtedly gave off emanations of much greater violence."

Doc paused to listen. Mo-Gwei seemed to be moving about — at least, scuffling sounds came from behind the shaft escarpment.

"THE emanations from the blue meteor simply shocked the human nerve system into a state of paralysis," Doc continued.

"Any idea what the antidote is?" Monk queried.

"Some substance distilled from the blue meteor," Doc surmised. "It was in a vapor form. It merely acted as an antidote, a counter-irritant which kept the nerves functioning despite the shock of the blue meteor emanations."

The scuffling sounds behind the shaft wall were becoming louder.

"What a hideous weapon that blue meteor was!" choked Rae Stanley.

Her face was white; her voice was shrill.

"In the wrong hands, it was," Monk agreed. "But it's just about out of the wrong hands, now."

The girl stared tensely at Doc.

"My father!" she choked. "I have seen no sign of him!"

Doc's weird gold-flake eyes remained fixed on the other room, and he did not answer.

"My father – haven't you any idea where he is?" Rae Stanley repeated.

Doc said gently, "Keep a grip on your nerve, Rae."

Her eyes began to moisten. "You mean – "

"That I'm afraid the news about your father will not be what you had hoped for," Doc told her.

Chapter 21. THE FANCIEST LIAR

THE scuffling behind the shaft wall in the other room abruptly became understandable. Curses exploded. Grunts puffed.

Two men heaved up behind the parapet. Mo-Gwei and Shrops! They were locked in ferocious embrace. In some fashion, Shrops had managed to free his hands. He had his arms banded around the sinister apparition in the yellow robe and purple mask of the yak demon.

"Now's our chance!" Monk yelled.

But Doc was already on his feet and whipping into the large room.

Mo-Gwei looked around and saw the bronze giant. The sight maddened him. He pitched about in an effort to free himself. He got clear.

The Bron mask hampered his vision, and he stepped back almost to the lip of the pit. Even then he would not have fallen in, however. But Shrops, howling in rage, dived forward.

The Cockney's shove propelled Mo-Gwei over the wall and into the pit.

Mo-Gwei clutched madly. His hands managed to tangle in Shrops's hair, and he jerked the Cockney along as he fell.

Both men shrieked as they sank into the glittering blue depths. The shrieks seemed to sink into the depths of the earth. Somehow, the receding wails were remindful of the dying whistle of the blue meteors themselves.

The sounds ended with meaningful abruptness.

Racing forward, Doc peered into the pit, shielding his eyes from the glare. He stared for only a moment. Then he drew away and waved Monk and Rae Stanley back.

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"There's no need of looking," he said. "It's a sight you might remember too long."

Monk grunted, "You mean

"The shaft must be two hundred feet deep," Doc replied. "They were killed by the fall."

Rae Stanley suddenly covered her face with her hands and choked, "My father – hunt him – "

An arm across her shoulders, Doc guided her outside.

Ham appeared.

"We've got just about everybody," reported the dapper lawyer.

Doc signalled him, and Ham took over the handling of Rae Stanley. He guided her to an adjacent chamber.

Big-fisted Renny dashed up. His arms were laden with numerous of the metal cure-cylinders.

"Lookit!" he rumbled. "There's enough of these things to return normalcy to those poor devils who were overcome by the blue meteor in South America."

"We'll ship them over as quickly as possible," Doc told him.

Long Tom and Johnny turned up, satisfaction on their faces.

"We've got the whole outfit, Doc," the electrical wizard grunted.

"Locked in the strongest room in the place," added gaunt Johnny.

Monk squinted at the mouth of the shaft with its topping plume of blue light, then eyed Doc.

"Who was Mo-Gwei?" he asked. "Or did you get a look at his face."

"His face is visible at the bottom of the shaft," Doc said, after a pause. "The purple mask came off in the fall."

"Is he somebody we know?"

Doc was very slow in answering.

"This is one of the few times I have really hated to reveal the identity of a villain," he said at last. "In fact, we're not going to disclose it to the world."

The others seemed astounded. "why not?"

"This man was undoubtedly robbed of his mental balance by the blue meteor," Doc explained. "As far as his right mind was concerned, he has probably been dead for many months. His body lived, and in it the distorted shred of mentality which the blue meteor had left him."

Monk gulped, seeming too surprised to speak. He had comprehended the identity of Mo-Gwei, from Doc's words.

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"The man was not responsible for his hideous plan to make himself master of civilization," Doc continued. "It was the product of an irrational brain, that idea. There is little doubt but that it would have succeeded had his own men, Shrops and Saturday Loo, not double-crossed him."

"When did you get a line on his identity, Doc?" Monk demanded.

"In the Village of the Mad Ones," Doc replied slowly. "I was masquerading as Mo-Gwei, and told a guard that the bronze man was holding the man who was actually McGwei. When the guard instantly realized Mo-Gwei could not be a prisoner and be addressing him at the same time, he gave an alarm. That told me the truth."

"And when Rae Stanley asked you about her father," said Monk, "you didn't tell her."

"I did not tell her that Professor Stanley was Mo-Gwei," Doc said grimly.

"BROTHERS," the bronze man continued, "we're going to keep Rae Stanley from learning her father was Mo-Gwei. She's a swell girl, and Stanley was not mentally responsible. The blue meteor got him, undoubtedly."

Doc went over to the shaft and glanced into its blue depths. He could see Professor Stanley, still wearing the yellow robe of Mo-Gwei.

Near by lay Saturday Loo, who had turned traitor to Shrops. No doubt Mo-Gwei had cast him to his death. There were other victims of Mo-Gwei's poor, deranged mind down there.

Doc drew back. He plucked a metal egg of a bomb from his vest and tossed it into the shaft. Then he herded his men swiftly outside.

There was a whooping roar. The stone floor shuddered; lumps of mud jumped off the walls; the ceiling groaned. The floor all about the shaft caved in, and the azure light shut off, indicating that the pit had closed itself tightly.

"It will never be opened again," Doc said grimly. "We'll have the Tibetan government see to that."

A sober file of men, Doc and his aides moved toward the room which held Ham and Rae Stanley.

"Professor Stanley – was Mo-Gwei," Monk mumbled. "That explains why the Tibetan natives hated white men. A rumor got out that Mo-Gwei was white, probably."

Doc replied nothing. The flake-gold of the bronze man's eyes seemed less animated than usual, as if at rest.

The men walked through the ancient monastery and came near the room which held Ham and Rae Stanley.

Monk held up a hand.

"Let me handle this," he muttered. "I'm the fanciest liar in the gang."

They entered the room.

Rae Stanley looked up tearfully. "My father – "

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"Perished several months ago," Monk told her.

THE END