THE TALKING DEVIL

A Doc Savage Adventure by Kenneth Robeson

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Chapter I. THE DEVIL AND COMPANY

Renny Renwick, the engineer, and Long Tom Roberts, the electrical expert, were on hand to meet Doc Savage when he brought his plane down on the Hudson River. Doc taxied the craft, managing it expertly on the wind−whipped river surface, into the big hangar which was disguised as a warehouse on the river front, almost in the shadow of New York's midtown skyscrapers. Renny and Long Tom were a little breathless as they met Doc Savage.

“It's a devil,” said Renny.

“It talks,” said Long Tom.

“A little statuette of a satan, or a devil, not much more than a foot high,” Renny said. “It is made out of bronze or brass or some similar metal.”

“It has a deep voice,” Long Tom said.

“But only one man hears it talk.”

“One man. Nobody else.”

“His name is Joseph. Sam Joseph.”

“The man who hears it, we mean,” Long Tom explained.

Doc Savage listened to them patiently. Patience was one of Doc Savage's accomplishments, being one of the things that had been hammered into him as a part of the strange training which he had received in his youth−when, at diaper age, he had been placed in the hands of scientists to be subjected, over a course of almost twenty years, to an intensive program which was intended to fit him for one specific and rather strange career. Unlike many persons given an arbitrary training before they were old enough to know what it was all about, or speak for themselves, he had elected to follow the career for which he had been trained. It was an unusual career. It consisted, literally, of making other people's business his own. Or at least their troubles.

For some time now, Doc Savage had been taking it on himself to right wrongs and punish evildoers, traveling to the far corners of the earth to do so. He had five associates who worked with him. Renny Renwick and Long Tom Roberts were two members of this group of five.

“A devil,” Doc Savage said, getting it straight. “And it talks. But only one man can hear it.”

“That's right,” Long Tom said. “Sam Joseph.”

“There are more details,” Renny said.

“But they won't make it sound less silly,” Long Tom declared.

Renny took Doc's arm. “Come on,” he said. “We will take you to talk to Montague Ogden.”

“Who is Montague Ogden?”

“He hasn't any connection at all with the devil, or so he claims,” said Renny Renwick. “But he is the employer of Sam Joseph, the man who has been hearing the devil speak.”

THE impressive Ogden building was new, just barely prewar, and the lobby was all black and gold and apparently designed by an architect who had fallen on his head when small. But it was utterly expensive. The elevators were gold and black and also utterly expensive, and the elevator operators were girls with shapes that also looked expensive.

“I would like to have the money it cost to think about building this place,” said Renny Renwick, who was an engineer and knew what it had cost.

“I would rather have the elevator operators,” said Monk Mayfair. Monk was a remarkably homely fellow with a remarkable eye for a well−turned ankle.

The elevator let them out in a corridor which was ankle−deep in rich carpet. Office building halls are ordinarily not even carpeted.

“What kind of a place *is* this?” remarked Monk.

“Wait,” said Renny Renwick, “until you see the master of the establishment.”

They walked into a reception room that might have been lifted from a spectacular motion picture. The carpet was even deeper, the colors even richer, the furniture more extreme. The blonde at the desk looked as if she had been manufactured with a magazine cover in mind.

“Mr. Ogden,” she told them, bells in her voice, “is expecting you.”

Then they walked into a log cabin. Or so it would have seemed, had not the big glass windows offered views of some of the financial district's more impressive buildings. Everything was rustic, extremely rustic, even to the logs blazing in the fieldstone fireplace and the two large dogs lying on the hearth. The dogs lifted their heads and barked.

“I am Montague Ogden,” the man behind the desk said. He sounded as if he was accustomed to the name meaning something.

He was smooth. That was the first impression you got of him. As smooth as a polished rock. He was forty−five or fifty years old, well−preserved, and he was dressed in country tweeds and moccasins, so that he blended with his log−cabin inner office.

The general effect of Montague Ogden was a little ridiculous. Unless, of course, you were impressed by the obvious evidences of money.

There were conversational preliminaries, introductions mostly.

Then Montague Ogden got around to making what he evidently intended to be the outstanding statement of the conference.

“I am a very wealthy man,” he said.

DOC SAVAGE, with just a trace of the general feeling of distaste that the overly flamboyant office building, this office suite and the spectacle effect of the man himself had aroused, said, “At the moment we are more interested in a man named Sam Joseph, who is said to be hearing a small statue of the devil speak aloud to him.”

“Exactly,” said Montague Ogden. “Exactly.”

“I understand you can supply details.”

“Exactly,” said Montague Ogden. “I am a very wealthy man, and I want nothing spared to straighten out poor Sam. Poor Sam is my office manager, my trusted employee. He is even, I may say, more than that. He is the real working head, the manager, of my rather wide enterprises. I owe Sam a great deal. Sam is paid an excellent salary, it is true, but his value to me extends far beyond that. Sam is . . . is−” He groped for words, found them. “Sam is like a part of my own heart,” he finished.

Doc Savage asked quietly, “What do you mean by straightening out poor Sam?”

Montague Ogden blinked. He had blue eyes, very pale−blue eyes.

“Why, find out his trouble,” he said.

“Just what has happened?” Doc Savage asked patiently.

Ogden spread his hands with the palms up. “Poor Sam has this statue of a devil−”

“Where did he get it?”

“I gave it to him,” Montague Ogden said. “I frankly admit that.”

“Where did you get the statue?” Doc asked.

“From a Chinaman,” Ogden explained. “From an old Chinaman named Chi Sui. Poor Chi Sui was a very elderly Oriental who for a long time had operated a shop in Mott Street dealing in knickknacks, the trash that tourists buy in Chinatown. But old Chi Sui wanted to close up his business and go to China to help Chiang against the Japanese, and he had very little money, but he did have this statue, which was realistic. I bought it from Chi Sui−ah−in spite of the rather hair−lifting story he told me about it.”

Doc said, “So the former owner of the devil statue had a story to tell about it?”

“Yes.”

“What was the nature of the story?”

Montague Ogden blinked, smiled sheepishly, said, “A ridiculous story, of course. One in which I placed no stock. Not a bit of belief, not for a minute.”

“Suppose you tell it to us, anyway,” Doc invited.

Ogden nodded. “It was a rather simple story. It seems that this Chinese statue was molded by Co Suan, a friend of the original Buddha, and that the spirit of Buddha captured a portion of the spirit of the King of Evil, and imprisoned it in this statuette. That was to give the little statue life, because Co Suan, the sculptor, was a great friend of Buddha, and the All−Mighty One wished to give his friend fame and fortune deserving of such a kind and goodly fellow. Therefore Buddha imprisoned the spirit of the devil in the statue in order to give the little thing of brass a life and realism which no other sculptor could ever equal.”

“That is all of the story?”

“Yes. It's ridiculous, of course.” Montague Ogden smiled at them. “I want you to understand, of course, that I do not credit for a minute the belief that the statue is actually talking to poor Sam Joseph.”

“You have not heard the statue speak?” Doc asked.

“No.”

“Anyone but Sam Joseph heard it?”

“No.”

“What else do you know?” Doc Savage asked.

“Nothing. Nothing more.”

“In that case,” Doc Savage said, “we had better see Sam Joseph.”

THEY surrounded Sam Joseph where he lay on a bed, a great chromium−and−green bed, in the penthouse on top of the flamboyant Ogden building. The decorating theme of the penthouse was chromium and other colors, broken up with large and vital flowers of bright coloration. The penthouse was not in quite as bad taste as the rest of the building.

“My personal apartment,” said Montague Ogden of the penthouse layout. “I had poor Sam brought here.”

Sam Joseph was obviously not himself. He was a man large enough to make quite a hump on the bed, under the silken covers. He had gray hair, a not inconsiderable shock of it, and an angelic, peaceful, completely honest−looking face.

Sam Joseph had the kind of a face you would expect a man−angel to have. It was so entirely benign and innocent.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” he said. “Or, rather, good afternoon. It is afternoon, isn't it?”

“Don't you know whether or not it is afternoon?” Doc Savage asked.

Sam Joseph seemed somewhat confused. “I guess so,” he said. “That is, I was watching the snow, and the bluebirds singing in the snow. It only snows in the afternoon, does it not, or is it only on Wednesday, the first of June?”

Doc Savage asked Montague Ogden, “How long has he been talking like that?”

“Gracious, I never heard him speak like that before,” Montague Ogden said. “I really haven't.”

“His conversation hitherto has been rational?”

“Oh, yes. It really has.”

Sam Joseph said, “I came out of the hill and it was very dark, but there was the fish in the sand, with the ice all around it. We sat down there, the fish and I, and we had fine steaks and caviar, but the fish wouldn't eat the caviar because he was not a cannibal, he told me. When the fish said he was not a cannibal he had a very deep voice.”

Monk Mayfair, Doc Savage's assistant, looked at Doc thoughtfully. Monk put the end of a forefinger against his own right temple and made a motion as if he was winding up something.

“Like the things you pull corks with,” Monk said.

Doc Savage studied Sam Joseph for a while. The man was smiling, but it was a vacantly empty smile, a smile without intelligence or even much feeling behind it.

Doc turned back to Montague Ogden again.

“The devil statue,” Doc said. “Where is it?”

Montague Ogden seemed startled. “Oh, the devil. It is around somewhere, I suppose.”

“Get it.”

“But now you can see that poor Sam Joseph is−”

“The devil,” Doc said. “The devil that talked. We want to see it.”

Montague Ogden now seemed distressed, and also his brow wrinkled as if he was trying to think where the statue was, and he scratched his head.

“Oh, how silly of me,” he said. “How really silly. Of course, I remember now. In my den. I'll get it. I placed the statue in my den and I will get it now.”

He turned away.

Doc said, “Monk, go with him.”

“Me?” Monk was surprised.

“Yes, you,” Doc said.

“But−”

Monk stopped, and turned and followed Montague Ogden. Monk had remembered that when you argued with Doc you usually found yourself exceedingly in the wrong.

THEY walked down corridors, Monk and Montague Ogden. And Ogden examined Monk out of the corner of his eye, as if amazed at Monk's homeliness, and amused by it.

Monk's homeliness had amazed and amused many people, but he was not ashamed of it. There was a pleasantness about his homeliness and a fascination. Monk would not have to be seen in a very thick fog to be mistaken for something just out of the ape house in the zoo. His arms were as long as his legs, and he was coated with reddish hair that was close cousin to rusted shingle nails. Monk was even rather pleased with his clock−stopping looks because he had found that they exerted a hypnotic power over girls, and the prettier the girl, the greater the hypnotic capacity.

Montague Ogden opened a door, said, “This is my den, Mr. Mayfair.”

The den was inhabited by the stuffed heads of animals, at least half a hundred of them, which hung on the walls and leered, stared, snarled, or showed gap−fanged jaws at anyone in the den.

There was a man already in the den.

“Aren't you afraid of staying in here?” Monk asked the man.

He was a timid−looking young man, quite pale and lean and soft. The very picture of a timid soul.

“Beg pardon?” the man said. He sounded frightened, nervous, embarrassed.

“This is Butch,” said Montague Ogden.

“Butch, eh?” Monk said, and tried not to grin at the timid soul.

Montague Ogden remarked, “Butch, we have come after the devil statue.”

“Oh,” Butch said. He looked scared. “Oh! I haven't−that is−well, it's over there, but−”

“Never mind,” Montague Ogden told him. “We'll take it with us. You can go ahead with your work, Butch.”

Montague Ogden picked up the devil statue.

The statue was about what Monk expected to see, being not much over a foot high, rather fat, and made of brass that was tarnished, or bronze, wearing some sort of ceremonial robe, and holding a sword in one hand. This devil had a pronounced Chinese cast on his evil little face.

“I'll carry it,” Monk said.

“But−”

“I'll carry it,” Monk repeated.

Montague Ogden smiled and his, “Very well, if you wish,” was the soul of politeness.

They left the den and Monk was glad to get out of sight of all the leering, staring or snarling stuffed animals. He wondered how Butch managed to stand it in there with all those man−hungry−looking trophies, and he wondered if that was what was making Butch look frightened.

“Who's Butch?” Monk asked. “What's he do, I mean?”

“His work?”

“Yes.”

“Butch is my big−game hunting guide and my jujitsu instructor,” Montague Ogden explained. “He also teaches me wrestling and the art of knife−throwing, in. which I am interested as a hobby.”

Monk laughed. He thought he was being kidded.

They went down a hall that was majestic in a futuristic modern fashion, with high walls and great pictures in gaunt plain frames, and lighting that was so subdued that it was difficult to tell from where it came.

Monk walked along thinking of the timid soul who was named Butch, and how funny it was that Ogden had jokingly said Butch was his hunting guide and instructor in the more robust manly arts. Ordinarily that would not have been funny, but after you had seen Butch it was quite humorous.

“We can go through this way,” Montague Ogden said. “It is shorter.”

He turned to the left and opened a door and went through it.

Monk was following behind Ogden and watching Ogden's back when something hit Monk's head. It hit hard, whatever it was, and there was only a slight sound, a slight grinding, just before the impact landed. It took Monk on top of the head, slightly to the right−hand side, so that there was the grisly sensation of the blow sliding down toward the right ear and taking off the whole side of his head as it went. In the middle of this awful feeling it got very black and remained that way.

Chapter II. THE GREAT MISTAKE

MONK accomplished the feat of opening his eyes, but did it with some difficulty, after which he stared at Montague Ogden. Monk had the feeling that some time had passed, and did not dare move his body for fear his head would fall off it. There was a gouging pain in the small of his back.

Soon his ears recovered their ability to hear.

“That nasty picture!” Montague Ogden was saying. “Oh, that nasty picture! I told the interior decorator when he hung it over the door that something like this would happen! I told him it would be just my luck to have the picture fall down and brain somebody sometime.”

Monk tried out his voice with a groan and found his vocal chords satisfactory. “I'm brained, all right,” he said.

“Oh!” gasped Ogden. “He's conscious! He has recovered!”

Monk felt a hell of a long way from complete recovery and said so. “What hit me?” he demanded.

“A picture hanging over the door fell down as you went through,” explained Montague Ogden. “It was one of those freak accidents.”

Monk grimaced at Ogden.

“It's a good thing you were walking ahead of me when it happened,” Monk said. “Or I would have thought you beaned me.”

Montague Ogden laughed deprecatingly. Doc Savage, Renny Renwick and Long Tom Roberts were standing around Monk, looking relieved that he had recovered. Monk wondered if he *had* recovered, or if there was going to be complications.

The gouging pain in the small of his back was awful. He investigated and found it to be the devil statuette.

“I must have fallen on the thing,” Monk complained. “I wonder how many ribs it broke.”

“That the devil statue which speaks?” Doc Savage asked.

“That's it,” Monk said.

Montague Ogden said uncomfortably, “Of course, you gentlemen do not for a minute believe that the statue can speak?”

Doc Savage made no comment. He suggested that Renny Renwick find the building superintendent, and obtain a hacksaw and a cold chisel and hammer, in order that they might perform a dissection on the brass

devil.

Fifteen minutes later they had the devil lying in half a dozen pieces on a table, and there was obviously nothing inside it but brass.

“That is that,” Doc admitted. “The thing hardly seemed to have a conversational nature.”

“Of course you knew it hadn't,” Montague Ogden said.

Monk Mayfair explained to Ogden, “When you've been in the kind of a business we're in for a while, you get so you don't go around taking things at face value.”

Doc Savage said, “We will examine Sam Joseph now.”

The bronze man spent nearly an hour with Sam Joseph, doing the things a doctor does.

“According to all indications,” Doc said, “the man has an advanced cerebral fibroma.”

The bronze man then asked Monk to telephone the hospital and arrange for reception of the patient.

Doc told Montague Ogden, “I am going to call in other brain specialists for consultation. Do you have any particular doctors you would like to have pass an opinion?”

Ogden stared.

“I thought you were supposed to be the world's leading brain surgeon,” he said.

Doc passed up the compliment, explained, “In a matter as serious as this we prefer to have a consensus of opinion.”

(It is a well−known fact that in cases of serious illnesses, even the most skillful surgeons and physicians in the world will usually call in other specialists for their opinion on diagnosis and treatment.)

Montague Ogden nodded. He seemed to be surprised, but to consider the matter reasonable now that he thought of it.

“Could I bring in Dr. Nedden?” he asked. “He is my private surgeon.”

Doc Savage nodded. He had not heard of Dr. Nedden, but that did not mean the man could not be good.

“Certainly,” the bronze man said. “Call Dr. Nedden.”

THEY transferred Sam Joseph to the hospital, a small but wonderfully equipped hospital uptown, which specialized in brain cases, and which was largely supported by Doc Savage. He did most of his work there. Doc did not, as a matter of fact, do a great deal of surgery for surgery's sake, his specialty being stubborn and unusual cases upon which he could apply new and experimental technique.

Dr. Nedden appeared. He was a stocky man, face reddened by the outdoors sun, clothes immaculate, who seemed to know what he was doing.

“I have examined the patient previously,” he explained. “The unusual cerebropsychosis aroused my interest, and I was fairly sure it was cerebral fibroma. I made a thorough examination with a cerebroscope and found nothing to support any other diagnosis.”

Doc Savage called in two more specialists, and their diagnosis was the same.

“Cerebral fibroma.”

Monk asked, “What the heck's a cerebral fibroma, anyway?”

“A brain tumor. A fibrous type. That makes it very difficult to remove,” Doc Savage explained.

“Why don't doctors use words you can understand?” Monk wanted to know.

“For the same reason that chemists do not use small ones,” Doc told him.

Monk had to grin at that. There was nothing more incomprehensible to a layman than a chemical formula, even when you simplified it and used the symbols. But if you took one of those chemicals and tried to explain what it was by using small words, it would run into an afternoon's work.

Doc Savage found Montague Ogden.

“Your office manager, Sam Joseph, has a brain tumor,” Doc told Ogden. “An operation is the only answer.”

“He will not die?”

“There is no such thing as a minor or a completely safe operation,” Doc told him frankly. “But he should pull through.”

“Oh, I want him to. Sam means a lot to me. He has always practically run everything for me.”

Doc said, “Dr. C. B. Sticken would be a good man to do the surgery.”

“Yes, I−” Ogden's eyes flew wide. “What did you say?”

“I recommend C. B. Sticken for the surgery.”

Montague Ogden looked as if he was going to faint.

“But *you* must do it!” he gasped.

Doc Savage explained patiently, “This is not a sufficiently unusual or difficult case to warrant my doing the surgery, and, furthermore, Dr. Sticken is fully qualified.”

Montague Ogden seemed horrified at the idea.

“I insist on *you* doing it!” he cried. “Why, I wouldn't think of anyone else! I'll pay any fee.”

“It just happens,” Doc Savage said, “that I do not work for a fee.”

“What? Oh, yes, I remember. You get your funds from some unknown source. Well, then, I'll donate any sum you name to any organization you wish if you will do the operation.”

(Doc Savage's mysterious source of fabulous wealth is located in a remote lost valley in Central America, an enormous golden treasure guarded over by a clan of descendants of ancient Maya.)

“That will not be necessary. Dr. Sticken is capable−”

“I'll donate a hundred thousand dollars,” said Montague Ogden, “if you will do this operation.”

Doc Savage studied the man. “That is not necessary.”

“I mean it. A hundred thousand, Mr. Savage. To any charity, or army or navy relief group you care to name.” The man was so earnest he was pale.

“All right,” Doc Savage said finally.

DOC SAVAGE did the operation in the special amphitheater pit at the brain clinic. It was a cup−shaped arena surrounded by the most transparent type of glass. Beyond the glass were seats for witnessing surgeons. The lighting was fluorescent and brilliant.

As was always the case when Doc Savage was operating, the amphitheater was crowded. There were very few students among the witnesses, the majority being brain surgeons of established name and reputation, some of them men who had hurriedly caught airplanes and flown halfway across the continent in order to watch a master at work.

Doc Savage made the scalp incision, laid back the scalp, then used a special electrical bone knife of his own invention, a device which would cut without shock, having the property of rendering bone and nerve more insensible to shock in the area near the cutting head.

The operation progressed with brilliance up to the point where Doc reached the spot where the tumor should be.

There was no tumor.

The thing was so astounding that Doc was stunned. He stood there rigid and speechless, then after a few moments made the small trilling sound which was his unconscious habit in moments of intense mental stress. The trilling was low, exotic, might have been the product of an eerie wayward breeze in a naked forest. It had a ventriloqual quality, seeming to come from everywhere rather than any definite spot in the operating room.

There was certainly no tumor, either a fibroma or otherwise. There was only one thing Doc could say, and he said it.

“I have made a mistake,” he said.

Chapter III. A PLAN ROLLING

DR. NEDDEN, the man who had been introduced into the case as Montague Ogden's private doctor, was one of the spectators in the arena above the operating pit.

He got out of there in a hurry.

He found a cab. “Across town,” he ordered. “And hurry!”

Dr. Nedden leaned back in the cab. He seemed to have been holding himself in, and now he relaxed. As men sometimes do after they have been under terrific strain and try to relax, he started going to pieces.

He trembled and twitched. He pounded his knees wildly with his fists.

“Hurry, you fool!” he screamed at the driver.

He got out at an ordinary−looking brick apartment house west of Central Park and stumbled inside. He was so weak he had to hold to the hand rail in the elevator while riding up.

In the sixteenth−floor hall a man met him. The man who met him was the timid−looking soul called Butch.

“Goodness, doctor,” Butch said. “What is wrong?”

“Nothing's wrong,” said Dr. Nedden. “I'm just having a nervous reaction, that's all. I'll be all right as soon as I can take a sedative.”

Butch nodded. “Here,” he said. He handed Dr. Nedden a bundle. “Put these on.” Butch had an identical bundle. “We can put them on in the inner reception room,” he added.

They went to a door.

A legend on the door, in discreet lettering, said:

DR. MORGAN

PRIVATE HOSPITAL

They tried the door. It was locked.

“One of the others in there masking,” Butch said. “Let's try another room.”

There were half a dozen doors in the hall, all bearing the same legend. They found one which was unlocked and it admitted them to a bare room fitted with two white chairs, a white desk, a stool behind the desk, and a telephone on the desk itself.

Dr. Nedden and Butch unwrapped their bundles, which proved to hold ordinary white surgical robes, surgical hoods, and the gauze antiseptic masks which operating−room personnel wear.

When they had donned these their identities were thoroughly concealed.

Dr. Nedden led the way into another and much larger room after unlocking the hall door of the room where they had dressed.

There were seven men already seated in the room. All were enveloped in the surgical robes and masks.

Dr. Nedden was still shaking. Butch had had to tie the strings of Nedden's robe.

Nedden hurried to a cabinet containing medicines, got out a few pills out of a bottle, and swallowed them with water.

The other masked men watched him intently.

Dr. Nedden faced them.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “It worked. Doc Savage is trapped.”

DR. NEDDEN then sat down and explained, “I am suffering from nervous shock. The strain has been very great on me, gentlemen. If you will wait a few minutes, please.”

They waited patiently. Judging from the eyes visible above the surgical masks, all of them were vastly relieved. Even elated.

The sedative took effect on Dr. Nedden. His agitation subsided and he arose and drank more water. He added a hooker of whiskey.

He faced the men.

“It was an incredibly difficult and ticklish business,” he said. “Doc Savage is unquestionably the world's greatest general surgeon, and probably the greatest brain surgeon. To pull this we had to deceive him at his own business.

“Fortunately, mental difficulties are the most uncertain to diagnose,” continued Dr. Nedden. “By the use of drugs, largely types of barbiturates in overdoses, I was able to produce fake mental symptoms in Sam Joseph. A number of very cunning devices were resorted to in order to deceive Doc Savage, but I will not take up your time describing them, and you would not understand them anyway, not being doctors yourselves.”

A man interrupted, “What about the devil−statue mix−up?”

Dr. Nedden shrugged.

“We had a narrow escape there,” he said. “A devil statue containing a small loud−speaker and radio had been used to fool Sam Joseph into thinking the little statue was talking to him. Through an oversight, this statue was still in Montague Ogden's den when Doc Savage wished to see it.”

“I heard,” said the other, “that you had to knock out one of Doc Savage's men, that fellow they call Monk, and swap a harmless statue for the trick one.”

“We did that,” admitted Dr. Nedden. “We pulled it without a hitch.”

Butch said, “I pulled it. I popped him one on the head. Then Ogden made him think a picture had fallen off the wall just as he was going under it, and conked him.”

“That was a goofy explanation to give him.”

“Its goofiness made it good,” Butch declared.

They seemed satisfied.

One said, “That fixes everything so we can go ahead with the next step of the plan.”

“Not everything,” reminded Dr. Nedden. “There is still the Harrison matter.”

A man growled, “I'd call it the Duster Jones matter.”

Butch spoke up smugly.

“That will be taken care of,” he said. “The thing to do is let this operation have its repercussions.”

“Savage may think there is something strange about it.”

“Too late now, if he does.”

“All right, but murder isn't something to make mistakes with,” one of the men said.

Chapter IV. THE INDIGNANT MAN

IT was a bright crisp morning, the sunlight crisp out of an utterly clear sky, and the air a thing like wine which you noticed in a way that you do not ordinarily notice air, when Ham Brooks came into Doc Savage's offices in a midtown skyscraper.

Ham looked concerned. Ham was another Doc Savage assistant, another member of the group of five. He was a man of medium height with good shoulders and a thin waist, and clothing which had made him notable as one of the country's best−dressed men. He was the law expert of the group.

“Doc,” Ham said, “I'm worried about something.”

“Yes?”

“You know that operation on Sam Joseph?”

“What about it?”

“The news is all over town, in the surgical profession, that you pulled a bloomer. You operated on a man who did not have the slightest trace of what you were operating for.”

Doc Savage was not worried. “Just gossip within the profession,” he said. “Maybe it is not very nice of us, but it is a very human trait to get a kick out of seeing a big shot make a mistake. We all make them. It just goes to prove he is human, and that we are human to talk about it.”

Ham shook his head. “I know. I discounted it at first, thinking it was that kind of talk. But it's more.”

“What more?”

“There is some ugly talk about malpractice.”

“That is ridiculous.”

“The definition of malpractice,” Ham said, “is wrong or injurious treatment. At least that's the way the medical dictionaries give it.”

“You need not have gone to the bother of looking it up,” Doc told him. “This is just gossip. I have it coming to me because I did make a mistake.”

“All right,” Ham said. “I just wanted to mention it and tell you that, legally, no one can hang anything on you.”

Doc Savage smiled. “That is fine, Ham. But you are making a mountain out of a molehill.”

“I hope so,” Ham said. “But I don't like the way this malpractice talk is going around through the profession. It looks as if someone might be spreading it.”

MR. MONTAGUE OGDEN was more blunt about it. He came into Doc Savage's headquarters with his jaw out and his hands made into fists, and he was accompanied by two gentlemen who carried brief cases and looked like bulldogs.

“Mr. Savage,” Ogden said, “I am not at all satisfied with the thing you did to poor Sam Joseph.”

“Just what do you mean, Ogden?” Doc Savage asked.

“Why did you perform that brain operation on Sam Joseph?”

“For the same reason that you operate for an appendix,” Doc said. “It seemed to be the thing to do. The man's symptoms indicated brain tumor.”

“So *you* said.”

The most outstanding of Doc Savage's features was probably unusual eyes, like pools of flake gold always stirred by tiny winds. These took on a rather cold light now.

“You will recall,” he said, “that Dr. Nedden and two other brain specialists agreed with me on the diagnosis.”

Montague Ogden drew himself up.

“They have admitted,” he snapped, “that they took your word for it. As a matter of truth they were so overawed by your−ah−reputation−that they did not wish to disagree with you.”

Doc decided this was rather unprofessional behavior on the part of the three doctors, but he made no comment on that, saying instead:

“I am sorry it happened,” he said. “There is no denying I made a mistake.”

“Sorry,” said Ogden, “isn't enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“I demand,” snapped Ogden, “that you make a cash settlement of five hundred thousand dollars on Sam Joseph by way of reimbursing him for the peril to which you subjected his life. I also demand that you publish a half−page advertisement in all New York newspapers admitting that you made an error in diagnosis.”

Ham Brooks, who was present, jumped to his feet.

Doc waved Ham back. He digested Montague Ogden's demand.

“That is ridiculous, of course,” he said.

“I'll show you how ridiculous it is!” Montague Ogden bellowed. He waved to his two bulldog−faced companions. “These are my lawyers, Flack and Morrow. They'll show you how ridiculous it is.”

This was too much for Ham. He shot to his feet.

“Get out of here!” Ham yelled. “I know these two shysters, Flack and Morrow. They're crooks of the first water. The only thing different about them is that they are big thieves!”

“We'll sue you for slander!” bellowed a lawyer.

“Who ever heard of one lawyer calling another lawyer a crook being slander?” Ham snarled.

Ham habitually carried an innocent−looking black cane, and almost everyone in the legal profession knew this was a sword cane, the tip of which was coated with a chemical producing quick unconsciousness.

“Get out of here!” Ham roared, and flourished his cane as he made a rush for Ogden and his lawyers.

Ogden and his attorneys took flight.

As he ran, Ogden shouted, “You can't shut us up this way! We're going to get at the truth about your strange brain operations! We'll unmask your devilish scheme!”

Then they ran for their lives from Ham, got into the elevator and escaped.

“Doc,” Ham said, “something isn't up−and−up about this.”

THE fight on the speaker's platform at the big Army Relief rally at Madison Square Garden got a great deal more publicity.

It was not much of a fight. Montague Ogden merely popped out of the crowd, dashed across the speaker's platform in full view of the audience of many thousands and tried to assault Doc Savage with his fists.

The police soon hauled Ogden away.

But everyone in the audience heard the words Montague Ogden shrieked at the bronze man. The public−address microphones picked them up and made them loud in the great auditorium.

“There's something devilish behind your brain operations!” Ogden screamed. “What are you doing to those men? You're a monster!”

(Early in his career, Doc Savage recognized the need of some permanently effective, but at the same time humane, method of treatment for criminals which he captured. The numbers of these criminals as time went on would be considerable. So, out of his skill as a brain surgeon, and his understanding of human psychology, Doc evolved a method of permanently curing criminals of crime. He established an institution in a remote section of upstate New York, the mountainous area which is surprisingly one of the most deserted sections of the United States. Here he installed brain specialists which he had trained. When he sends a criminal to the “College,” the routine does not vary greatly. First the “student” undergoes a brain operation which Doc perfected, and which wipes out all memory of past. The criminal, having lost all vicious effects of environment, is then trained to make a useful and comfortable living at some worthy occupation. The results of Doc's experiment have been remarkable. It was his dream, and still is, to have such a method of criminal treatment widely accepted and practiced, for he feels it is one of the few sure cures for habitual criminality. However, the treatment is far too drastic for public acceptance. It is a hundred or two hundred years ahead of its time, probably, like other things which the bronze man uses regularly.)

The thing got in the newspapers. Montague Ogden was reputedly one of the rich men of the nation, and Doc Savage had a worldwide name. So it could hardly have kept out of the newspapers.

Also, Doc Savage was not a man who sought publicity, and items about him were scarce, so, accordingly, their news value was greater.

Doc Savage, as a matter of fact, had antagonized some of the newspapers at various times by refusing to give out information concerning his activities. One paper in particular, the *Morning Blade,* a blaring tabloid which featured a stable of columnists who were unreliable sensationalists, did not have a great love for Doc Savage.

It was the *Morning Blade* in which the black−type editorial said:

We know all about the laws of libel and slander. Sometimes we wonder if these laws don't protect people who shouldn't be protected.

Is it libel and slander to ask some questions?

Question one: Why is this fellow Doc Savage so secretive about himself that he is known as the Man of Mystery? What has he to hide?

Question two: What does Doc Savage do with the men he seizes, the men he says are criminals. (He alone says they are criminals; isn't it the right of our courts to judge those things?) What happens to these men? They disappear. Their old friends never see them again.

Question three: What is this mysterious “college” which Doc Savage maintains, of which rumors are sometimes heard? Has it horrors to hide?

Ham Brooks came in with this in his hands, a scowl on his face, and said, “Blast them! I think we could stick them for libel and slander on the strength of that. Doc, shall we try it?”

Doc Savage shook his head, but he was thoughtful. On the big inlaid table which was one of the principal articles of furniture in the reception room of his eighty−sixth floor headquarters, lay the other metropolitan newspapers, all of which contained items about what had happened last night at Madison Square Garden.

“Ham,” Doc said quietly, “it seems I made two mistakes.”

“One of them when you operated on Sam Joseph?”

“Yes.”

“What was the other one?”

“When I overlooked your suggestion that something might not be on the up−and−up about this thing,” Doc said.

Ham grinned. “We better get to looking into it, eh?”

Doc nodded.

“We better,” he said.

ANOTHER interested reader of the newspapers that day was Butch, the timid−looking soul. He read them and rubbed his hands together in glee.

He carried his newspapers and his delight to Dr. Nedden.

“It's beginning to roll,” Butch said. “You think we ought to have another meeting?”

Dr. Nedden was worried. He had not been sleeping well and was losing weight. He was getting peevish.

“Call a meeting?” he said, and sneered. “Are you forgetting it is the man we work for who calls the meetings?”

Butch grinned. “That's right. O. K., then. I just got too happy over this. But it's sure rolling now, ain't it?”

Dr. Nedden looked at the newspapers, wet his lips and admitted, “It's rolling, all right.”

“What are you afraid of, doctor? You look like a singed cat.”

“It's trying to perpetrate a thing like this on a man like Doc Savage,” muttered Dr. Nedden.

“Hell, it's so big it can't fail.”

“Savage will start investigating before long.”

“It'll be built up too much for him to stop it by then. And he doesn't know what is behind it. He'll never guess. The thing is so unexpected that it would be the last thing in the world he would look for.”

Dr. Nedden nodded. “The murder doesn't help my sleep,” he confessed.

“Murder? Oh, that.” Butch laughed. “Didn't you know the Harrisons were going to be taken care of tonight?”

“More murders?”

Butch grinned. “Ever hear of fighting fire with fire, doctor?”

“Where will it be done?”

“Kansas City,” Butch told him. “Our man is waiting at the airport there now.”

Chapter V. MURDER AND KANSAS CITY

R. J. HARRISON had been christened Ranzo John Harrison in his cradle, and he had come to hate the name “Ranzo” and the nickname “Randy” so thoroughly that he never told anyone his two christened names if he could help it. He was now called, and had been called for years, Rotary Harrison. Strangely enough, he did not object to Rotary. He was even proud of it.

The name came from the so−called rotary method of drilling oil wells, as opposed to the cable tool method. Rotary Harrison had been a pioneer in the mid−continent oil fields in the use of rotary drilling.

Rotary Harrison was a big man physically, a hard−hammered giant of a fellow, now a little more thin than he had once been, but with the hard, solid look of a frontiersman in his blue eyes and the same quality in his fists.

He had made and lost ten or a dozen fortunes, and they had been oilmen's fortunes. Anything less than five or ten million dollars is not considered much of a fortune in the oil business. The fortunes Rotary Harrison had made and lost had been big ones. He had another big one now, and again he was on the verge of losing it.

He was a spectacular old reprobate. His private airplanes, for example, were always the fastest and most luxurious.

The one he was flying now was a sample.

His daughter, Sister Harrison, was sitting back in the cabin.

Sis was holding a .250/3000−caliber rifle equipped with a telescopic sight.

Sis was on the spectacular side herself, being a long blond girl who won tennis cups, prizes for riding horses in rodeos, and once, a complimentary squib from a Broadway columnist for knocking a leering stew bum into the middle of next week with a left. These were accomplishments enough, but she was also with mentality, as the saying goes, being the possessor of various scholarship keys which were not given for having oil millions, as well as two books and a play she had written, and clippings of many pointed letters she had sent the Tulsa *World*, her favorite newspaper, concerning what she thought about the oil situation, and its probable effect on the national economy. Assuredly with brains.

Rotary Harrison said, “Sis, there's a river down there. I think it's the Kaw.”

“In that case we may make it,” Sis said.

“Maybe so. We should hit the Kaw close to Kansas City.”

Sis put down the rifle and picked up a pair of good binoculars. She focused these on the sky behind the ship and searched intently for a while.

She eventually located the winged speck that was the plane following them. It was about where it had been during most of the trip.

“We still got our gadfly?” asked Rotary.

“Still got it,” Sis agreed.

“Yonder's Kansas City,” said Rotary Harrison. “When we get there we'll see what luck we have pulling a shenanigan.”

THE plane which had followed the Harrisons had, they believed, picked up their trail sometime after they left the municipal airport at Tulsa. Because no plane had followed them off the municipal airport at Tulsa, they surmised the other ship had been at another airport nearby and had been notified when they left the ground.

They knew the other plane was following them. They had made sure of that by detouring slightly in the direction of Oil Hill, Kansas, where Rotary Harrison had once opened a field of gushers−that was his third fortune in the making−and the plane behind had trailed them on the detour. The other ship had always remained some miles back, practically out of sight in the distance.

Rotary Harrison's face had become rocklike when he knew they were being followed.

“Poor old Duster Jones,” he said once.

Then Rotary had leaned back, letting the plane fly herself, and had remembered Duster Jones.

Duster Jones had come out of Ohio or Pennsylvania or some such place forty years ago and he had brought his hard luck with him. It had been a kind of inexhaustible hard luck, good for all the years of Duster Jones' life. Fate was particularly cruel, because she hit her blows of hard luck with platinum and diamond hammers. He made such ungodly rich strikes and he always lost them. Duster Jones had the golden touch of Midas, but his hands were greased. He never quite got hold of the riches, but always it was almost. Duster Jones became a legend in the oil fields.

Duster Jones liked Rotary Harrison. They were opposites, in a way, because it seemed that Rotary had only to turn a hand to make a fortune, while Duster could turn handsprings and wind up as poor as a mouse.

They had been very, very close friends for years. Neither of them ever did a thing, ever had hardly a thought, that the other did not know about.

Rotary believed he knew why Duster Jones had been shot between the eyes with a .22−caliber bullet.

ROTARY HARRISON set his plane down at the Kansas City airport. He taxied back along the edge of the runway toward the office and hangars, letting the ship move slowly.

He watched the other plane, the ship that had been following him, come out of the southwest.

He was not surprised when it did not land. Nor was he puzzled when the craft roared overhead and dropped first one wing then the other in a series of measured maneuvers.

“Signal,” he said. “They got somebody here at the airport waitin' for us.”

He looked back at his daughter then. He was oppressed by the feeling of danger around them, of poor old Duster Jones' death, and of mystery. He studied Sis' face. They had been through a lot together, through more than most fathers and daughters. But he found himself wishing, suddenly, that Sis was somewhere where it was safe.

“Scared, Sis?” he asked.

“Sure,” she admitted. “But don't let it bother you.”

Rotary grinned. “Nothing is gonna bother us. *We're* gonna do the bothering.”

He parked his plane on the line where civilian aircraft were supposed to park. He went into the office and filled out the arrival forms and applied for the permission which the army required civilians to obtain before they could fly on to New York.

“Want to leave in about half an hour,” he said. “See that my plane is refueled.”

“Half an hour?” the C. A. A. man said. “Be night before you get into New York. You experienced in night flying?”

“Sure,” said Rotary. “Here's my license with instrument rating.”

Rotary and Sis got a cab, acting as if nothing out of the way was transpiring, except that Sis carried the rifle, which made her a slightly odd spectacle.

When the cab was crossing the Missouri River bridge into Kansas City, Rotary asked, “Got him spotted?”

“Second cab back of us,” Sis said.

“Little man, dark hair, dark skin, blue pin−stripe suit?”

“That's the one,” Sis agreed.

“All right,” Rotary said. “Pretty soon we surprise him.”

They rolled down off the bridge through the shabby commercial district, then started to climb the hill. They topped the rise and rolled down Grand Avenue. Traffic was thick around them now.

Their cab halted for a red light, a big truck on their right. “Pull in ahead of that truck a little,” Rotary ordered. Their driver obeyed.

Rotary got out. The truck screened him from the machine behind.

“Go right ahead,” he told Sis.

The pursuing cab drew alongside the truck, passing it.

Rotary Harrison jumped out from around the side of the truck. He got an arm around the door post of the cab−its windows were down−wrenched the cab door open and was inside.

Rotary showed the occupant of the cab the six−shooter he had inherited from his Indian−fighting dad.

“DON'T jump, hop, skip or reach,” Rotary said. “Just sit.”

He used the kind of a tone he used when he had just lost a string of tools in a six−thousand−foot oil well. It was a tone that would curl wire.

“Follow that second cab ahead,” he told the driver.

The driver looked around. He seemed undecided.

Rotary showed him the six−gun and said, “When I shoot a rabbit with this thing, all they generally find is one ear.”

The driver followed orders.

They turned left and found a street where there was no traffic. Sis got out of the cab ahead and came back.

“Got him, eh?” She examined the man. “Never saw him before.”

The man would have looked suave enough ordinarily perhaps, but now he was scared.

“Go back to the airport,” Rotary told their driver.

The cab chauffeur, more than anxious to get rid of his passengers and wash his hands of the whole thing, lost no time in driving back across the river to the airport.

Rotary told his prisoner, “You know what happened to Duster Jones?”

The man said nothing, but more fear swam in his eyes. He knew what had happened to Duster Jones, all right, and apparently that was the big thing now in his mind.

“The same thing will happen to you,” Rotary told him, “if you make one bleat or one jump.”

They got out at the airport. The Harrison plane was refueled, ready for the air.

Rotary put the captive in the cabin, indicating that Sis should watch the fellow.

“I'll go get my papers for the New York flight,” Rotary explained. “Getting papers every time you turn around in an airplane is a danged nuisance, but on account of the war I guess you gotta do it.”

He went away and came back. “All set,” he explained. He took over the controls, started the motor and warmed it, checked both magnetos, then swung the tail around, got out on the runway and fed it the gun when he got the O. K. from the control tower.

The plane was soon slanting up into the sky.

Rotary Harrison turned to their captive.

“I didn't include you in my cargo when I checked out,” he said. “You know what that means?”

The man got white.

“That's right,” Rotary told him. “I can't have you along when we land.” He turned to his daughter. “Sis, plot a course that will take us over one of the Great Lakes. And haven't we got a fishing tool back in the cabin that will do as a sinker for this hombre's body?”

Chapter VI. DEATH IN THE SKY

THEY flew north, left the Missouri River behind, climbed until the concrete ribbon of Highway 69 was a vague thread below and behind. Rotary turned the controls over to Sis, whispering, “Don't get excited, but you can act as if you are. I'm fooling about killing this bird.”

“I knew you were,” Sis said.

Rotary went back. He stood looking at the prisoner, who was sprawled in a seat and gripping the seat arms.

“Got a name?” Rotary asked.

“Smith,” the man said.

“John Smith?” asked Rotary.

“Yeah.”

Rotary hit him, drove two quick blows like lightning. The man lifted up in the seat, then flopped back. He turned slightly blue and his tongue stuck out and he breathed nosily.

“That's for John Smithing me,” said Rotary. “I don't guess there's any need of fooling with you.”

Rotary then fell upon the man, yanked him into the aisle, hit him again. That blow produced unconsciousness, but it was brief.

When the man awakened it was in time to find Rotary just finishing tying his ankles to his wrists, and both of these to an oil−well fishing tool, a piece of steel which weighed possibly forty pounds.

Rotary noted the man was awake. He made a gesture as if to hit him again, then changed his mind.

“What the hell,” Rotary said. “What yelling you do on the way down won't hurt anything.”

Rotary dragged him to the plane door and forced the door open against the propeller wash.

“See, we're over the Missouri River,” Rotary pointed out. “Changed our minds about the Great Lakes. Too far away.”

Rotary then picked the man up, and−the fellow struggled horribly but ineffectively−heaved him out of the plane door.

The man's screams were ghastly.

Rotary seemed to encounter an accident. The loose end of the rope−it was a cowboy lariat−with which the man was tied, became tangled, apparently, with one of the seat supports. The man was stopped and dangled helplessly just outside the plane door.

“Danged rope got caught!” Rotary bellowed.

He fought as if to free the rope. He did not succeed.

“Got a knife, Sis?” he yelled. “Gotta cut this hombre loose.”

The screaming of the man dangling outside the plane, the propeller wash smashing against him with cold horror, became articulate words.

“Please!” he screeched. “Don't! I'll do anything! Anything!”

Rotary sneered at him.

“Brother, you'd just tell me more lies,” he said. “Sis, hand me that knife.”

The man blubbered and screeched that he hoped to die if he was lying. He was about as scared as a man could become and remain rational.

“Oh, all right,” Rotary said with seeming reluctance.

He yanked the prisoner back inside.

“Just one little fib and out you go,” he warned the man.

THE plot−the terrorized captive told Rotary Harrison−was a large thing, and it probably extended into foreign countries. There were millions of dollars involved, and there had been one murder executed and others were planned.

“The killing of old Duster Jones was that murder?” asked Rotary grimly.

It was. But that one had been done by a man called Butch, who had been sent out from New York City for the job. Butch was a fellow who looked as meek as a rabbit, a regular milksop man in appearance, but a fiend who had the bloodthirsty instincts of a weasel.

“Why was Duster killed?” asked Rotary fiercely.

“He found out too much,” the man explained. “Or at least I gathered that was what it was. It seems Duster was in a honkatonk one night and heard two men talking. He bought the men drinks and got them tight. He got their tongues loose and went riding with them in the night, and at the end of the ride he had learned enough to be dangerous to the plan.”

Rotary scowled and demanded, “Why are they trying to knock off me and Sis?”

“Because,” the man explained, “they are afraid you know too much.”

“What makes them think that?”

“Your decision to go to New York.”

Rotary Harrison was astonished. He was going to New York, as a matter of truth, on what he believed in his heart would be a fruitless attempt to raise money. He had to have the money, because without it the whole structure of his oil enterprises would collapse.

“Why am I going to New York, do they think?” he asked the prisoner.

“To see Doc Savage. To tell him what you know.”

Rotary hid his amazement. “So they think that,” he said.

He had nearly asked who Doc Savage was, but he caught himself in time. And now, probing in his mind, he decided who Doc Savage must be. He had heard of a rather mysterious man with headquarters in New York by that name. For some reason or other, Rotary recalled, many men in the oil fields had heard of Savage, but he did not know exactly why. He did remember that crooks were supposed to be afraid of Savage, if that meant anything.

Rotary listened to the prisoner talk. The man was getting sickly worried as he watched the hard look on Rotary's face.

He was really a small fry, the prisoner explained. Just a hired hand. He had been dishonorably discharged from the army for assaulting an officer, had served a term in Leavenworth, and had lately been released from prison. He was under bond in a theft case in Missouri, and had sought to pick himself up a bit of lawyer money by taking on this job. A friend, another crook, had recommended him for the job. He had been ordered to seize Rotary and Sis, and hold or kill them, whichever was convenient.

“I don't even know who the head guys are,” he insisted.

“But you know some of the small fry?”

“Yes. That Butch, and three or four others.”

Rotary asked ominously, “What about Doc Savage?”

The man knew something about that. Evidently he and Butch, or someone else, had talked about it.

“They have a big scheme whereby Doc Savage is going to be made to take the blame for the whole thing,” the prisoner explained.

“Why pick on Savage?”

The man said, “That's the first question that occurred to me, too. But Savage is made for the part. He is a mysterious figure. Then, there's all these brain operations he has performed, and the men who disappear after he gets his hands on them.”

“Men who disappear when Savage gets hold of them?” Rotary echoed, and his surprise got in his voice.

“Crooks.”

“Oh.”

THE thing as a whole did not make much sense to Rotary Harrison.

He didn't have the real explanation behind it all, he felt.

He was convinced, though, that this hireling he had captured did not know the real answer.

Rotary sank in the seat beside Sis. He told her, pretty much as the prisoner had given it, what he had learned. “Make sense to you?” he finished.

Sis was thoughtful. “Looks to me as if our trouble is just part and parcel of a great mess of trouble that's cooking for a lot of folks,” she decided.

“Sis,” said Rotary, “this makes me look at our own trouble in a new light.”

“Just how?”

“This is our situation: Six months ago we borrowed a mess of money from a New York outfit owned by a man named Montague Ogden. But Ogden himself didn't handle the deal. It was handled by Sam Joseph, who was Ogden's office manager, and seemed to run everything for Ogden.”

Rotary Harrison made a grim jaw for a moment.

“Our deal with Sam Joseph was witnessed by Duster Jones,” he continued. “The deal included an agreement that the loan was to be renewed on our request in six months, and it was a written agreement. Duster Jones witnessed it. We had a copy, and Sam Joseph had a copy.”

His scowl darkened.

“Now Sam Joseph wires us there was no such agreement,” he growled. “Our copy of it disappears−stolen probably. And poor Duster Jones, the only man who could prove there was an agreement for me, is killed. That means this Sam Joseph can demand full payment of the loan in three weeks. I haven't got the money. I have got no more chance than a rabbit of getting it. He'll foreclose, ruin me, and grab control of my company. As soon as word gets around I can't meet my obligations−and he'll see that the word gets around−the stock of my company will go to hell for cheap.”

Sis was also grim.

She said, “Dad, I wonder if they could have killed Duster Jones because he witnessed that agreement.”

“Probably,” Rotary agreed.

“What about this Doc Savage, the man they're trying to hang it all onto?” Sis asked.

“He might want to know what's goin' on,” Rotary said. “So we better hightail it into New York and give him the news.”

ROTARY went back and tied the prisoner in a somewhat more comfortable position. He talked with the man for some time and the fellow poured out all he knew with frightened eagerness, but it was nothing more than he had already said.

“Ever hear of a man named Sam Joseph?” Rotary demanded.

The prisoner had.

“He the big boss?” Rotary asked.

The other didn't know. The killer named Butch had just mentioned Sam Joseph, but the prisoner couldn't remember in what connection.

In order to fly over the Missouri River and frighten the prisoner, they had flown south from the route laid out for them as a permissible course by the army authorities. Sis turned the plane north and got on the course again. It was the regular airways route, Kansas City to Chicago, part of the distance.

Rotary consulted the map. “Here's a place named Millard,” he said. “There's a civil airways radio station there.”

He got out a notebook and scribbled on it, tore out the page on which he had written, and folded it around a five−dollar bill. Then he tied them both around a monkey wrench with a piece of string.

Rotary said, “O. K., fly low over the radio station. Make the engine sound as if we're in trouble.”

Sis followed instructions. A man, probably an operator, came out and stood watching them.

Rotary tossed the paper and the bill, tied to the monkey wrench, overside. The man below began walking toward the falling object.

“What was the idea?” Sis asked.

“Just a piece of insurance,” Rotary explained. “Cautious in my old age. That's me.”

IT could not have been more than three minutes later when a plane came piling out of a cloud a little ahead of them. It was fast. It bored toward them.

“Look,” Sis gasped. “That's the same plane that followed us from Tulsa to Kansas City!”

“This is the regular route the army assigns to civilian planes,” Rotary said grimly. “So he just flew up here and waited around for us. Where's that rifle?”

He yanked open the cabin windows. Motor thunder and inrushing wind was a roar.

“Careful of the propeller!” Sis warned.

The plane ahead was coming at them straight−on now. The pilot must know they couldn't shoot through the propeller, and was keeping ahead of it.

Sis said, “I'll do a flat skid to the right. Be ready.”

She sent the plane into the skid, presenting Rotary with the other ship as a target. But the plane ahead was ready for that. It skidded also.

Rotary's rifle banged. Then there was a terrific racket, thudding jars, as machine−gun bullets stormed into their ship. The metal framing was hit at least a dozen times. Bullets slashed their fuel tank. The tank was located between the cockpit and the engine, and suddenly high−octane gas was flooding back into the cockpit and cabin.

The planes thundered past each other and apart.

Rotary growled, “Must be losin' my eye.” He hadn't, as far as he could tell, hit anything effectively.

“See if you can keep them back,” Sis said. She hauled the hand throttle as far open as it would go.

Rotary nodded. He climbed back into the cabin, noting that their prisoner was white−faced, but apparently unhurt as yet. “Your pals!” Rotary told him. “Maybe you'd been better off if I had tossed you overboard.”

He leaned out of the cabin window from time to time, aiming carefully with his rifle and firing. He was not a particularly good shot. Not expert as modern marksmen go, although he could hold his own with any man on a quail hunt, or shooting jackrabbits from a moving car. He emptied the clip. He had no idea a plane would be so hard to bring down.

The other ship gained on them rapidly and flew below and behind so that it was almost impossible for him to hit it or even catch sight of it. Time seemed to go swiftly. But actually only twenty minutes had passed.

Because the Mississippi River, broad and darkly turgid in the afternoon sun, was below them when they caught fire. The leaking gas tank did it, of course. They were tempting providence to try to fly. But there had been no place where they could land, and still protect themselves after they were down. And, suddenly, Sis screamed, and the plane was full of bundling flames.

They were low, trying to get the plane behind them out of the blind spot. The river was snaking below no more than two hundred feet.

“We'll have to take to the water,” Sis said. She had cut the motor and her voice was astonishingly loud.

They hit almost at once. There was not much of it. Not much more roughness than a seaplane landing.

Rotary slashed their prisoner loose. Then he went out through the plane cabin door. Sis was ahead of him. Water was pouring in, their ship beginning to stand on its nose as it sank.

Rotary and Sis swam clear. The water was fairly cold. Fifty yards away, low and glistening in the sun, was a sandbar. It was more than half a mile long, looked smooth, and was completely bare of vegetation. The plane which had brought them down was floating in for a landing on the sandbar. Everywhere else, it seemed to them, there was water.

“They got us,” Rotary Harrison said.

Chapter VII. MIDWEST TRAIL

THE telegram had just come. Doc Savage gave it a second reading.

“Renny,” Doc said.

Renny Renwick appeared.

Doc handed him the telegram, explaining, “It just came.”

Renny examined the message, then turned it thoughtfully in his big hands. “Telephoned to Kirksville, Missouri, from a place called Millard, Missouri, where there is an airways radio station,” he said gravely. “Operator of the airways radio says a plane flew over, apparently with engine trouble, and dropped a message to be telegraphed to you.”

“Notice the content of the message,” Doc said.

“'You are being framed to take the rap in scheme involving murder and no telling what else. Coming to give you story.' And it's signed by Rotary Harrison. Do you know a Rotary Harrison?”

“The name is not familiar,” Doc admitted. “Get copies of national business directories and Who's Who, and see if we find anything.”

Renny's search got results.

“Holy cow!” he said, his great, rumbling voice fully impressed. “Rotary Harrison is an oil man. Got a financial record like a jack−in−the−box. Up and down. Right now, seems to be up, but in a shaky way. Like a man sitting on a stack of packing cases.”

Doc Savage said, “Check on this plane Rotary Harrison was flying. Get Monk and Ham to help you, and Long Tom. Keep track of the ship, once you find it.”

Renny got on a telephone.

Ham Brooks came in, said, “Doc, this thing isn't shaping up so good from a legal angle.”

“You mean that Montague Ogden is still threatening to sue me because of the error in operating on Sam Joseph?”

“He's more than threatening. He's filed suit.” Ham spread his hands. “Ogden claims that he has lost the services of Sam Joseph and is therefore entitled to damages.”

“That is a fragile basis for a lawsuit.”

Ham shrugged. “Ordinarily, yes. But the letter of the written law is not always the law that prevails. Other connected circumstances are usually taken into consideration, whether they should be or not.”

“You mean, Ham, that the unpleasant publicity we are getting in the newspapers will weight the scales against us?”

“That,” Ham said, “is what I mean.”

“I see.”

“And, furthermore, I think somebody is behind that publicity campaign against you.”

“Our investigation has not turned up a deliberate plot,” Doc reminded.

“They're too slick. Too smooth to be caught.”

Doc said, “Montague Ogden is certainly doing all he can to discredit me. But you can say one thing about Ogden−he stands right out in the open and beats his drum.”

Ham admitted, “He does that,” grudgingly. “But the thing is spreading like wildfire. I don't see how one man could stir up all that stink.”

Renny came in to report on the results of his search for the plane of Rotary Harrison.

“The ship is down somewhere,” Renny said. “Here's a report from a place called Keokuk, on the Mississippi River right at the border of Missouri and Iowa. A plane answering the description of Rotary Harrison's ship passed over that town closely pursued by another plane about two hours ago. That would make it right after the telegram was sent from Millard.”

Doc Savage nodded. “Are you getting one of our planes ready?”

“It'll be fueled by the time we get there,” Renny said. “Monk and Ham are down there now.”

DOC SAVAGE did not take off for the Midwest immediately. He got Long Tom and Renny aside.

“You two stay here,” Doc directed, “and begin a general investigation of the situation.”

“Just what,” asked Renny, “would you suggest was a general investigation?”

“Go to a lot of trouble,” Doc said, “to find out whether this campaign against us is the work of an organization.”

“I see. Apparently it is the work of Montague Ogden. But you want to know whether there is a gang behind it.”

“Another thing,” Doc said, “is an investigation of Montague Ogden. I want the history of the man, a complete picture of his life from the beginning up to now.”

“Montague's life story. O. K.”

“I want a complete report on his financial condition.”

“The low−down on Montague Ogden. Right.”

“I want a full report on Dr. Nedden.”

“The low−down on the Ogden private physician.”

“He thoroughly agreed with me that a cerebral fibroma was Sam Joseph's trouble,” Doc said.

“So did two other doctors,” Renny reminded.

“I want the low−down on them, too.”

Renny nodded. “All right. We'll do the best we can.”

“Good. We will return as soon as we look into this matter of a man named Rotary Harrison, who has disappeared in the Midwest.”

“I take it,” Renny said, “that you know how serious this thing can get.”

“I have an inkling.”

“I'm talking about our college,” Renny said.

Doc Savage's face was suddenly solemn, with a trace of strain. Plainly, Renny had touched on the worry uppermost in his mind.

“I think you have hit the nail on the head.”

“I thought I had,” Renny said.

“If the public gets one single inkling of the kind of an institution we maintain up there, there will be a terrific uproar.”

Renny nodded. “We'll be lucky if they only hang us.”

“You understand everything you are to do?”

“I'm to get all the dope possible on Montague Ogden and his business interests, find out if there is an organization behind this newspaper campaign against us, and check up on Dr. Nedden and the other doctors who concurred in the diagnosis which said Sam Joseph had a cerebral fibroma. Is that all?”

“Add Sam Joseph to your list. Find out all about him.”

“Sure,” Renny said. “I can see where Long Tom and I are going to be as busy as one−armed paperhangers.”

“You better hire two or three good detective agencies to help you.”

“That wouldn't be a bad idea,” Renny agreed. “We'll handle it, Doc. Are you leaving for the Midwest now?”

“Right away.”

“I hope you find Rotary Harrison,” Renny said. “I have a hunch he is the first proof we've had that this thing is a lot bigger than anybody dreamed.”

DOC SAVAGE took off from the Hudson River with Monk and Ham. They used one of Doc's small planes, a craft which could handle five passengers at the very most, a ship which was mostly motor. It was an experimental army pursuit−type job which had been constructed on Doc's specifications, and which had proved too “hot” to be handled by the average run of pursuit pilots. Considering how “hot” the pursuit ships now used by the army were, this plane became something of a freak. It held a little over four hours' gas supply, and they had to detour by St. Louis to find a runway long enough to accommodate them. But the trip required very little time. Monk insisted he hardly had time to spit.

They were in the air again when Ham, who was wearing the telephone headset, said, “Here is Renny in New York on the air. Voice. He wants you.”

Doc plugged in his headset, picked up the microphone, said, “Yes?”

Renny's deep voice said, “Another telegram just came in from that place in Missouri, Millard. You want it?”

“Go ahead,” Doc said.

“It says that Rotary Harrison's plane has landed there and that he and his daughter are waiting to see you if you can fly there to meet them,” Renny explained.

“All right,” Doc said. “Thanks.” He consulted a chart and the wind−velocity information he had gotten from the St. Louis airport. He changed his course.

Alarmed, Ham Brooks consulted the logged data concerning the Millard field, the runway length. “They've got a hard−surfaced runway north and south,” he said. “The wind is north and fairly strong. We may be able to set this bumblebee down there.”

Monk Mayfair was less concerned about their landing.

“Rotary Harrison and daughter, eh?” he remarked. “I wonder what kind of a daughter.”

Ham frowned. “I thought you were cured?”

“Cured of what?”

“Making a yassack out of yourself every time a pretty girl goes past.”

Monk grinned. “The only time I feel like a fool,” he said, “is when I let one get past me.”

Doc Savage said, “Millard Field coming up.”

“In this thing,” Ham said, “you no more than put your finger on a place than you are there.”

They made the usual traffic circle of the field, came in low over the fence and already stalling. The airspeed indicator when they touched said better than a hundred and fifty miles an hour. That was plenty “hot,” and as the ship slowed so that the abbreviated control surfaces no longer had much effect, it took expert brake

controlling to keep them on the runway and out of the fence at the other end.

When their ground speed was down to twenty miles an hour, Doc braked the right wheel, sent the ship toward the small cottage of an airways radio station with its windmill−like tower for the anemometer and wind sock.

They were not fifty yards from the cottage when a storm of lead hit their ship.

All of the bullets−and no one but Doc noticed this, and he certainly did not discuss it then−hit back in the cabin section where Monk and Ham were riding. None of them hit near the cockpit where Doc was seated in plain view.

Chapter VIII. MAN LOST

IT was a machine gun. A heavy military−type gun operating on a tripod. It had been set up on the ground and covered with a large canvas, and gun and canvas had been behind a car where it had not been noticed−or more probably the setting up of it had not been noticed−by the operators in the radio station. The car drove forward a few yards, the canvas was yanked away, and the gun began shaking a red−lipped snout.

The effect on Doc's ship was terrific. The machine−gun bullets, .30−caliber with a hitting energy of around twenty−nine hundred foot−pounds, seemed about to turn the plane over. They raked the ship from stern to propeller and took about a fourth off one propeller blade, so that vibration of the unbalanced prop helped shake the ship.

Then everything was silent. The motor had stopped.

Finally Monk spoke.

“That's a nice Missouri reception,” he said. “What if this hadn't been an army experimental job with an armored cabin?”

A man appeared in the radio cottage door. One of the operators. Someone shot at him. He jumped, high and wide, and began to run. He did not jump back into the cottage, which would have seemed natural, but took out across the field toward some orange hangars, labeled as the property of a flying service, on the other side of the field. He was a long thin man who ran as probably he had never run before.

“He's a little excited,” Monk said mildly.

The words were hardly out of Monk's mouth when a grenade exploded directly under their ship. It might have been a homemade bomb of dynamite. It lifted the plane, Monk said forty feet but ten was probably closer, and snapped off both wings, ripped open the armored cabin compartment, and dumped the wreckage over on its side.

Monk, always ready with a wisecrack, for once was speechless. They were dazed. Their ears had stopped working for the moment.

Doc Savage dug into his clothing. When he was operating, his clothes were invariably a mine of gadgets. He came up with a smoke bomb, a little egg of a thing, which he flipped toward the machine gun.

The smoke bomb hit the ground, ripened, made a cloud of smoke so black that it looked solid like a large and spreading mushroom of tar. It shut off view of car and machine gun.

“Run!” Doc rapped. “They may use another bomb.”

Ham piled out of a rip in the cabin. Doc followed, then Monk. Doc and Ham ran, heading for the radio shack, which had a good concrete foundation that should stop lead.

Monk was bellowing. He liked to bellow in a fight, and he jumped around, half of a mind to rush through the smoke and try his luck on the gun crew behind it.

Then an object came gyrating out of the smoke, hit the ground, rolled and stopped near Monk's feet. It was another bomb, homemade, fifteen or so sticks of dynamite and a fizzing, smoking fuse. Monk popped his eyes at it. He let out a howl much louder than any previous effort and started running, not seeming to touch the ground.

Doc Savage scooped up the bomb and threw it back into the smoke on the theory that he could get it away from them faster than they could get away from it. Monk had often claimed that Doc Savage had a mind which could stop and reason such things out under such circumstances. Monk maintained this put Doc on a practically abnormal plane.

The bomb made a noise that a Fourth of July never heard and immediately there was some satisfactory howling.

“RUN,” Doc said.

They followed Monk, who already had reached the radio cottage. Monk went inside, through the open door where the operator had been standing when shot at.

Doc and Ham followed, except that they did not go inside, but circled the end of the building and went down behind the foundation. “Keep down!” Doc warned. He had seen that the explosion had merely ruffled their enemies.

There seemed to be at least five of the foe, two handling the machine gun, the others with rifles.

The rifles began making the crisp, violent reports that gelatined nitrocellulose powders make, and the bullets went entirely through the radio cottage in most cases. A few were stopped by generators and other solid apparatus inside.

Monk came out through a window, landed beside them. He had discovered bullets would go through the cottage.

“Why don't somebody tell me them things,” he complained.

Doc Savage stepped back a few paces, threw another smoke grenade. Then another, and a third. He was spacing them carefully. They made the noises of firecrackers that had fizzled.

To Monk and Ham, Doc said, “Pay no attention to the yelling I do now.”

In a much louder voice, a bellow, Doc howled, *"Monk, Ham, make a break for it! Run! We've got to get away. We want to reach the Harrisons. Let these fellows go!"*

He waited for that to soak in. Then he repeated it, almost exactly the same words.

After which he dashed out around the corner of the radio cottage, back toward his mangled plane. The smoke pall had now spread enough to envelop the entire vicinity. He could hear the assailants saying things, mostly profanity, in the pall. Doc got into the hulk of his plane largely by the sense of touch and found an equipment case. This was intact and he got it open, took out two metal flasks.

He returned with both flasks to Monk. He gave one to the homely chemist.

"They have a plane," Doc said. "It is undoubtedly over by the hangars, so get over there and put this stuff in the fuel tank."

Monk knew what was in the flasks. He had helped concoct the stuff.

"Sure," he said.

Doc made his voice loud again and bellowed, *"Get away! Don't take any chances on being shot. Our job is to get the Harrisons!"*

Then the bronze man ran back into the smoke pall again. He went cautiously now. He heard a man swearing and made for the fellow, found him and struck with a fist, simultaneously grabbing the man by the throat to throttle an outcry. The fist blow he sent to the stomach. It was not very successful for the man was wearing an armored vest. One of the plate−type commercial armored vests which sell for about seventy−five dollars. It stopped most of the effect of Doc's fist blow. The man squirmed, fought. Doc hit him again and the fellow subsided.

Doc took the man's coat and hat. Strangely, the hat was harder to remove than the coat; the man had yanked it down over his ears so he wouldn't lose it in the uproar.

"Use gas on them!"

Doc shouted, using his own voice and making it loud.

HE then hauled on the coat, which fit him better than expected, and yanked the hat over his own ears, splitting it at the band in the operation.

He found the criminals' car. There was no one behind the wheel. He got in, started the motor, made it moan and race.

Thrusting his head out of the car, he yelled, imitating one of the voices which he had heard, "Gas! Gas! Come on! Let's get out of here!"

There was no gas, of course. But the black stuff thrown off by the smoke bombs had an acrid odor that was distinctive enough to give the imagination a good start.

They thought there was gas. They were not prepared with masks evidently. And the roaring, racing car engine was like a magnet. None of them wanted to be left behind. They converged on the machine in a wild rush.

Doc added to the confusion−it was intensely black there in the smoke pall, impossible to see an arm length−by honking the car horn steadily and bellowing, “Come on! Gas! Gas!”

When he knew they were aboard he meshed gears, let out the clutch and gave the machine plenty of gas. He drove blindly until he was out of the smoke. Then he wheeled to the right, went over a driveway curbing with a flying bump and out through the airport gate onto a graveled road.

Doc drove fast. The men in the car leaned out of windows and fired back into the smoke cloud. Two were clinging to the outside, and one of these tried to fire, but almost fell off and lost his rifle.

So far the hat and coat Doc was wearing had fooled them.

But he did not want to get them too far away from the airport. Not so far away but that they would try to go back and get their plane.

He went over a railroad crossing. It was rough, so rough that only the solid top of the car kept some of them from flying out. Then there was a sharp turn onto another highway, a concrete one, and that did not ease the situation.

Doc Savage drove two hundred yards more, saw a cornfield at the roadside. The growing corn was about the right height for his purpose.

He jammed on the brakes hard, gave the wheel just the right treatment and got the car on its side in the ditch in a cloud of dust, the door on his side open.

He got out, feet pounding in grass, went over a low barbed−wire fence into the corn. By stooping, the corn tassels were well over his head. The corn, fortunately, had not been check−planted, so that its rows ran in only one direction, which was parallel to the road. They could not look down a corn row and see him.

“That ain't Bill!” one of the men bellowed.

There was some more shooting then, but not as bad as it had been back at the radio cottage.

DOC SAVAGE kept going and circled widely, coming back to the road. Once there he was very cautious once more. But it was not needed.

The men had deserted their car. They had crossed the railroad and were running across the airport toward the hangars on the opposite side. They all were there except the one Doc had slugged. That one had recovered his senses and was sprinting across the field, also headed for the hangars.

Ham Brooks, at the radio shack, began shooting. Ham seemed to have found a double−barreled shotgun inside the radio cottage. He unloaded both barrels with a terrific report. He was kicked backward through the radio−shack door. The running man only ran faster.

Doc went to the railroad tracks. There was a culvert close by, a small one, and he sat down there. He waited calmly.

He was pleased. His plan was working as smoothly as if it had been rehearsed. They did not always go this well.

The running men, just crossing the airport, were staggering with fatigue. They did some wild shooting at the hangars, the bullets causing a general rush for cover on the part of a number of young men, evidently Civilian Pilot Training students.

The plane setting in front of the hangars was a black cabin job, one large motor, low−wing. One of the expensive ships built for the rich private trade before the war, and not taken over by the government because of an overly large number of hours on motor and ship. But airworthy and fast. A ship large enough to take all the men off the ground.

They piled into the craft. It had an electric starter, and this whipped the prop over. Dust picked up behind the ship and whirled away in clouds.

The plane tore across the airport, ignoring the paved runway, quartering into the wind. It got its wheels off, and immediately the pilot began to slip a little into the wind to keep away from the fence corners.

A small man, a very indignant small man, came out of one of the hangars and began to pop away with a revolver at the fleeing plane. Monk appeared hastily, said something to the small man. He stopped shooting, then he and Monk ran into the hangar.

The plane with the criminals in it got a hundred and fifty feet of altitude, banked quickly, came back. It was obvious they were after Ham, at the radio shack. And maybe the radio shack, too, if they had more of those dynamite bombs.

Doc Savage showed himself. He made as much of a spectacle as he could, jumping around and waving his arms, seizing a short piece of plank and going through the motions of aiming it, as if it was a gun.

The plane wheeled, came boring toward him. Out of the cabin windows, came fire and noise.

Doc went into the culvert. The machine−gun bullets jarred the ground around the mouth of the culvert. The plane whooped overhead. Doc waited. Soon there was a terrific concussion and sticks, dust and leaves flew into the culvert. They'd had another dynamite bomb, all right.

Doc waited awhile, crawled out. He looked around for another bomb instantly, but located none. Then he eyed the plane. It was heading into the east. It had the purposeful aim of a definite place to go.

Doc ran across the field to the hangars.

MONK and the small man−the latter was swearing really wonderful profanity and not asking questions−were wheeling a neat−looking blue biplane out of the big hangar.

Monk said, “I knew you'd want to follow them right away, Doc.”

Doc Savage glanced over the ship. It was faster than the cabin job which had just left the field.

Ham had appeared at the radio shack again, was doing something around the wreckage of their bomb−ripped plane.

Doc made a hand funnel, yelled, “Get the scanner!”

Ham, shouting back faintly, said, “I'm getting it.”

He disappeared into the plane ruin, came out and ran toward them. He had a case about the size of a typewriter case, and a longer and heavier box of metal.

Doc climbed into the biplane. It was an open−cockpit job.

The small man stopped swearing long enough to say, “That's my C. P. T. advanced trainer. You guys bust up that ship and it won't be healthy for you. They're getting hard to get.”

Monk said, “Keep your shirt on. Has anybody some goggles?”

Two young men, wearing the C. P. T. wing emblems on their blouses, had goggles. They parted with them−for about twice what they were worth, cash.

Ham arrived.

“You and Monk ride in the back,” Doc said, “with the gadget.”

Ham said, “It'll be a trial riding with that goon.” He got in the cockpit with the homely Monk and the two cases. They were very crowded. And they were quarreling when Doc gave the hand throttle a steady pull and sent the ship across the tarmac.

Doc lifted the ship off and sent it into the east on the trail of the other plane. The latter was now out of sight, had been out of sight for some minutes.

The plane, being a trainer, was equipped with gosports, the speaking−tube−headset device used in training student fliers. Doc indicated Monk should put on the headset, said, “Get the scanner working.”

Monk nodded violently and went to work with the apparatus.

Ham watched, puzzled. He understood only part of this. Doc's unorthodox conduct of the fight back at the airport had been aimed at scaring the enemy into flight, or, more specifically, into flight to wherever they were holding the Harrisons.

Also, the fight had been arranged so that Monk could introduce something into the gas tank of the plane ahead. Some chemical, Ham surmised.

“What kind of mumbo−jumbo is this?” Ham yelled at Monk.

“Keep your hair on,” Monk shouted back, “until I get this thing percolating.”

OF the two parts of the apparatus, the metal case seemed to contain a large collection of batteries of the “B” radio type, batteries delivering a sizable voltage. In addition there were coils and vacuum tubes, arranged so that they did not make sense to Ham. But it was certainly not a radio.

The second box contained a device into which Monk proceeded to thrust his face, after plugging it into the other apparatus. The thing was about a foot and a half long. At the end opposite Monk's face was a large lens, and Monk stared at the surrounding sky through this.

“North, Doc,” Monk shouted. “They swung north right ahead. Guess they figured they were out of sight of the airport. And they're climbing fast.”

Ham bellowed, “How do you know where that other plane went?”

“Look,” Monk said. He thrust the gadget into Ham's hands. “Look through it.”

Ham stared into the thing. At first he saw nothing but a deep−purple darkness and he said so.

“Look to the north you overdressed shyster,” Monk ordered.

Ham did so. Immediately and astonishingly he saw a faintly silver−colored thread of what looked like smoke. Smoke from a tracer bullet, but very vague. He told Monk what he saw.

“That's it,” Monk said. “That's the trail of the other plane.”

Ham jerked the thing away from his eyes. “You're crazy!”

“You're the crazy one!” Monk roared at him. “Doc and I have worked for months on this thing.”

“How does it work?”

“Simple, like all great things,” Monk snapped. “You introduce a chemical in the gasoline which a plane burns. After it burns and passes out of the exhaust stacks, it is a vapor that hangs quiescent in the air. It will hang there for hours. Of course it drifts with the wind currents, but it's there anyway, marking a plain trail.”

Ham objected, “But I can't see it with the naked eye.”

“That's what makes it good,” Monk assured him. “You can only see it with this gadget here.”

“How does it work?”

“That would take two hours to explain, plus about four years of chemical education for you so you would know enough to understand the explanation,” Monk assured him. “But it works with both ultraviolet and infrared wave lengths of light from both ends of the so−called visible spectrum.”

(Doc Savage's researches into light have been extensive, his employment of it varied. As regular readers of Doc Savage magazine will surely have noticed, in almost every new adventure, Doc Savage manages to introduce one or more surprises in the shape of a scientific gadget. What readers of a scientific bent will also have noted is that it is the policy of the author of the Doc Savage material to have Doc employ only methods and devices which have been developed, or which other scientists have accomplished at least on a laboratory scale. Since the first Doc Savage novel appeared in 1933, many of the mechanical devices employed by Doc Savage, which seemed completely fantastic at the time, have been placed in every−day use. These range from simple devices, such as a generator−operated type of flashlight, which are now so common they can be bought in toy stores for children or in expensive deluxe models for blackout use, to the method lately employed of introducing a gas into the fuel tanks of military pursuit planes to make the gasoline vapor non−explosive when the tanks are hit by the incendiary bullets from enemy guns. This, however, is the first time the device for

trailing planes has been employed by Doc.)

“All right, all right, you don't have to be sarcastic, you ape,” Ham said.

He was satisfied.

THE plane flew north, got above an extended bank of clouds. Then it turned east again. And, eventually, when the cloud bank widened it angled southward. Compared to the terrific speed of the plane in which they had come out from New York, they seemed to be crawling.

Ham had been silent, thinking about the gadget they were using. He was fascinated. He began to see possibilities in the thing.

“Say,” Ham yelled. The roar of air in the open cockpit made it hard to talk. “Say, why wouldn't this be a good gadget for the American army or navy to use on the enemy?”

Monk sneered at him. “What do you think we developed it for?”

“Has it already been tried?”

“Europe and Asia,” Monk said, “are full of English and American agents busy introducing quantities of that chemical into the gasoline supplies of the enemy.”

“Is there any way of them licking it?”

“Sure. They can work out some chemical to nullify the effect of this stuff. But that will take weeks or months, and in the meantime their planes can be tracked back to their airdromes by our ships. There won't be any such thing as a concealed enemy airdrome.”

Ham grinned. Particularly in crowded Europe did bombers operate from secret bases. This trailing method would be death on such bases. You would follow the trail, and if there was wind, allow for wind drift. On still−air days, the stuff should be marvelous.

As time went on Ham was beginning to understand why both the army and navy had refused active service to Doc Savage and his associates as well. The explanation then had been that they could do more good for the war effort by going on as they had been. That had seemed a thin argument to Doc and the rest of them at the time. Certainly it was not satisfactory.

Because in the final analysis their main thirst was for excitement and adventure, and that even included Doc himself. The war was a great show, probably the greatest show of the century, and they hated to miss it. Or at least fool around in the cheering section, only now and then getting a finger into it. But the army and navy simply wouldn't have them. They had been tossed out on their collective ears. Not once, either. Just about weekly.

Chapter IX. RIVER FIGHT

DOC SAVAGE'S voice was quiet in the gosport when he said, “All right, there they are!”

The river was a width of gray corduroy below them, and in it lay the white scar of a long sandbar. At the north end the bar thrust an arm out toward the shore, and the water there seemed to be wading depth mostly, except for a narrow channel. In fact, at the far side of the channel, very near to the river bank, was a paddle−wheel steamer which was obviously a derelict, a hulk which had been there many years.

On the sandbar, however, and in motion, was the black plane which they had followed from the Millard airport. The pilot had seen them, was taking off.

Tiny figures were sprinting along the sandbar toward the derelict steamer. Doc counted them. Four. That meant the pilot was alone in the craft that was leaving the bar.

That plane and this one were so closely matched in climbing rate and maneuverability that the presence of even one added passenger would be too much of a handicap.

Doc said, “Two of us have to go over.”

There were two 'chutes in the plane. They were regulation parachutes for the C. P. T. students, so they would be all right. Seat−pack type.

Ham said, “I'll fly her. I'm the lightest one, anyway.”

There was no argument. He was right. And Ham was a good combat pilot.

Doc directed, “Dive her. Get her about a hundred yards north of the old boat.”

Ham nodded.

To Monk, Doc said, “Hold off cracking your 'chute until you're almost in the trees.”

“You're telling me,” Monk yelled. “I hope none of those guys are wing shots.”

Doc watched the river surface, the position of the plane, judging the wind velocity−which would influence their parachute drift very little, but nevertheless somewhat−from the condition of the river waves.

Direction of the wind, of course, was easy to judge from the unruffled surface of the water next to the bank over which the wind was blowing.

He went over. He got a bad start, slipping on the cockpit rim, and began to turn over and over. He stopped that by violent kicking at the right moments. The earth came rushing up at him. He kept his eyes on it. A long fall and a break−out of the 'chute as low as he intended to crack this one was not something to fool with. You fell fifty feet in no time at all; fifty feet misjudgment could kill you.

He was being shot at. He could hear the fiddle−string−break sounds of the bullets passing. He did not take his eyes off the ground, which was magnifying enormously. He hauled on the ripcord.

He was a little ashamed of what he did then. He threw the steel ripcord away in his excitement, something parachute jumpers in the army and navy were taught never to do. The ripcords cost nearly five dollars apiece.

THE next instant he was jarred solidly, then he was in trees. The trees were willows and they cushioned his fall, tore clothing, took off hide, planted a few splinters.

With a flourishing of willows and a painful grunting, Monk was down a moment later. He was not over fifty feet away. Doc got out of the harness, left the chute there, and ran to Monk.

Monk said, “These danged willows ain't as soft as they look from the air.” He was not seriously damaged.

“Come on,” Doc said. “They must have the Harrisons on that old boat.”

They ran toward the boat. The ruin of it projected above the willows, higher than would have been possible if the old derelict was resting in the water. It must be grounded, planted high and dry by some flood years ago, perhaps far out of the river channel, and now the river had channeled almost to the boat.

Doc saw water through the willows, slowed his pace, and located the sandbar. The four running men were off the big bar, were in the deeper channel which separated it from the grounded derelict. Two of them were wading while the other two were swimming, making slightly better time.

Doc drew back, made for the boat. Monk was close behind him. Monk had picked up a club, a small oak fence post, a most impressive shillalah. “An Irishman's toothpick,” Monk explained, waving the post.

Doc picked up two tomato cans as he ran. Fishermen must have brought them here to carry worms; now they were full of sand, and made good missiles.

Feet had trampled the bank near the old boat. There was a crude gangplank, a tree trunk which had been felled from the bank to the derelict.

A man was coming down the gangplank, walking sidewise, using his rifle for a balancing stick. He must have seen the two parachutes come down, had decided to get ashore and do his fighting bushwhack style.

Doc threw one of the sand−filled tomato cans.

The man on the log squawked, lost his rifle, fell down and wrapped his arms around the log. He remained there, dazed.

Doc pegged a smoke bomb onto the deck of the sidewheeler, let it burst, then went out on the log. He ran lightly, hardly seeming to slacken speed while on the log.

Monk followed but paused to give the man clinging to the log a wallop with his club, with the result that he nearly fell off the log. The clinging man, stunned still more, lost his grip with his legs. But he still hung to the log by his hands. Monk trampled on his fingers for a while, poked with the club. The man remained there, crying, “I can't swim!” in an awful voice.

“You've got a fine chance to learn,” Monk assured him, and kicked him loose.

It was about fifteen feet down to the water, and the water was not waist−deep.

Monk ran on, entered the smoke from Doc's grenade, which was spreading.

“Monk,” said Doc's voice in the black pall.

“Yeah?”

“You've got to be less reckless,” Doc warned. “You take too many chances.”

“O. K.,” Monk agreed, and grinned. A fight, he figured, was the place to be reckless.

THE men fording across from the sandbar were shouting excitedly, howling warnings about the parachutes to the boat.

Overhead there was tense moaning from the two airplanes.

Doc lifted his voice, shouted, “Harrison! Rotary Harrison! This is Doc Savage. Where are you?”

Over the plane−motor noise, over the yelling of the men coming from the bar, and the anxious squalling of the man Monk had kicked off the log and who was trying to drown in waist−deep water, there was an answer. It was a response in a bellowing voice. From the boat somewhere. Deep inside. The voice made no words, just anger and noise.

Monk said, “That sounds about like I figured Rotary Harrison would sound.”

“Monk, come on,” Doc said. “We have got to find the Harrisons and get them out of here, safely. That is the first job.”

Monk thought of the four men in the river and decided to misunderstand Doc's order. Now and then Monk permitted himself to do something like that, usually when to follow instructions meant missing a fight.

“Sure, I'll get 'em, Doc,” Monk yelled, and made off up the deck.

There was enough noise, what with the planes and the yelling, that he figured he could get away with that.

He wanted a fight. The men trying to board the derelict would be just about what he considered suitable odds.

He made for the bow, which was where he surmised the men would try to board the old boat. Almost at once he fell through to his armpits in a hole in the deck. The boards did not seem to be rotten; someone had merely removed them.

He got out of the smoke, made better time. He reached the rail, heard the men splashing alongside. He put his head over the rail quickly.

The men, waist−deep in mud and sand, were working along the side of the derelict. Their heads were not more than six feet below. Wonderful targets for Monk's long club, he decided. Like playing golf.

He drew back quickly, got a grip on the very end of the club. He leaned over the rail.

Two of the men below were ready. They had an old piece of rusted wire hawser about a dozen feet long. Each had an end.

They came up and over with the hawser, swinging it as if it was a skip rope. It came down on the back of Monk's neck. They yanked. Monk did a one−and−a−half turn over the rail and lit standing up in the mud beside them.

It occurred to Monk, a little too late, that they could have seen his shadow when he appeared at the rail the first time.

They were on him instantly, all of them. And Monk had his fight. He knew immediately it was the nastiest fight he had ever had, which was saying a great deal. Two of them had double fistfuls of mud, which they at once slapped into his eyes.

Someone hit him with something a little later. It felt like a rifle stock when he clutched it helplessly, going down. He was dazed.

They got on him with their feet, trampled him deep into the mud.

He never heard one of them say, “Don't do him clear in! We can use one of them alive, the big boss says.”

DOC SAVAGE crouched at the edge of a hatch, listening. The voice that undoubtedly belonged to Rotary Harrison was howling steadily below. It was close.

Overhead, the two planes were circling, sparring. From time to time gun clatter joined the noise of their motors. Ham seemed to be the better flier. At least he was holding his own. But the other pilot had an automatic rifle. And Ham, who was used to a ship with an armored cockpit, with fuel tanks treated so they would not leak, was handicapped. Like Monk, he was inclined to be reckless, too.

Doc looked down into the hatch. The hold planking had long ago been ripped out; there were only the naked beams of the old sidewheeler's internal frame.

But there was, lurking down there somewhere, a guard. Probably a man with a gun. It was tobacco smoke that told the bronze man this, not the smoke itself, but the pungent odor from the clothes of a man who smoked a pipe a great deal.

Doc picked up a long stick, a fragment of fishpole someone had left on deck, and sent it away from him like a spear. The pole hit, skittered down through another hatch, made a clatter.

Instantly, Doc swung down through the hatch where he was crouching. He landed on a crosspiece, leaped to the right, got behind a timber.

At one time the hold of the derelict had drifted full of mud and sand. But of late years the hull at the stern−Doc was now near the stern−had fallen apart, and the mud and sand had washed out again when the river was at flood stage. So the central section of the derelict was still piled high with a sandbank.

Doc searched carefully, located the guard. The man was standing behind a timber himself, only the muzzle of his gun showing.

Doc worked toward him and managed to get closer and closer.

The two figures lying bound on the sandbank did not stir and made no sound. A man and a girl. The girl even turned once, quickly, as if she heard some small sound in the direction opposite Doc, which was clever.

Doc got the guard, reaching around the beam to take him. He tried to make the fellow unconscious silently. He did that all right, but the man's gun was on cock, and it exploded, the blast ear−rending in the confines of the place. Immediately another guard, one stationed farther toward the bow, but inside the boat, howled an alarmed demand.

Not knowing how many more there were, Doc shouted, “Run! The place is full of cops!”

The cavelike acoustics of the place, he hoped, would make his voice sound like anybody's voice.

He dropped the guard, ran to the Harrisons and freed them, slashing with a knife at their ropes.

“Run,” he ordered. “Get ashore!”

They had been tied too long and couldn't run. The effort they made was agonizing.

Doc gathered them up, one with each arm, and carried them.

THE guard toward the bow hadn't been fooled. He was coming back, and cautiously. Once he fired at them, the bullet scooping rotten wood off a timber.

Carrying the Harrisons, Doc got to a burst hull planking, and worked through it. They fell out into river mud. Carrying two people was incredibly difficult in the stuff. But he worked toward the bank, which was steep, and got up onto the sun−baked mud, then climbed more rapidly. He piled into the willows that furred the top without being shot in the back.

He dropped the Harrisons.

“Keep crawling away from here,” he said.

The noise of the planes overhead had changed. He looked up. It was bad news. The motor of Ham's plane had gone dead and he was slanting off to the east for a motor−off landing somewhere. He evidently figured he was high enough to reach some of the oat−stubble fields that were back half a mile or so from the river.

The second plane−for some reason or other, the pilot was not pursuing Ham to finish him off−was spiraling down toward the sandbar.

The ship landed on the sandbar.

There was some shouting when the plane stopped. Doc moved to a position where he could see the ship.

Three men were hauling a fourth toward the plane. The man they hauled was Monk. Monk seemed to be unconscious.

Then, three more men appeared, wading to the sandbar. They were the two guards who had been in the derelict, and the man Monk had kicked off the log gangplank.

Monk was dumped into the plane. The others climbed in. The plane went flogging down the long sandbar. The sand seemed to be packed as hard as a runway, otherwise the ship would never have taken the air with that load.

But it got off.

They flew straight up the river, slowly gathering altitude. The plane was hardly above the level of the river−bank treetops when it was out of sight and out of sound.

“Harrison!” Doc called.

Rotary Harrison and the girl appeared, coated with mud and dust, twigs and grass, from head to foot. They walked stiffly, staggering because of stiffened muscles.

“This is my daughter, Sis,” Rotary Harrison said quietly. “They got away, huh?”

Doc Savage nodded.

“They not only got away,” he said grimly. “They escaped with one of my best men.”

DOC SAVAGE went back aboard the derelict river steamer alone. He searched the ruin from stem to rudder post, from keel to passenger deck.

There was nothing to show that the men had used the wreck for anything but a very temporary hide−out.

Doc spent some time measuring footprints, storing the measurements in his mind, using a mental−impression memory system which he had developed.

(The remarkable memory ability which Doc Savage possesses is not, as his other traits are not, particularly freakish. Really amazing memories, as experts on psychology know, are usually the result of the use, consciously or subconsciously, of various systems, association or otherwise, of filing a fact in the brain tissue along with various labels by which it can be found.)

He decided that the river steamer had been wrecked here originally through the misfortune of having its boilers blow up.

But there was nothing of real value.

After a while, Ham Brooks came stumbling through the willow thickets.

“A blasted lucky shot brought me down,” he complained. “The only bullet that hit the plane, I think. It shorted out one mag, and the other was out of order. Just one of those freaks.”

Doc Savage said, “They got away with Monk.”

Ham did not say anything. But his face was fixed, and afterward it lost color. He could not have been tortured into admitting it, but Monk was probably closer to Ham than any other person.

Chapter X. THE DEMENTED TRAIL

IT was not yet daylight the next morning when Doc Savage walked into his headquarters with Rotary Harrison and Sis.

Renny Renwick and Long Tom Roberts were at work, surrounded with telephones, scratch pads, pencils, and half−consumed sandwiches.

The big−fisted engineer, Renny, said, “Holy cow! Where's Ham? Monk was seized by those guys; we knew that. But where is Ham?”

Doc explained, “Ham stayed behind to look for Monk.”

“He got any clues?”

“Only that the black plane which carried Monk away was a type of ship which probably did not have a large fuel capacity, and therefore it had to land three or four hundred miles from where they got Monk.”

Renny nodded. “Long Tom and I have been as busy as jumping beans. But we've checked up on Montague Ogden and his company. We've looked into that newspaper campaign against you, and we've checked up on the doctors who concurred in the diagnosis which led to the operation on Sam Joseph. And we have looked up Sam Joseph.”

“Take the last first,” Doc Savage suggested, “and begin with Sam Joseph.”

Rotary Harrison and Sis crowded close. “Yeah,” said Rotary. “I think I got me a big personal interest in that hombre.”

“This is Miss Sister Harrison, and her father, Mr. Ranzo John Harrison,” Doc Savage explained. “Colonel John Renwick and Major Thomas J. Roberts. Better known as Renny and Long Tom.”

“Call me Sis,” Sis said, smiling.

“And call me Rotary,” Rotary Harrison rumbled, “if you want me to be happy.”

Renny nodded.

“Here's the report on Sam Joseph,” the big−fisted engineer rumbled. “Birthplace, parents, nationality, early environment unknown.”

Renny stopped speaking, looked at them expectantly.

“Unknown?” said Doc. “What do you mean, unknown?”

“Sam Joseph,” said Renny, “is a victim of permanent early amnesia, or so he claims. He knows nothing about what happened to him before he was about twenty−five years old. He claims that he is one of those men who wake up in hospitals, not knowing who he is. He claims he still does not know.”

“What about the rest of his life?”

“His business career has been about the usual career of an executive in a business organization. He has worked for three different firms, a bond house, a mail−order concern, and the Ogden outfit. Good record.”

“You mean he ain't a crook?” Rotary demanded, disgusted.

“There is no evidence of his being crooked,” Renny said.

“He's just too slick for you then. He's got it all covered up.”

“If he covered anything up, he *is* slick,” Renny rumbled. “We've done everything but look at the roots of his teeth. No, we even did that! One of the detectives we hired brought in X−ray films of Sam Joseph's teeth. Got them from his dentist.”

Rotary Harrison smashed a fist into a palm. “Sam Joseph is a crook!” he declared. “And I think he's a murderer, too, or at least hired murder done.”

Renny was interested. “What makes you say a thing like that? That's a pretty harsh statement.”

“Six months ago I borrowed a large sum of money from Sam Joseph and we signed an agreement to renew the loan in six months. Now I can't pay. Somebody stole the written agreement to renew, and Sam Joseph say there wasn't any. The only witness I had to the agreement was an old friend, Duster Jones. He was murdered. A man named Butch killed him.”

Renny jumped. “Butch! There's a man working for Montague Ogden named Butch.”

“Working for Sam Joseph, you mean, don't you?” demanded Rotary.

“No, for Odgen. But maybe−” Renny scratched his head.

Doc said, “The thing to do seems to be to talk to Sam Joseph. Renny, do you know where we can find him?”

“He's back at Montague Ogden's place, as far as we know.”

THEY rode downtown in a black limousine which was large but subdued, discreet, ordinary, giving no hint that it was actually a rolling fortress of armor plate and special bullet resistant glass and as formidable as a tank. Long Tom had remained behind to continue the investigation to which he and Renny had been assigned.

“Doc,” Renny said thoughtfully.

“Yes?”

“You remember that thing which first got me and Long Tom so excited about this case?”

“The talking devil, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“What about it?”

“It keeps cropping up in my thoughts. You suppose it had any peculiar significance?”

Doc Savage said, “The thing possibly was not what it seemed.”

Rotary Harrison demanded, “What's this stuff about a talking devil?”

Renny gave him the story about Sam Joseph apparently hearing the small devil image speak. It was plain from the way Renny told the story that he had been giving it a good deal of thought and was still much intrigued by it, as well as far from convinced that the speaking satan was a figment of a disordered mind.

Sis Harrison also listened to the story, and she watched Doc Savage. She seemed to be noting the physical qualities of the bronze man and seemed quite impressed.

Sis said unexpectedly, “This whole thing hasn't made much sense so far, has it? If it is just a plot to steal the oil interests which dad and I have built up, it seems rather elaborate.”

“My guess,” Doc Savage told them, “is that we will find that a great deal more is involved. What happened in the Midwest shows we are up against a big organization.”

“A cultus bunch of hombres,” Rotary put in. “And they won't stop at nothin'.”

A MAN in a butler's livery tried to prevent them entering the fantastically modernistic Ogden penthouse on top of the Ogden building. Rotary Harrison lost no time in elbowing the butler out of the way. Rotary had risen to a rage as he looked at the fabulous richness of the Ogden building, and had growled, “Probably got the dough for this by robbing other guys like me! Well, I'll put a quietus on that!” He slammed the butler one on the chest and said, “Don't argue with us, fancy britches!”

Dr. Nedden met them at the door of the room where Sam Joseph lay on a bed.

Dr. Nedden's manner was cold as he eyed Doc Savage. His greeting was brusque. “You are fully aware the patient should not have visitors yet,” he snapped.

Doc made no comment on that. Instead, he said, “Dr. Nedden, is it true that you have stated that you did not actually diagnose Sam Joseph's trouble as cerebral fibroma?”

Dr. Nedden's face tightened. “I refuse to discuss the case with you.”

“But you have so stated to the newspapers, have you not?”

“I–”

“When as a matter of truth you told me in plain words that you agreed your diagnosis was cerebral fibroma,” Doc added.

Dr. Nedden swallowed.

“You can't see the patient,” he snapped.

Rotary Harrison said, “Brother, where's your riot squad? You better have one when you tell us what we can't do.”

Dr. Nedden backed away indignantly. “Remember,” he snapped. “I haven't given my permission. This is on your own initiative, and against a surgeon's advice.”

He wheeled and went away.

Rotary Harrison looked after Dr. Nedden and said, “When I was a kid I used to think I had a strange power where snakes were concerned. I thought I could *feel* when a snake was around me. Maybe it was imagination then. But I *feel* that way about that guy.”

They went into the room.

Sam Joseph smiled at them pleasantly from the bed.

His color was good, although his head was swathed in bandages, and he was obviously quite weak. His voice, when he spoke, was low but healthy, quiet and quite sane−sounding.

“Good morning,” he said. “I am very sorry to be the cause of all this trouble.”

Rotary Harrison roared, “Good morning−hell! Listen, you dirty, black−faced crook, you−”

“Hold it, hold it,” Doc Savage said. Although Doc did not lift his voice, Harrison went silent.

Sam Joseph examined Rotary Harrison, asked, “Who is this man? He seems familiar−”

“You oughta remember me, you snipe,” said Rotary. “I'm Rotary Harrison.”

“Oh, yes. Yes, indeed,” said Sam Joseph. “I do remember you now. But you have changed a little.”

“You loaned me a hundred and eighty thousand dollars,” snapped Rotary.

“Yes, I recall. On your oil interests.”

“And you signed an agreement to renew the loan in six months.”

“I am sure you are mistaken,” Sam Joseph said. “I would have remembered that. There was no such agreement.”

“Why, you−”

Doc Savage got in front of Rotary, pushed him back. “You will have to keep that for later,” Doc said. “This man underwent a major operation three days ago.”

Sam Joseph smiled, said, “Thank you. But I am feeling better. Except at times, when I seem to fade off mentally and have rather strange dreams.”

“What kind of dreams?” Doc inquired.

“I never seem to be able to recall the details,” Sam Joseph said. “However, one strange thing happened. I heard that little devil statue speaking again.”

“You heard the devil talk again?”

“Yes, I really heard it again.”

Sis Harrison blurted, “But I thought the devil was supposed to have been destroy−”

Doc, interrupting, asked, “Where was the devil when it spoke?”

“On the table there, beside my bed.”

The indicated table was a small modern metal one which bore a rather expensive−looking bedside reading lamp which gave a focused and controlled beam that could be changed from a switch on the end of a cord, which an occupant of the bed could use.

“It was the little brass devil statue?” Doc asked.

“Yes.”

“What did it say?” Doc inquired. “Or did you understand the words?”

The bronze man's voice had not changed, had not taken on excitement. But there was an intense activity in his flake−gold eyes and tension in his jaw muscles.

“I understood the words,” said Sam Joseph.

“What were they?”

“The devil said, *'Hello, hello, hello. We have to see you. That thing in Missouri turned out better than we expected. We have the short ugly one. What shall we do with him?'”*

Sam Joseph closed his eyes for a moment. “I am sure that is what the devil said,” he continued. “I made a particular point to remember it. It was a rather long speech, but I kept repeating it to myself. I have a good memory, really.”

Rotary Harrison growled, “If you have such a memory, it's funny that agreement−”

Doc interposed, “Mr. Joseph, had you been asleep just before you heard the devil talk?”

“Yes.”

“One of the sleepy spells when you dream?”

“Well, yes. But my head was quite clear when I heard the statue talk.”

Doc Savage nodded.

“What became of the devil after it spoke?” he asked.

“Oh, it disappeared. I don't know where it went.”

“Do you have a nurse?”

“Only Dr. Nedden. He has been staying here day and night. He seems very disturbed over what happened.”

“Dr. Nedden does not leave your side?”

“Oh, I wouldn't say that. He goes away frequently, but for short times only. Never for more than five minutes at a time.”

That ended the discussion because Long Tom Roberts burst into the place.”

“Get out of here, Doc!” Long Tom yelled. “The police are on their way here to arrest you!”

LONG TOM did not get that excited without reason. Doc wheeled, made for the door. The Harrisons, father and daughter, seemed undecided, then followed him, running. They lost no time getting into an elevator and down to the street.

Long Tom had a car waiting. They piled into that. Long Tom yanked the machine into traffic, said, “You better get down out of sight, Doc. They'll have prowl cars looking for you.”

Rotary Harrison swore.

“I thought you were a special policeman yourself,” he said.

Doc made no reply.

(Doc Savage has held, through most of his career, honorary police commissions, usually of high ranking. From time to time, due to one misunderstanding or another arising out of the bronze man's unusual activities, these have been revoked and restored.)

Long Tom said, “Special commission or not, Doc, you are in plenty of trouble.”

Doc said, “It must have developed suddenly.”

Long Tom popped a hand down on the steering wheel.

“Like that!” he said. “Like lightning. Out of a clear sky. Bang! But we should have seen it coming.”

Doc said, “It has been building up, all right.”

Long Tom, startled, eyed him and demanded, “You mean to say you have seen it coming?”

Doc nodded.

“When did the police appear?” he asked.

“Not very long after you left to come down to examine Sam Joseph,” Long Tom explained. “The commissioner himself came in, with the head of the detective bureau, the head of the frauds investigation bureau, and some other big shots. So I knew it was bad. I tried to stall them. Said I didn't know exactly where you were, which was true in a way.”

“And then?”

“They got a telephone call. It was a tip−off about where you were. So they lit out. And I lit out faster, because I beat them down here.”

Renny Renwick emitted a rumble of anger. “That Dr. Nedden! He tipped them off!”

The sound of a police siren came at them so suddenly that it was surprising. The car, a white radio prowl, whisked past with two grim officers leaning forward on the seat. The machine was headed for the Ogden building.

“I didn't beat them by much,” Long Tom said.

Rotary Harrison emitted a growl of disgust. “Do you guys do everything backward?”

“What you mean?” Long Tom asked.

“What're they tryin' to arrest Savage for?” Rotary demanded. “Why? You haven't said.”

Long Tom stared at him, then at Doc Savage. “Doc,” Long Tom asked, “do you want to discuss it in front of these people?”

Doc Savage spoke then in Mayan. The language of ancient Maya was one they had learned in the course of their first really great adventure together. Although simple, it was spoken, as far as they knew, by no one in the civilized world but themselves.

“Has the existence and location of our College actually been disclosed to the police?” Doc asked in Mayan.

“Apparently not,” Long Tom replied, also in Mayan. “But they are convinced there is such a place.”

“Then, in our discussions, avoid admitting there is such a place,” Doc directed.

“O. K.,” Long Tom said in English. He added, “What do you say we go to my laboratory? The police don't know where it is, and we'll be safe there.”

Doc nodded.

Chapter XI. THE DEVIL'S WORK

LONG TOM ROBERTS was a man who was noted for two things, the first being his ability with electricity, for it was conceded that he was one of the great contemporary men of electrical science; and, secondly, he was known for his ability to look as if he was so unhealthy that he was going to collapse with his next step. Undertakers invariably looked at him with hope. Monk Mayfair claimed Long Tom's complexion was one a mushroom would consider anaemic.

Long Tom had gotten the complexion by spending some time in his laboratory, judging by the looks of the place. It was in a basement, in a neighborhood which was so tough that the cops walked in pairs in the middle of the street. There was no vestige of natural light in the place, and apparently no fresh air ever entered either.

But the array of electrical machinery was impressive, actually frightening.

“Great grief!” said Rotary Harrison in awe.

Long Tom brushed pliers, wire and gadgets off chairs and seated them.

“Doc,” he said, “you want to know the whole situation?”

“All of it,” the bronze man said.

“All right,” Long Tom told him. “First, I'll begin with this stuff against you that appeared in the newspapers. I'm talking about stories like that one which appeared in the *Morning Blade.* That was a typical example. Just a lot of innuendo. That story in the *Morning Blade* was typical, although some of the other newspapers were not that blunt.”

Long Tom picked up a piece of copper wire and began to twist it absent−mindedly.

“That newspaper campaign,” he said, “was the work of an organization.”

Doc asked, “You are sure of that?”

Long Tom shoved out his jaw and nodded. “That's the first real piece of information Renny and I dug up. It was a campaign, all right.”

“How was it managed?” Doc inquired.

“In the crudest and most effective way. Money. Bribes. This thing wasn't hatched in an evening over a glass of beer. Whoever cooked it up spent plenty of time and has plenty of money to back it and get it going. But the money that is spent will probably be only a sneeze in the bucket to the final take.”

Doc said, “You were explaining how this newspaper campaign against me was put in operation.”

“By bribing one or two guys on each paper,” Long Tom said. “They just bought off a reporter here and there. Not on every paper, mind. Just where they could find a soft man. We got this information from reporters they had planned to bribe and couldn't.”

“Did one man do the bribing?”

“One man; that's right.”

“Who,” Doc asked, “was he?”

“Butch,” Long Tom said. “The fellow they call Butch.”

ROTARY HARRISON, frowning heavily, said, “I don't see how newspaper stories could start the police looking for you. Or is there something behind the stories?”

“Yes, what is the rest of it?” Doc asked.

“We,” Long Tom said, “have investigated the Montague Ogden business enterprises, and found the whole institution about to collapse. Accountants haven't finished going over the books yet−there hasn't been time. But it seems that Montague Ogden, who thought he was a rich man, is without a cent, or maybe even in debt. Suspicions are that the firm has been looted. It has had the money sucked out of it like a weasel sucks the blood out of a chicken.”

“The weasel,” bellowed Rotary, “was Sam Joseph, I bet.”

“Right,” said Long Tom. “Sam Joseph, a man who−and mark this, because it is the important part−a man who does not have any memory of his early life. A man who cannot recall where he spent his youth, or anything about his early environment or existence.”

Doc Savage was suddenly showing the most intense interest.

“Go on,” he said.

“Sam Joseph is No. 1,” Long Tom said.

“Yes?”

“There are at least ten others.” Long Tom looked at Doc gravely. “And every one of them is a man who does not remember what happened during the early part of his life.”

Rotary Harrison frowned. “This is a crazy thing. First, a brass devil that talks. Then men who have lost their memories.”

“Not lost their memories,” Long Tom corrected. “Men who have simply had all memory of their early lives erased from their brains.”

There was now the strangest expression on Doc Savage's metallic features.

“Name some of those men,” he directed.

Long Tom said, “Charles Moore, T. B. Moresco, Dan Taylor, Reynold Rice Doyle−”

“That is enough,” Doc Savage said.

The bronze man almost never showed emotion. But now there was stark amazement on his face, shock and stunned amazement.

“What's the matter with you?” Rotary asked.

Doc was silent.

He could not very well answer.

The men Long Tom had named were men who had once been criminals, men whom Doc Savage had captured in the course of his strange career of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers!

“Name the rest of them,” Doc said suddenly.

Long Tom named them.

Doc nodded grimly. They were successful graduates of his College−all of them.

“What have they done?” Doc asked.

“Every one of those men,” Long Tom said pointedly, “has become a crook, robbed his concern of enormous sums of money.”

DOC SAVAGE stood erect slowly and walked into another room. He sank in a chair and sat there. Long Tom Roberts glanced at the Harrisons and indicated they should remain where they were. Then Long Tom followed Doc. He closed the door behind him and stood studying the big bronze man. He had never seen Doc look as deeply affected.

“It's an awful thing to happen, Doc,” Long Tom said finally.

“Very bad,” Doc agreed.

“I don't understand it at all. None of the graduates from our College have ever turned back to crooked ways before. How come a whole bunch of them do it now, all at once?”

“Dirty work,” Doc said.

Long Tom rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. “It must be. You figure it is all tied in with the talking devil and Sam Joseph.”

“Apparently.”

“Sam Joseph was never in the College.”

“No. But all the others were.”

Doc Savage came up out of the chair. He seemed to have reached some kind of a conclusion, a decision.

He said, “The particularly terrible aspect of this thing is that the whereabouts of our College, and proof that it actually exists, may get into the hands of the police and the public when they are unfriendly. We have always known that our method of treating criminals is too drastic for the public to accept, and probably will be too drastic for another fifty or a hundred years.” He paused and shook his head grimly.

“I had hoped,” Doc continued, “to keep the College in operation, and perhaps in the future evolve some way of quietly bringing the method of treating criminals to the attention of the public. Present it in a favorable light, so that it would be seen as the only sure cure for criminal minds. Then, with that accomplished, if we could present a sound groundwork of many cases of criminals cured and made into upright citizens by our treatment, we could get our method accepted. It would mean the elimination of the most troublesome type of

criminal of all, the confirmed criminal.

“But,” Doc concluded, “if our plans are wrecked now it can well take another century or more for such a thing to be developed and accepted by the public. That is the really grim thing about this. You and I believe in this thing, and we know how it works, and what a benefit it will be to mankind. We know how tragic losing it would be.”

“Doc, there is one thing the police haven't been tipped. They haven't been told where our College is located.”

“We have got to stop this thing before they are informed.”

“If we knew where to start,” Long Tom complained.

RENNY RENWICK brought Doc Savage the newspaper. It was a copy of the *Morning Blade,* the paper which had attacked Doc Savage with the greatest violence.

“This just went on sale on the streets,” Renny said. “Take a look at it.”

Red ink for headlines went out of fashion years ago, even for the *Blade.* But this one was in red ink.

DOC SAVAGE AID CONFESSES

The following is a true, signed statement made to representatives of *The Blade* this morning by Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Monk Mayfair, for a long time aid and close confident of the notorious and monstrous Doc Savage.

Editor, The Blade,

And Whom It May Concern:

This is to inform you that I have just discovered the real nature of the incredible thing which Doc Savage has been doing to the brains of men. Accordingly, I have not only severed all relations with Doc Savage, but I shall do what I can to right this horrendous wrong.

I shall have in the hands of the *Morning Blade,* and all other newspapers and press associations, in time for publication tomorrow morning, a full and true signed statement concerning Doc Savage's so−called College and the hideous brain operations conducted there. My statement will include the location of the College in order that the poor wretches still there may be rescued. It will also include a full list of past graduates of the place, as nearly as my memory can supply the names of these poor victims.

(Signed) Monk Mayfair

Renny rumbled, “Holy cow! That's Monk's signature, too. And the document isn't a fake.”

That was also Doc's opinion. The letter from Monk, or the statement, whichever it would be called, was not printed, but was a reproduction of a photograph of the letter itself. It was a good cut, quite large, full of detail, and there was no doubt that Monk had signed it. Furthermore, Monk's fingerprints were affixed.

Renny waved the paper angrily.

“How'd this happen?” he bellowed. “It's incredible! What the blazes has gotten into Monk?”

“They've bought him off,” said Rotary Harrison.

Renny looked as if he was going to slam Harrison with one of his big fists.

“Don't be a fool,” Renny growled. “They couldn't torture a thing like that out of Monk. How'd they get it?”

Then Renny stared at Doc Savage and his jaw fell, for the bronze man's manner had changed. Doc looked alert, even relieved. The bronze man was on his feet.

Doc indicated the newspaper.

“They stubbed their toes,” he said. “They went just one jump too far and gave it all away. Now we can go into action.”

“Action,” Renny said, “is what we can use some of.”

“Get Ham Brooks,” Doc Savage said. “Get him here at once.”

Chapter XII. MAN−THEFT

HAM BROOKS did not arrive at Long Tom Roberts' experimental laboratory, which was serving as Doc's headquarters, until early that night. He came in looking haggard, pouches under his eyes, lips cracked from wind.

“I got your message to come,” he told Doc. “But I had a heck of a time dodging police. Did you know there's a police alarm all over the United States for you?”

Doc admitted he knew that, because he had been listening to shortwave radio police broadcasts. He led Ham into a room where they could be alone and closed the door.

“That thing Monk had in the newspapers−that incredible thing!” Ham exclaimed. “How'd they make Monk sign a thing like that? He must have been horribly tortured.”

Doc said quietly, “Do not worry about Monk. He probably is still alive, and they probably have not tortured him.”

“But−”

Doc indicated a chair. “Sit down,” he said. “I have a job for you. It may be dangerous, but it is important. It requires a man of your build, a man who can act. That is why I called you in.”

“I'll do it,” Ham said. “Calling me in was all right, too. I hadn't found a single trace of poor Monk.”

“Lean back in this chair,” Doc said.

Twenty minutes later the bronze man opened the door and called in Rotary and Sis Harrison, and Long Tom. They came to the door and gasped in astonishment.

“Sam Joseph!” exclaimed Sis. “Where'd you get him? How−”

“Does he look like Sam Joseph to you?” Doc asked.

“Why, of course he does,” Sis said. And Rotary nodded agreement.

Long Tom Roberts, however, grinned and said, “So that's why you wanted Ham. He *does* look a lot like Sam Joseph, at that.”

The resemblance which Ham now bore to Sam Joseph, the victim of the wrongly diagnosed brain operation, was in fact startling. There had been a physical resemblance to begin with, and the disguise work Doc had done had enhanced the likeness.

Doc said, “All right, I just wanted to see how effective the disguise was. Will you leave us alone now.”

“What's going on?” Rotary blurted.

Sis took his arm, said, “Come on, dad. It looks to me like we're going to get some action.”

They went out, leaving Doc and Ham alone. Doc said, “Ham, his voice will be the tricky part. We are going to work on that now. It may take several hours. I will talk to you, using the nearest thing to Sam Joseph's voice and tone I can manage, and you will repeat the words after me.”

THE truck was large, painted a silver gray, and had a body like a metal box. It was labeled *Department of Sanitation,* and it had the usual mechanism at the rear into which the contents of an ash can could be dumped and loaded automatically into the dust and odor−proof body. There was nothing about it to indicate it was not a city sanitation−department truck of the type which called at downtown office buildings each morning before dawn for ashes and waste.

It did arrive a little early.

It stopped at the service entrance of the towering modern Ogden building, near the stack of ash cans which the janitors had already placed on the sidewalk, as was customary.

Two men came out of the Ogden building. They wore janitor's coveralls marked *Ogden Bldg.*, but they did not look like janitors, and the bulges in their pockets near which they kept their hands were obviously guns.

They stood and watched, a pair of sinister figures, very alert, in the rather thick gloom.

Two men piled out of the truck and began loading ashes. They worked methodically, as if they had done that work for years. Only twice did they seem to have a little trouble, grunting and banging large ash cans against the rear of the truck before they lowered them to the walk, replaced the lids and took the cans back to stand them along the wall just inside the service entrance of the building.

They got in the truck, drove to the next building and collected more ashes.

One of the two men wearing janitor coveralls laughed. “Some guys make it the hard way, don't they.”

“We'd look more like janitors,” said his companion, “if we got busy and rolled these empty ash cans back into the boiler room.”

“You gone crazy?” the other demanded. “Hell with it.”

They closed the service door, locked it, and walked away, discussing a bottle and a card game they had been forced to desert.

It was quiet in the passageway for two or three minutes after they had gone.

Then lids came off two of the ash cans. Doc got out of one. Ham Brooks, wearing his Sam Joseph disguise, with coveralls and a Cellophanelike hood to protect his clothing and the bandages from ash dust, appeared from the other can.

“Lucky we used a system to get in here,” Ham said. “They've got the place under guard, all right.”

Doc said, “Look for the stairway.”

THE only other guard they encountered was outside the door of Montague Ogden's penthouse. He was equipped with brush and pail, and apparently it was his job to look innocent by scrubbing at the parquet floor when the occasion required.

Doc used an anaesthetic bomb on him. The bomb was about the size of a bantam egg, consisted of a thin, glasslike plastic shell containing liquid. The shell burst when the bomb hit near the man, making hardly any noise, and the liquid splattered, evaporated.

The guard seemed to go to sleep. Actually, that was about what it amounted to. The anaesthetic gas, one of the most efficient gadgets ever developed by Doc Savage, took effect without causing sensation, and the man would awaken as one awakens from sleep, after half an hour or so.

Doc and Ham avoided effects of the gas by holding their breath. After about a minute the stuff lost its effectiveness, mingling with the air.

Doc carefully gathered up the glasslike plastic fragments and pocketed them, so no trace would remain.

There were no servants in the elaborate penthouse layout, which Ham considered a little strange.

“And I wonder where Montague Ogden himself is?” he added, whispering.

In the bedroom where Sam Joseph lay, Dr. Nedden was sitting. Nedden occupied a deep chair and he was reading. He had the lights on very bright, as if to keep himself awake.

Doc Savage tossed another of the anaesthetic grenades into the room, after easing the door open a fraction of an inch at a time. He and Ham held their breath, until Dr. Nedden's head sagged forward, and the book slipped out of his hands to the floor.

Doc Savage picked up the book Dr. Nedden had been reading. It was a technical tome, one on *medinals,* the monosodium salts of diethylbarbituric acid.

The book title meant nothing to Ham, but he noted that Doc Savage seemed to think it significant, for the bronze man made, for a brief moment, a tiny trilling sound, a note that was almost inaudible. And yet it sounded satisfied.

Ham saw also that Doc picked up a small bottle on a table at Dr. Nedden's elbow. Evidently the man had been using the contents himself.

“Something to keep him awake,” Ham remarked.

Sam Joseph was asleep. They awakened him. He knew them and smiled.

“We are going to take you out of here for a while,” Doc Savage told him, “and leave Ham Brooks in your place.”

“I do not see any sense in that,” Sam Joseph said.

“There will be sense to it, we hope,” Doc said.

The man seemed agreeable.

Ham took Sam Joseph's place in the bed.

“Be very careful,” Doc warned him.

Ham nodded. “How long will I have to do this, do you suppose?”

“Let us hope, no longer than a few hours,” Doc told him. “We will put the genuine patient back as soon as possible.”

Ham said, “O. K., I'm game.”

“There are some weapons you can use concealed in your head bandage,” Doc said, “if it comes to that.”

THE bronze man got Sam Joseph out of the building without difficulty, without being discovered. He carried the patient to a car which Renny Renwick had waiting around the corner.

“Feel all right?” Doc inquired.

“Oh, yes, excellent,” Sam Joseph said. “You know, it is strange. I feel very well at times, and then at other times I go off into those strange unconscious spells.”

Doc Savage made no comment.

But Renny glanced at the patient, asked, “Heard that devil do any more talking?”

“No,” Sam Joseph replied. “I guess you gentlemen think I am crazy, don't you?”

“Seen anything more of the devil?”

“No. You *do* think I'm crazy, don't you?”

Doc Savage said quietly, “You are as sane as any of the rest of us, and you can rest assured of that.”

The bandages kept much expression from showing on Sam Joseph's face, but into his voice came almost pitiful relief when he spoke.

“I am so glad to hear you say that,” he said eagerly. “So much has happened to make me doubt my−well−rationality.”

“For example?”

“Well−those periods of coma, of unconsciousness, when my senses leave me−yet it is not sleep.” Sam Joseph opened and closed his hands slowly, painfully. “That has been happening for many weeks, and always there has been growing a kind of premonition of something terribly wrong.”

Doc put a comforting hand on his arm. “You have a very strong subconscious, Mr. Joseph.”

“You mean something *is* wrong?”

“Very.”

Long Tom Roberts helped them carry Sam Joseph into the electrical research laboratory in the dank basement when they arrived. Long Tom was somewhat sullen and scowled frequently at Rotary Harrison.

“Something wrong?” Doc asked.

“I don't see why the hell I can't get out and walk around the town,” Rotary snapped. “It's not *me* the police are looking for.”

Long Tom said, “I told him your orders were for everybody to stay out of sight, Doc. I practically had to hit him over the head with a chair to keep him here.”

Rotary growled, “You try kissing me with a chair and it'll be the last guy you try it on.”

“Now, dad!” Sis said. “He's right. The police probably know we are with Mr. Savage. We cannot do anyone any good in jail.”

LONG TOM, Renny, Sis and Rotary watched with interest, but with no immediate understanding, as Doc Savage went to work on Sam Joseph.

It first appeared that the bronze man was going to do nothing but give Sam Joseph another physical examination, including various blood tests. Then it was clear that the examination was of specialized nature.

Doc analyzed blood samples, tissue, saliva. It seemed to the others that he was making every possible analysis.

He spent some four hours at it.

Then he asked Sam Joseph questions.

“These periods of coma, or unconsciousness, to which you refer,” Doc said. “Did they come on regularly?”

“No, not at all,” Sam Joseph assured him. “There was an irregular interval of time between each one.”

“I want you to think carefully,” Doc said, “and tell me whether some of them came on after meals.”

“Yes. Yes, after I had taken a cocktail sometimes. I thought it was the cocktails causing it, and I even stopped drinking.”

“Who was with you when you had the cocktails?”

“Why . . . why, Dr. Nedden, now that I think of it.”

Doc Savage was pleased.

“Have you ever heard of the monosodium salts of diethylbarbituric acid?” the bronze man asked.

Sam Joseph frowned. “No−except that I believe I have seen Dr. Nedden reading a scientific text concerning something like that.”

Doc nodded.

“Your spells of coma,” he said, “have been brought on by medinals and other drugs. My analysis is not complete, but there is unmistakable evidence of the presence of medinals and their continued administration.”

“What is a medinal?”

“A hypnotic,” Doc explained.

Renny gave a violent jump. “Holy cow! Hypnotics! You mean there's a drug that hypnotizes a person−”

“No, no,” Doc corrected him. “The medical application of the term hypnotic simply means an agent producing sleep. But in the present case other drugs have been added to the barbituric group to produce physically a state of coma with apparently only the loss of the facility of memory and initiative.”

(It has long been the policy of Doc Savage magazine when dealing with chemical formulas which might be subject to misuse in unscrupulous hands, to refrain from giving exact chemical ingredients in great detail.)

Sam Joseph apparently understood it better than any of them.

“They drugged me!” he ejaculated. “And then they made me do whatever they wanted me to do, and I didn't remember.”

Rotary Harrison seemed astounded. “That's why you don't remember the agreement you signed to renew my loan!”

“That must be it.”

DOC SAVAGE confronted Renny Renwick and Long Tom Roberts. He said, “There is one thing more we should do to make sure about this thing. That is to get hold of at least one of the graduates of our College who, according to the police, have turned crooked.”

“Right now?” Renny asked.

“Right now,” Doc said.

Renny and Long Tom left on the job.

Doc Savage went back to work testing and analyzing blood specimens from Sam Joseph. It was a job not made any easier by the fact that Long Tom's electrical laboratory was not equipped with medical type slides for the microscopes, nor proper chemicals. There was, however, a wonderful atomic microscope which made up for much that was lacking.

Sis Harrison waited patiently, employing her time in administering little comforts to Sam Joseph. Sis, it was evident, was admiring Doc Savage more and more.

“What will happen to Mr. Ham Brooks if they find he is not Sam Joseph?” she asked.

Doc said, “We had better cross our fingers and hope on that.”

An hour later Renny and Long Tom came back. They had a man named Charles Moore, once a patient in the College.

“We got him,” Long Tom explained dryly, “by highjacking him away from two police detectives who were taking him to talk to the district attorney.”

Charles Moore was a smooth, brown, capable man, a little taller than the average, in good physical shape. Clean living had made his face pleasant, and there remained very little of the thin hardness that had once been there when he was a notorious criminal. He had once, as a matter of fact, very nearly succeeded in murdering Doc Savage. But that was before he had been captured, subjected to a brain operation that wiped out all knowledge of past, and trained as an accountant. He had been a successful, honest man in the field of accountancy, having risen to be vice president of his firm.

“They had arrested me,” Charles Moore said. “I do not understand it at all. They say I have robbed my company of large sums of money. That is ridiculous.”

He looked extremely worried.

Doc Savage asked, “How do they claim the robberies were executed?”

“As vice president of my concern, which deals in heavy industrial and oil−field machinery, I handled a lot of executive matters,” Charles Moore explained. “There are many occasions where I could sign the wrong kind of a bill of sale, or lease, or other document, and steal a large sum. In the company files, they claim they have found a lot of such papers. One example is a bunch of receipts for money paid out, and no merchandise was received. The money went into my pocket, they claim. It does look logical. But I'm no crook. I hate crooks.”

Doc Savage's voice was quiet, intended to restore the man's confidence in himself.

“How about those spells of coma, somewhat like sleep, from which you have suffered?” Doc asked.

Charles Moore stared at him in astonishment.

“How did you know about those?”

“You have had them?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Do you know a man named Dr. Nedden?”

“Why, yes, I do.”

“And do you have a drink with Dr. Nedden now and then?”

“Yes.”

Renny Renwick leaped up and slammed a fist into a palm, bellowing, “This tears it! This tears it right up the middle! I see the guts of the thing now!”

“Sit down or they'll hear you in China,” Long Tom snapped. “We all see it now.”

Renny subsided. Charles Moore didn't know that he had once been a criminal; none of the graduates knew that about themselves. Charles Moore did not even know the purpose of the strange institution in upstate New York where he had received his training, nor did he know its exact location.

Charles Moore must not, Renny knew, be told of his past, or the unorthodox method that had been used to change him from a criminal to an honest man. It would do Charles Moore no good, and it might saddle his mind with a worry that would hamper him through the rest of his life.

Doc Savage told Charles Moore, “The thing for you to do is go back and give yourself up to the police. We are going to do our best to straighten out this mess.”

“Shall I tell them about this meeting with you?”

Doc nodded. “It will do no harm. Yes, tell them. But do not tell them where the interview took place.”

Charles Moore departed, not a little relieved.

“A DEVILISH scheme,” Renny said when they were alone. “That fiend, Dr. Nedden, somehow learned the identity of a group of the men we have made honest by brain operations. He worked on those men with drugs, got them to perpetrate crimes which they did not know they were doing. And now he is saddling the whole thing on us.”

Long Tom looked at Doc, asked, “Doc, do you suppose Nedden is the brains behind it.”

The bronze man did not seem to hear the question, which was a rather aggravating eccentricity of his when he did not wish to answer an inquiry. Renny and Long Tom had seen him do it many times before. They did not

put the question again, knowing it would get no response.

Long Tom said finally, “We know how that letter from Monk came to happen, anyway. They drugged him. He signed it when he was drugged.”

Renny nodded, agreed, “That is why they kept him alive.”

“What about Ham? When do we put Sam Joseph back in his place?”

Doc Savage looked as if he was worried about Ham.

Chapter XIII. KILL ORDER

HAM BROOKS was a little worried about himself. He had played the part of Sam Joseph, recuperating operation victim, with complete success for some hours now. The success was so complete that it was contributing to Ham's worry. Nothing had happened so that he could prove to himself that he could get away with it.

He did not like the looks of the medicine Dr. Nedden was mixing either. Medicine was something Ham didn't want.

Dr. Nedden approached. “Here's your little tonic for the day,” he said.

“I don't feel as if I need anything,” Ham said hurriedly.

“Oh, but you must build up your strength. This will just make you rest comfortably and sleep a little.”

Ham felt more kindly toward the stuff. Sleep, eh? Well, if he was asleep it would be that much easier to get away with this thing.

He drank the stuff. It tasted as if they had drowned a cat in it about a month ago and forgot to remove the remains.

He was a little astonished at the speed with which he became sleepy. It was sure potent stuff. Not unpleasant, though. He remembered thinking that, and then he was able to think of no more.

DR. NEDDEN bent over Ham and said, “Sam! Sam! Can you hear me?”

There was no response from the figure on the bed.

Dr. Nedden rolled back Ham's eyelids and examined the reaction of the eyes to the beam of a small flashlight which he splashed into them. He seemed satisfied.

“Fully under,” he remarked.

Dr. Nedden then went into the kitchen of the elaborate penthouse layout, and from there into an excellent−and bizarre, considering that it was on top of a skyscraper−imitation of a French wine cellar. This was well

stocked with imported wines and champagnes.

Selecting a wicker−covered jug labeled as a wine, Dr. Nedden separated this. The gut had been cut in the middle, the two halves fitting together inside the wicker covering.

He took a brass devil image out of this.

Having carried the thing back to the room where Ham lay, Dr. Nedden placed the image on the table, and turned on a thermal switch by holding a lighted match against the devil's left ear. The switch evidently operated as a thermostat functions.

There was a click and a radio apparatus began humming as it warmed up inside the thing.

Dr. Nedden took hold of the thing, pressed on a spot where there was a concealed button, said, “All right. You can come up now. And bring the papers.”

“Be right up,” the devil said, but with the voice of Butch, the meek−looking man.

Butch came in looking very subdued and sheeplike in blue suit, black shoes and a stiff collar. He had a brief case under an arm, and wore a pair of rimless spectacles. He was altogether benign.

“Good afternoon,” he said gently. “You need new batteries in that devil, doctor. Your signal comes in very weak. You may want to contact someone at the other end of the city sometime, and they will not be able to hear you.”

“Thanks,” said Dr. Nedden shortly.

“Furthermore, I would suggest you dispose of the devil,” added Butch. “The thing nearly got us into trouble once, when you insisted on having it talk to poor Sam Joseph to further convince him he was mentally unbalanced and needed a brain operation. Suppose Doc Savage had gotten the real statue containing the transceiver that day instead of the fake one which he did finally get? Savage's suspicions would have been aroused.”

“Oh, stop harping on it,” Dr. Nedden snapped. “Savage didn't get the real one, and he operated on Sam Joseph, and all those witnessing doctors saw that he had made a mistake, and that gave us the foothold we needed to start accusing him.”

BUTCH shrugged and placed his brief case on the table. He removed several documents, together with a fountain pen. “Here they are,” he said.

“That the last of them?” Dr. Nedden demanded.

“Sure. This finishes up cleaning out Montague Ogden. These papers prove that Sam Joseph bought, or rather pretended to buy, a large quantity of stock, which he proceeded to carry on the books of the concern. The stock, being actually nonexistent, will prove Sam Joseph shystered his boss out of a fortune. The checks, of course, have already been signed by Sam Joseph two weeks ago, when he was under the effects of the drug, and cashed. The boss has the money. All we need now is these few papers to help clinch the blame on Sam.”

Dr. Nedden grinned, waved an arm. “There he is. Go to it.”

Butch seated himself beside the bed. It was obvious that he had gone through the routine many times before, because he leaned forward, took Ham's hand and said, “Sam, Sam, hear me? Sam, do as you are told. Here is a fountain pen. Take it and hold it. Take the pen, Sam.”

Ham's hand then moved vaguely, finally grasped the pen in writing position.

Butch said, “Write! Write, Sam. Sign your name. Sign it. Sam Joseph. S−a−m J−o−s−e−p−h.”

Ham wrote the signature.

Butch repeated this painstakingly with the other documents, got all of them signed.

“Fine,” he said. “Now you won't need to dope him up any more. We're all shaped up.”

Dr. Nedden looked much relieved. “You think everything is fine then?”

Butch nodded. “Sure. All hunky. Savage hasn't made any progress whatever. We just hit him with everything and hit him so fast that he hasn't been able to get his head above water. He was tricked into that operation. That stunned him. We had him framed before he knew it.”

Dr. Nedden said, “That operation on Sam Joseph here was risky. I still don't think it was worth the risk.”

“You don't? Why, dammit, that was the crowning touch. That was what will convict Doc Savage. That's what they'll electrocute him for.”

“I don't understand.”

Butch whipped out a paper which bore typed lines. “Look, here is what the morning newspapers will carry.”

The typing said:

WHY DID SAVAGE OPERATE ON

SAM JOSEPH?

Sam Joseph is a man who was formerly an amnesia victim. He is a man who has no idea who he was in his youth. All the embezzlers in this case are the same. None of them remember back past a certain day. Did Doc Savage operate on the brains of all these men? Did he make them crooks? Did he take their loot from them? Did they work for him? Did Savage operate on Sam Joseph in an attempt to hide the crime he had committed in operating on the man's brain?

Dr. Nedden laughed and said, “I see it now. The operation is the one thing that implicates Doc Savage directly in the affair.”

“Sure.”

Butch, very satisfied with himself and the world, started to fold the documents which Ham had just signed, and place them with other papers in the brief case.

He froze. He eyed the papers. His eyes came out of their sockets a little.

“Look!” he croaked. “The signature ain't his!”

“What?”

“This signature ain't Sam Joseph's signature!” Butch yelled.

Dr. Nedden leaped to the bed and rubbed Ham's face vigorously, dislodging some of the wax make−up which Doc had applied as disguise.

“It's not Sam!” he gasped.

“It's Ham Brooks!” Butch said.

DR. NEDDEN nearly went to pieces then. He wrung his hands, seemed wildly baffled, then suddenly snatched up his hat and headed for the door in frenzied flight.

Butch said, “None of that!” and produced a gun. Dr. Nedden came back. Butch ordered, “Help me take this guy along.”

“But what−”

“Don't ask baboon questions!” Butch snarled. “Grab him! We've got to get out of here with him. We may need a hostage, somebody we can knock off if they don't stay off our trail.”

They got out of the building a great deal faster than it seemed possible they could have managed it. Butch warned the rest of the gang, the minor members, who served as guards around the place. All of them piled into cars from a nearby parking lot.

They went to the ordinary−looking brick apartment house west of Central Park. Butch ordered all of the men to wait outside, preferably in nearby bars, and to respond to a signal comprised of two short, one long and two short blasts of an automobile horn.

Butch and Dr. Nedden carried Ham, who was still unconscious, into the elevator. At the sixteenth floor they got out and packed Ham through one of the numerous doors marked:

DR. MORGAN

PRIVATE HOSPITAL

Two men only were there, and they were minor members of the gang, wearing white male−nurse suits−and at the moment in a fright, and carrying towels wrapped around pistols.

“Call a meeting!” Butch snarled at them. “Get everybody here!”

This seemed to be the general headquarters of the gang, the spot where conferences were held. And in ordering the summoning of *everybody*, Butch apparently meant only those who held positions of responsibility in the organization. Men who considered it important that the other members did not become too familiar with their faces.

They began arriving. They entered the outer reception rooms and changed to the surgical robes and masks which were their conference disguises.

Butch was impatient with this mumbo jumbo.

“Rome is burning!” he snarled. “And you guys fiddle with your faces!”

The group was eventually gathered. Butch counted. Seven of them.

“And the boss makes eight,” Butch said. “But the boss won't be here.”

Butch produced the little statue of a devil, a devil with Chinese characteristics, and placed it on a white operating table. He switched the thing on, let the tubes warm, said into the microphone:

“Boss, come in. This is important.”

He got no answer.

“That's what I was afraid of,” he said. “And that doesn't make it look any better.”

BUTCH apparently held no more position of authority than any of the others because a man growled, “Where do you get off, calling a meeting and giving orders?”

“Oh, shut up,” Butch said. “Something has gone wrong.”

He told them about the finding of Ham Brooks in place of Sam Joseph, and pointed out Ham's unconscious body as proof of the story.

He informed them he did not know just what the unexpected discovery might mean. But it was sure to be nothing healthy for them. It meant at the least that Doc Savage was a lot closer to arriving at the truth than any of them expected.

The boss, he reminded them, had made a provision for a case like this.

“If anything serious went wrong,” he told them, “we were to make a break for the boss' southwestern ranch and stay there until the hounds quit howling. Until things blew over.”

Butch tried to get an answer out of the radio transceiver concealed in the devil statue and failed.

“Get going,” he directed. “You,” he told Dr. Nedden, “will light out first with Ham Brooks here. We're taking him along as a hostage if we need him. Also, when he comes out from under the effect of that hypnotic, we're damned sure going to find out how much Doc Savage knows.”

Dr. Nedden nodded. He and another man got a stretcher on which they placed Ham. They carried him to the elevator and rode down. They were alone, the other men being busy getting rid of their masks and surgical robes.

At the lobby floor they bent to pick up the stretcher.

“Oh!” gasped Dr. Nedden. His eyes got wide.

Montague Ogden was standing there. Ogden's feet were well apart, and his eyes narrow. He wore a topcoat, and from the way his hands rested in the pockets it was obvious they held guns.

“Oh!” repeated Dr. Nedden. “Uh−hello, boss!”

Montague Ogden said, “So you know who you take orders from?”

“I−yes, yes, of course.” Dr. Nedden was uncomfortable. “After all it isn't much of a secret. And your . . . your ranch, of course. We all know about that. Know we are to go there and keep out of sight if the breaks get too tough.”

“I see,” Montague Ogden said. He did not seem angry. “And where are you going now?”

“To the ranch.”

“Who gave those orders?”

“Butch,” said Nedden maliciously. “Butch gave them. He's becoming very officious.”

“I see. Officious, eh.” Montague Ogden looked fierce. “Well, we'll see about that. Is everyone going to the ranch?”

“Yes. Everyone. Monk Mayfair is already being held there, of course. And we're taking this other fellow, Ham Brooks, as a hostage if we need one.”

“Then what?”

“Then, if we don't need Monk or Ham, they can be killed.”

Montague Ogden seemed to give the situation thought.

“You two will go with me and bring Ham,” he said. “We will take my private plane. You can fly, can you not, Dr. Nedden?”

“Yes, I can fly.”

“And you know where the ranch is?”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“Then get going,” Montague Ogden snapped. “We will go together−you two, Ham Brooks and myself.”

They got going. For a man who was in command of a situation, Montague Ogden seemed very strained, and he took only one or the other of his hands from his pockets at a time, never removing both hands.

Chapter XIV. KING AND JOKER

DOC SAVAGE drove his ambulance with care and concentration. On the seat beside him, Sis Harrison sat and watched with admiration.

“You mean to tell me,” she said, “that you built a radio set small enough to inclose in the bandages on Ham's head?”

From the back of the ambulance, Long Tom said, “Drive north awhile, Doc. And better put on more speed. The signal isn't too good.”

Doc said, “Not a radio set. Just a transmitter. A little oscillator powered with concentrated flashlight batteries which puts out a simple wave that can be traced with a direction finder.”

“It's marvelous!” Sis exclaimed.

The ambulance was one belonging to the hospital which Doc Savage controlled, the one which he had employed in performing the unfortunate brain operation on Sam Joseph.

Sam Joseph was now back in that hospital to recuperate under an assumed name.

“We have used the device before,” Doc said. “There is nothing stupendous about it. It will only work for a few hours. Not over a day. It is only good for horizon distance because the wave length is so short. It has several drawbacks.”

“I think it's marvelous,” Sis said.

Long Tom said, “Go east again, Doc. We're getting a little closer to it.”

Rotary Harrison bellowed, “I hope we catch up with him soon! I'm getting tired of this chasing around. I want to get my hands on somebody. I want my hands on a throat.”

“Quit bawling like a bull,” Long Tom said. “You are worse than Monk.”

Doc asked, “Long Tom, are you still in contact with Renny?”

“Yes. I can hear his carrier wave.”

“Tell him to keep somewhere above us. But plenty high. High enough that he'll not be noticed.”

“O. K. Renny is bothered. He says what if the Civil Air Patrol or an army plane orders him down?”

“That is a chance we have to take,” Doc said. “A plane is the only way of following if they take Ham away in a plane.”

Sis saw that the bronze man was under an intense strain. She understood his feelings. It was at his suggestion that Ham Brooks had undertaken the job of pretending to be Sam Joseph. Now Ham was in trouble, or everything pointed to it.

As soon as Ham had been moved−as indicated by the shift of the little radio transmitter−they had hurried to follow. They had gotten uptown a little too late to intercept Ham at the time he was stationary, somewhere

near Central Park, and now they were trying to catch him.

Feeling a change of subject would do Doc good, Sis said, “You have five assistants, have you not? There are only four−Monk, Ham, Renny and Long Tom−working with you this time. But don't you have five?”

“Yes, five,” Doc Savage said. “The other is Johnny−William Harper Littlejohn, the archaeologist and geologist. He is in Alaska, where he is preparing some specimens.”

(The specimens to which doc Savage refers were some amazing prehistoric life forms which Johnny Littlejohn had collected in the course of another adventure, “The Time Terror,” which appeared in the January, 1943, issue of this magazine.)

Long Tom yelled in the back, “Doc! I think they've got Ham in a plane! I think they're just taking the air!”

THE plane was a bright cabin job. They saw it flash overhead, climbing steeply, and caught a faint trace of its strong motor roar.

Doc Savage rapped, “Long Tom! Call Renny down with our plane. Quick!”

“I've already called him down,” Long Tom said.

Doc Savage tramped on the brake, wheeled the car to the right, up a steeply rutted road into a field. The field was large and flat, a meadow. Nearby was a hangar, and a car parked in front of it. An elderly man in coveralls stood in front of the hangar, rolling a cigarette.

Doc braked the car to a halt before the man, demanded, “Who owns the field?”

“Reckon it's me,” the man said easily. He looked honest.

“Whose plane just took off?”

“Private ship. Belongs to Montague Ogden, the financier. Keeps it here. Had three friends with him, one of them so sick he was on a stretcher. Head all bandaged.”

“Know any of the friends?”

“One. Feller named Dr. Nedden. Family physician of Ogden's, I think.”

Renny was down on the field now. He was flying a fast cabin plane that was far from being the freak of speed in which they had made their earlier flight into the Midwest. This ship could hold its own with Ogden's plane, however.

Renny taxied up in the ship. They loaded in. Renny fed the cylinders gas and they took off.

Long Tom had brought his direction finder and he was feverishly setting it up. This was the critical period and his manner showed it. The little transmitter concealed on Ham was weak, and if it got out of range now they were lost.

When he picked up the signal his yell of delight startled everyone.

“Got it!” he bellowed. “Head more south, Renny.”

And fifteen minutes later Renny was saying, “I can see the ship now. What do we do? Overtake them?”

“Keep back far enough not to be seen,” Doc Savage said. “We might as well find out where they are going.”

Rotary Harrison looked disgusted at that. “Always followin'!” he snapped. “About time we was gettin' our hands on some necks, ain't it?”

Doc made no comment.

Long Tom remarked, “There is an old Chinese proverb that says: 'Snake is small because he suck egg; fox is big because he wait and catch grown bird.'“

“What kind of an answer is that?” Rotary snarled.

IT got dark and they followed the other plane several hours by radio alone, after which the other ship landed. They saw its landing lights streak out beams and these picked up a smooth field, and came to a stop on it.

“Over Georgia somewhere,” Long Tom said. “Near the coast.”

Doc Savage watched the plane lights below for a moment.

“Parachutes,” he said. “One man with me. Either one of you.”

Renny said, “Match you,” to Long Tom. And then lost.

They went over the side together and cracked open their 'chutes at once. It was very dark, clouds above, and small chance of their being seen. And probably their plane motor had not been heard because they could see that the engine of the ship below was still idling over, and that would drown any sound from above.

Doc called softly, “Get out of the harness.”

“Sure,” Long Tom said.

They squirmed and strained and unfastened the parachute harness snaps. These were 'chutes from Doc's plane, so they were equipped with a gadget which Renny Renwick had worked out for use by American parachute troopers, a gadget for releasing themselves quickly from the encumbrance of a parachute harness.

So, when they hit the ground, they were instantly free and running.

They separated.

Luck was with them. The engine of Ogden's plane was still turning and its coughing had covered the noise of their hitting the earth.

Ogden and two men were standing in the glare of the plane landing light.

Ogden had a gun in each hand. The two men−one of them Dr. Nedden−slowly put up their hands.

Doc Savage did not carry a gun, never carried one if he could avoid it, believing to carry one made you rely too much on a firearm, and be lost without it. He waited. Long Tom had a gun, a small machine pistol with a tremendous rate of fire.

Long Tom walked into the glare of landing lights, presented the muzzle of his machine pistol, said, “This little gun puts out a million bullets a minute.”

Montague Ogden turned slowly. He looked at Long Tom. He inspected Doc Savage.

“I've been a hell of a fool,” Ogden said.

He tossed his guns on the ground.

“And I'm a very puzzled man,” he added.

Doc said, “Puzzled?”

Ogden nodded. “For some reason or other, these three men seem to think I am their leader. I am nothing of the sort. It puzzles me.

No one said anything.

Finally, Ogden added, “I tricked them into bringing me down here from New York, thinking they would lead me to their headquarters.”

He stared at them.

“I became scared,” he finished. “I am very glad you came along.”

WHILE Renny landed the plane containing Rotary and Sis Harrison, Doc Savage tied Dr. Nedden and the other man. Then Doc examined Ham and found him unharmed but very groggy, able to mutter only that they had given him some kind of a damned shot of something. He sounded weakly indignant.

They listened to Ogden's story.

It was the story of a man who had been duped. A man who had inherited his wealth and had always had other men manage it for him. A man who knew little or nothing about business, but who liked to put on a big show, liked to impress people with his wealth. The flamboyant Ogden building was an example.

A man of close loyalties, of intense friendships. A man who would sacrifice for his friends, and liked to fight for them.

“I was intensely worried about Sam Joseph's mental troubles,” said Montague Ogden. “It was Dr. Nedden, I realize now, who convinced me you would be the man to operate. And then you did operate, and there was no brain tumor. How did that happen, anyway?”

Doc Savage was uncomfortable in the darkness.

“I was outsmarted,” Doc confessed, “at my own game. They had imitated the symptoms of cerebral fibroma so skillfully that I was completely taken in.”

“That must have taken a clever doctor,” Ogden said.

“It did. Nedden is clever. I think we will find he has other clever doctors working with him.”

Montague Ogden sighed explosively.

“They are all clever,” he said. “So much smarter than I am. But I became suspicious finally. Who wouldn't, after I found that Sam Joseph apparently had been looting my company. I knew Sam would not do a thing like that. My true friends do not double−cross me. That is one wonderful fact I have learned about human nature.

“I became suspicious too late. My indignation, and it was righteous indignation I assure you, even if egged on by Dr. Nedden, about the operation mistake had already touched off the newspaper publicity. I made a terrible fool of myself there. But you must understand I did that because I thought Sam Joseph, my closest friend, had been wronged.”

Doc Savage said, “You made that clear enough, and it was understandable under the circumstances.”

Montague Ogden sounded grateful.

“I have been shadowing them,” he explained. “Following them around. And that was how I happened to track them to an apartment house near Central Park. I was waiting downstairs, not knowing what to do, when Dr. Nedden and this man came out with the stretcher and what I thought was poor Sam Joseph on the stretcher. I confronted them. Imagine my astonishment when l found they thought I was their leader.”

He sounded bewildered.

“They said they were going to *my* ranch,” he said. “I haven't got a ranch. I own lots of things, but no place like that. But they landed here and I didn't know what to do. And then you landed and I'm glad.”

He groaned.

“I imagine you thought I was the leader, too,” he concluded. “You must have thought I was the king. And now you find I'm only a silly, gullible pawn, the joker. You are probably disgusted.”

DOC SAVAGE asked, “The ranch is near here?”

“Yes. I don't know exactly where, though.”

“Is this the ranch flying field?”

“No,” Montague Ogden said. “But there is one. I made Dr. Nedden land on this meadow, telling him I did not want the others to know we were here. I told him I wanted to sneak up on Butch, who has been becoming too officious.”

“Nedden knows where the flying field and the ranch is?”

“Yes.”

Without exchanging a word, Renny and Long Tom fell on Dr. Nedden, clubbed him to the ground and announced they were going to dispose of him then and there if he did not tell them where the ranch was located. There was nothing ridiculous about their performance, although they admitted later it should have been. They sounded so utterly convincing. They sold a bill of goods.

“Please!” Nedden gasped. “I'll tell you.”

The ranch was about two miles and a half distant, along a country road which bordered one edge of this meadow.

“Far enough that they didn't hear us land, probably,” Sis Harrison said with relief.

Rotary Harrison growled, “Let's get going! I want my hands on somebody's neck, and quick!”

“Just a moment,” Doc Savage said.

The bronze man went to their plane, his own ship, the one which Renny had just landed. In the cabin there were equipment cases in special racks, and he selected one of these.

He carried the case to the others.

He exhibited the contents.

“A new type of grenade,” he explained. “A new gas, one against which no mask is effective. Extremely potent. Acting almost instantaneously.”

Renny looked at the grenades and seemed startled.

“Holy cow, Doc, but−”

“We are each going to take some,” Doc explained, interrupting quickly. “Here, we will divide them.”

“How d'you work the gadgets?” Rotary asked. “Pull this key out?”

“Twist the key,” Doc Savage corrected. “You will find that it seems to wind like an alarm clock. Twist it up tight then get rid of it. Throw it as you would an ordinary grenade.”

“What's the idea of the winding?”

“The peculiar internal construction which was necessary.”

“Oh,” Rotary said. “I see. Another one of your gadgets.”

Chapter XV. SATAN'S RANCH

THEY left Dr. Nedden, Montague Ogden and the other crook behind. Doc Savage used a hypodermic needle on them and they were almost immediately asleep. They would remain that way for some time until noon the

following day, at the least. Renny dragged them off in the tall weeds where they would not be likely to be found before then.

Montague Ogden did not object to being drugged and left behind. “I expect you to suspect me,” he said. “I see how you could not conceive of a man being as big a fool as I've been.”

Walking away, Long Tom remarked, “You know, I halfway think he's innocent.”

“Oh, hell!” snorted Rotary Harrison. “Next thing you'll be thinking toads have wings.”

Ham Brooks went with them. He was rapidly regaining his equilibrium. He stripped off his bandages, which contained the little radio−wave transmitter, and had salvaged the gadget. When Sis insisted she would like to have it as a souvenir of an incredibly fantastic adventure, Ham gave it to her, which somewhat irritated Long Tom. It was Long Tom's device.

Having covered about a mile, they heard a series of three planes approach from the north and land in the night far ahead of them. They saw, by looking up, the faint glow of landing lights reflected against the very low clouds.

“The gang arriving,” Renny rumbled. “The way I understand it, the whole kit and kaboodle will be there. What a chance to make a roundup!”

They pushed forward more rapidly. Dust was thick on the country road, a soft pad for their footfalls.

Light appeared ahead. Electric glow around low buildings. The structures seemed to be made of logs and slabs, in keeping with the piny woods around them. And there was the excited barking of dogs which seemed to be confined to a fenced inclosure.

Doc Savage said, “We had better close in immediately while the dogs are still barking. Otherwise, the animals might give an alarm.”

“Good idea,” Rotary agreed. “What's the plan of campaign?”

“We will get a little closer,” Doc said, “and look over the place.”

Rotary stopped.

“Sis,” he said, “you go back.”

“But dad!” Sis objected. “I may be able to help.”

“You're a girl, and−”

“But I'm not scared. At least I'm not going to go to pieces−”

Rotary was suddenly harsh. “You go back,” he said. “I'm not going to have a daughter of mine mixed up in the kind of a thing this is going to be.”

“I−”

“Better go back, Sis,” Doc said. “Someone should be free and clear to go for help if we fail.”

Sis finally consented. “All right, if you insist,” she agreed.

They left her in the darkness and went on, moving with increasing care. Sis had been so disappointed at being left behind that they were silent.

They were quite close to the ranch buildings when Long Tom spoke in a whisper.

“Sis sure hated to miss out on this,” he said.

Doc said, “It was necessary.”

Rotary Harrison was suddenly confronting them.

“You bet it was necessary,” he snarled.

He had a gun and a flashlight. He menaced them with the gun.

“Wouldn't do for her to know what a hell cat her old man is,” Rotary said.

He splashed glare from the flashlight on them. Men came running from the ranch.

“Get Butch!” Rotary snarled at the man. “I don't want no more mistakes about who's boss of this thing!”

THEY took Doc Savage, Renny and Long Tom and Ham into a long low room with beamed ceilings and native fieldstone fireplaces at each end. A room where saddles and bridles hung, ropes and spurs, steer horns and buffalo horns. All the stuff that goes into a phony ranch set−up.

“Get back, get back!” Rotary Harrison kept snarling at his men. “Don't get close to these hombres. No tellin' what they'll pull.”

He pushed back his men bodily, and they made a large circle around the prisoners.

“Careful; they got more tricks than a centipede has legs,” he warned. He bellowed out a laugh. “I oughta know. I been their shadow for two days.”

Doc Savage said, “You went to a lot of trouble, Rotary.”

Rotary Harrison laughed.

“Hell, yes, and why not?” he asked. “I've spent the best months of my life, to say nothing of what money I had left in the world, working this out. It was complete.” He waved an arm, added, “It was complete, even to this little hide−out here, which I bought and recorded in Montague Ogden's name.”

Doc said, “And while you were committing the robberies, you included yourself?”

“What could have been finer? Who would suspect a robbed man?”

“Particularly,” Doc Savage said, “one who came to me for help.”

“That's the idea.”

“And one who has an innocent daughter,” Doc suggested.

That hit Rotary Harrison where it hurt. The smirk slid off his face, the lips off his teeth.

“She don't know about it,” he said. “That's why I didn't want her to come along.”

It was still in the room. Light in the place came from electric bulbs in ox−yoke and old−fashioned lantern devices, and from a few false candles. The men stood tense. None of them looked at ease.

Running his gaze over them, Doc Savage picked out two men who were doctors. He knew they were doctors without recalling their names, but he'd seen their faces before. They were cerebrologists, or specialists on the human brain. They were not prominent men, yet skilled enough to help in perpetrating the gigantic hoax that had been pulled. They were crooks, certainly.

Doc looked at their leader, Rotary Harrison, said, “You could have saved a lot of your elaborate scheming.”

Rotary stared. “Huh?”

“It was needless smoke screen,” Doc said.

“What the hell do you mean? Mean you were wise to me?”

Doc said, “You made a few mistakes. First, when you were captured on the Mississippi River, you were not killed. You were kept alive. There was no reason whatever for you being kept alive, particularly when you insisted your friend, Duster Jones, had been killed because he knew too much. You had yourself seized to arouse my interest, and it did arouse my interest, particularly in the phony aspect of it.

“Again, your business of a loan renewal agreement with Sam Joseph was a false note. Sam Joseph recognized you, but he did not make any loan−renewal agreement with you in talking to you, which you said he did.

“And also,” Doc continued, “you were in a position to know about all the companies and concerns which were robbed in the course of this thing. All of them were companies with which you would be familiar. Charles Moore's oil−field machinery concern, for example. You are an oilman. You would naturally know more about how to rob an oil−field machinery concern. And the same thing applied to the rest of your victims. There was too much coincidence.”

Rotary grinned.

“So there was too much coincidence. So what?”

“So we were able to beat you at your own game.”

“Game?”

“Deceit,” Doc Savage said.

“What kind of nutty talk is that you−”

DOC SAVAGE jumped then. He moved with abrupt violence, taking the two men holding him completely by surprise. He was not able to seize a weapon, but he was able to get free, to leap and reach a stairway that seemed to go down into a cellar. A window was near, but he ignored that, hit on his stomach, slid to the stairs, went down them.

Renny, Long Tom and Ham began struggling violently, but with no effect.

Rotary Harrison bellowed, “He's in the cellar! There's no way out! Give me one of those grenades!”

He meant the trick grenades which Doc Savage had so carefully distributed, with explanations about their deadly gas contents, before the raid on the ranch.

Rotary grabbed up one of the grenades. He ran to the cellar opening.

“Get ready to slam the door shut after I throw this egg down there,” he snarled.

“Ready,” one of his men said, seizing the door.

For the benefit of Doc Savage, down below, Rotary bellowed, “You said wind the key like an alarm clock, didn't you?”

He wound the key.

Instantly, there were explosions all over the room, all through the ranchhouse−wherever the trick grenades happened to be−all coming together. They were not loud reports, but there was a guttural violence about the way they let go, and the gas they spewed was sickening, paralyzing, blinding−if you inhaled it. Doc Savage came up out of the cellar.

“Let's finish this job,” he said.

What Rotary and none of his men knew, and what none of them ever did find out, was that by winding the key on the grenades, you wound a powerful little generator the size of a watch, and the current from this, through vacuum tubes not as large as a peanut, was amplified and put out in an impulse that would effect tiny receivers and these would explode the grenades. Each grenade contained receiver and transmitter, but they were not complicated, because they employed the same circuit. Wind the key in one grenade and they would all explode.

As soon as Rotary Harrison had wound the key, Renny and Long Tom and Ham, knowing all the grenades would let go now, began to fight.

The gas was not effective unless breathed. So they held their breathing back. Renny and Long Tom did it very successfully. But Ham almost immediately got hit in the stomach.

The blow to Ham's middle was terrific, and it opened up his mouth, and he had gas−charged air into his lungs before he could help himself. He began to yell in pain with the other men, and fell to the floor.

There was nothing deadly about the gas, but it was very painful and brought quick unconsciousness. Not that it did the recipient any benefit.

Doc heard Monk.

Monk's bellowing, even when he was gagged, was distinctive. Doc located the sound, headed for it. Through a door, across a room, through another door. There was a small tight shed stacked high with litter, old camp stools and tent poles mostly. And Monk floundering around in the middle of it.

Monk was doing his bellowing entirely through his nose, which was remarkable. He was making about the same amount of noise as a good trumpet, although it was hardly musical.

Doc stooped, slashed his bindings.

Monk bolted to his feet. Evidently he had been kicking around enough that his muscles were not stiff because he was up and out of the door in a streak. Still making nasal noise of remarkable quantity.

Doc went back into the connecting room, found a window.

He remembered to yell, “Anaesthetic gas!” at Monk by way of warning.

Then Doc smashed open the window, thrust out his head and got fresh air into his lungs. Then he turned and met Rotary Harrison.

In some fashion−astonishment must have stopped the man's breathing until he realized what had happened−Rotary had escaped the gas. His face was purple, bloated, from holding his breath.

Doc tried to belt the wind out of Harrison so he would have to breathe. It was not a success. Rotary piled out into the night.

Doc followed, caught him. They went to the ground. Rotary was strong and desperate. He was not a young man, but the iron of his muscle was astonishing.

MONK MAYFAIR, entering the big room, saw no one in motion, only men motionless on the floor. He knew there was gas, he could feel the slight sting of the stuff against his eyes. He saw Ham and he was horrified until he discovered Ham merely seemed to be gassed.

Monk went on. He could hear fighting, a few shots, well in the rear of the house. He headed for the spot.

“Hey!” somebody said. “Rotary!”

It was dark in the hall. Monk stopped. He recognized the voice. Butch.

“Yeah?” Monk said.

“This way. We can get to a plane.”

“Sure,” Monk said.

He moved rapidly and pushed along behind the other man until they came to a lighted room. It was Butch, all right. Butch, slim and pale and delicate−looking. The meekly helpless−looking person.

Monk took Butch by the neck.

“It's a shame to waste time on a spindlin' little guy like you,” Monk said. “You oughta−ow! *Ow!”*

Monk's greatest pride was what he could do in a hand−to−hand fight. He liked to brawl, knock−down−drag−out, anything goes, bite−an−ear, gouge−an−eye. He had never confessed to anyone, but he took regular lessons in rough and tumble, in jujitsu, and had even hired an osteopath doctor to teach him how to twist bones so as to hurt the most. He thought he was very good.

He began to get an education. He was hit twice; he didn't know exactly where. But the agony was awful. Stars exploded. Pain made his toes feel as if they were falling off.

He managed, and he thought he was lucky to do that, to fall on Butch.

They went over and over. Bones cracked, muscles popped, joints cracked. “Ow!” Monk bawled. “Ow−w−w−w!” He felt sure he was rapidly being separated from arms, legs, ears, hair, nose.

Somewhere in the back of the house, Renny Renwick yelled, “A gang of them are killing Monk! Come on!”

But when Renny appeared in the door he stopped. He began to grin uncontrollably, then to knot up with laughter. Long Tom joined him. He, too, thought it was funny.

“Get Ham Brooks!” Renny gurgled. “Pour water on Ham or something to wake him up. Ham can't miss this! Ham would give years off his life to see this.”

Monk and his tiny opponent went through a convulsion. Monk emitted fresh bellows of pain. He was suddenly not enjoying the fight. He had often, in the past, tackled a dozen men who were fighting men, and howled in glee through the whole fray. Now he was suddenly out of glee.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” Monk squalled.

“We better stop it,” Renny said, “before he eats Monk alive.”

He went over and tapped Butch on the head with a revolver barrel. Butch collapsed.

Monk rolled feebly, crawling away from the senseless Butch as if the latter was a tarantula. Monk tried to get to his feet, failed, collapsed, sat there foolishly.

Monk stared at the feeble−looking Butch.

“My, my,” Monk said. “And to think there's only one of him.”

Chapter XVI. TRUTH AND VARNISH

THE head of the New York State police and the district attorney from New York City who had been assigned to the case arrived a few hours after daylight.

Explanations and arguments, pro and con, and the taking of statements, occupied about three hours.

The D. A. made the speech of summary:

“Officially,” he said, “there has been no proof presented that Mr. Savage maintains any kind of an institution where criminal brains are operated upon. Whatever our personal opinions may be, they probably will remain officially inactive because of lack of such proof. Personally, the idea of treating criminals in that way seems a good idea to me.”

Ham Brooks asked, “What about all this stink in the newspapers?”

Doc explained, “When it is proven that the whole thing was simply a cleverly thought−out and executed scheme to pick a bunch of men who had been−ah−amnesia victims in the past, and drug them and force them to commit crimes while drugged, then lay it all on to me−when that is all proven, the newspapers will drop their campaign. And apologize, no doubt.”

Ham said, “They better apologize, or there'll be the fattest goblin of a lawsuit after each one of them.”

The New York district attorney checked over a list of prisoners.

“We have checked and rechecked the list of prisoners,” he said, “and from the statements of the other prisoners, we seem to be one short. The man who was the ringleader. A man by the name of Rotary Harrison.”

Doc Savage spoke quietly.

“Rotary Harrison,” the bronze man said, “was badly injured. He was sent to a private hospital.”

“Can you turn him over to us when he is fit?”

Doc nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “But Rotary Harrison will not be proven the criminal leader, I am afraid.”

“What do you mean?”

“It will probably develop,” Doc Savage said quietly, “that Rotary Harrison was just another one of the list of victims who, like myself, were framed to be the goats.”

“But all the stolen money and property is in his name,” the D A. pointed out.

Doc shook his head. “Rotary Harrison is turning all the property back to the rightful owners.”

The D. A. watched the bronze man for a while. Then he grinned. “Well, that fellow Butch will make a good master mind,” he said. “We'll hang it onto him.”

He got his papers together and went outside to watch the prisoners being loaded into cars.

THE moment Doc was alone with Monk and the others, the bronze man said, “Monk, get to our plane. Get your portable chemical lab.”

“What's the idea?”

“Rotary Harrison,” Doc explained, “is going to our upstate place for an operation that will wipe out all his memory of the past. I want you to mix an anaesthetic that will keep him unconscious during the trip.”

“Yes, I know that,” Monk said. “But what was the idea of telling the D. A. that Rotary was just another victim of the plot when you know perfectly well he was the brains behind the whole thing.”

“That's right,” Doc said. “And that's principally the reason I want to send him to the College. You see, Rotary planned this master crime himself and he hired all the others. He was not only plotting to steal several million dollars but he was going to discredit us and our life work with the public.

“The first thing he did was to get hold of Dr. Nedden and that young fellow, Butch. The two of them traced down some of our graduates, drugged them, stole all the money from the firms they worked for, and when the big blow−up came, they were going to say that we were responsible for the crimes because we had performed brain operations on them. The big scheme behind Rotary's mind was that he would have us trapped and then he could force us to pay blackmail or see the work of our College destroyed.”

Monk grunted. “Blackmail, eh? I guess he was figuring to cut himself a big slice of our Central American gold supply.”

Doc nodded. “Yes. That was his plan. He was so clever about it that only one man in the organization knew who their leader really was. That man was Butch. He was the one who hired all the others, including Dr. Nedden, and they all got their instructions through that little devil statue which, in reality, was only a tiny transmitting and receiving set.”

“Where is Rotary now?” Renny asked.

“Out in the bush, where I hid him,” Doc explained.

Monk looked puzzled. “I still don't understand why you're covering Rotary up from the police. I think−”

Renny gave Monk a kick and said, “Come on, you dope.”

Monk followed Renny outside. “What's got into Doc?” he said. “Rotary was the leader, and−”

“Possibly,” Renny suggested dryly, “Doc is suffering from a slight attack of your chronic trouble.”

“Huh?”

“Sis Harrison,” Renny said. “In other words, she doesn't know her dad was the kingfish in this affair.”

“Oh, oh,” Monk grinned. “Now I've run across something I can understand.”

THE END

THE RUNNING SKELETONS

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