

The Vanisher

A Doc Savage Adventure
#52

Kenneth Robeson
[Lester Dent]
1936

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Title: The Vanisher

Date of first publication: 1936

Author: Lester Dent (as Kenneth Robeson) (1904-1959)

Date first posted: July 20, 2020

Date last updated: July 20, 2020

Faded Page eBook #20200727

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

DOC SAVAGE'S AMAZING CREW

William Harper Littlejohn, the bespectacled scientist who was the world's greatest living expert on geology and archæology.

Colonel John Renwick, "Renny," his favorite sport was pounding his massive fists through heavy, paneled doors.

Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, "Monk," only a few inches over five feet tall, and yet over 260 pounds. His brutish exterior concealed the mind of a great scientist.

Major Thomas J. Roberts, "Long Tom," was the physical weakling of the crowd, but a genius at electricity.

Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, slender and waspy, he was never without his ominous, black sword cane.

WITH THEIR LEADER, THEY WOULD GO ANYWHERE,
FIGHT ANYONE, DARE EVERYTHING—SEEKING
EXCITEMENT AND PERILOUS ADVENTURE!

Books by Kenneth Robeson

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THE DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND	HAUNTED OCEAN
DEATH IN SILVER	THE VANISHER

THE VANISHER

A DOC SAVAGE ADVENTURE

BY KENNETH ROBESON

THE VANISHER

Originally published in DOC SAVAGE Magazine December 1936

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Chapter 1

THE ONE WITH THE QUEER BACK

THE early fall issue of a magazine of national circulation had carried a feature write-up about Doc Savage. The item was dramatic, well-written, and particularly interesting because it carried an excellent picture of Doc Savage. Good pictures of the man of bronze were scarce. The story told about Doc Savage's strange, Galahadian life work of traveling to the ends of the earth, righting wrongs, aiding the oppressed, and punishing evildoers. It told about the bronze man's scientifically developed brain and his equally remarkable muscles, and gave examples of the fantastic feats he could accomplish, and some of his eerie adventures. The writer of the article had drawn on his imagination only a little. Almost every one got around to reading the article.

So it was not so remarkable that John Winer, penitentiary guard, should be reading the magazine article at the moment when the horrible and incredible thing known as "The Vanisher" made its first public appearance—or, perhaps more correctly, disappearance.

That John Winer was reading the article was a coincidence because the mystery of The Vanisher was going to involve Doc Savage in one of the most startling adventures of his unusual career. John Winer was one of the night guards at the prison. He was reading in the northwest corner tower. The hour was three o'clock in the morning.

John Winer had a habit of talking to himself.

"Hey!" he said, suddenly. "What was that?"

There was no one around. He simply asked himself this question because he had heard a small grating noise. He got up, went to a powerful searchlight and turned it on, raking the prison yard below, and the terrain outside, with the beam. The light roved like a great, deadly white spook.

Inside the prison wall, in a large open space, stood an ordinary freight car. This had been switched inside the prison earlier in the evening. It held a great deal of complicated machinery in boxes and crates.

John Winer knew there was nothing but machinery in the car, because he had been one of a squad of guards who had searched it. The car was billed as holding the new pipe organ which a rich man was giving to the prison chapel.

The rich man donating the organ was named Sigmund Hoppel. This fact became something to think about later.

John Winer gave the freight car only cursory inspection, because he knew it was harmless. Hadn't he helped search it? Freight cars and trucks were customarily frisked upon entering the prison walls, lest they be used to smuggle guns inside.

But John Winer would have found a closer watch on the freight car productive of interesting things. For instance, he might have seen a furtive shadow drift swiftly from the car to a near-by wall.

Some one had left the freight car and was now prowling the interior of the prison. The sound which John Winer had heard was the freight car door opening and closing.

Even a close observer might have experienced difficulty in getting an idea of what the furtive prowler looked like. For one thing, the being kept where the shadows were darkest. Light seemed malign.

If it was a man—and there could be no certainty on this point—it was not a large man. The contrary, rather. In stature, the individual would hardly have topped a youth in his early teens. The Senegambian marauder did not have the slimness of youth, however; although the legs were spindling, the torso was burly and misshapen.

Just what gave the prowler the queer look became evident when a faint gleam of light chanced to be encountered. The creature was a pronounced humpback!

So furtively did this strange individual move that nothing more was seen or heard of the sinister presence until a tiny light appeared in the section of the prison set aside for offices.

It was evident from the manner in which the light roved about the offices that the strange skulker had not been there before, and knew little of the layout. Finally, a metal filing case was located. This held cards which showed in what cells the prisoners were confined.

The marauder seemed interested in those cards dealing with only certain prisoners.

A drawing of the prison hung on the wall. The prowler consulted this for some moments; cells holding the selected prisoners were being located.

The shadowy, humpbacked one produced a cane from inside darksome garments. It was a dark cane which looked heavy. Exactly similar canes

were commonly carried by guards within the prison. The guards were not permitted to carry guns; the canes were their only weapon.

The humpbacked one eased soundlessly out of the offices, haunted shadows under the walls, and a few minutes later approached the guard in front of the huge cell house which contained the bad ones. The approach was made boldly.

The guard was alert. He frowned at the newcomer, noted the regulation cane the fellow carried, and must have believed the strange person was a guard. The light was not good.

“I’m a guard of the day shift,” said the humpback. “Making an inspection round. Is everything all right?”

“Yep,” said the guard.

He did not notice that the other had stopped so that the end of the cane was thrust forward almost below the guard’s face. Nor did the guard notice a grayish vapor which was now pouring from the end of the cane. The vapor arose, and the guard unwittingly inhaled it.

The guard fell over on his face, unconscious almost at once, and began to grovel and kick. In time he became limp, absolutely senseless.

The guard carried keys to the cell block. These were appropriated by the humpbacked one and employed to unlock the grilled door.

From the central interior court, the door of every cell could be seen. Ordinarily, only a single guard was on duty inside the cell blocks at night, but since this was the building housing some bad actors, two guards were on duty.

The humpbacked marauder acted with heartless rapidity. The anæsthetic fumes from the cane accounted for both guards while they stood in front of the strange intruder and asked suspicious questions.

The humpbacked prowled now secured the cell keys, moved to the barred door of a cell which housed one of the selected prisoners, opened the door, crept in and shook the inmate.

The cell occupant aroused, took one look at his visitor and acted as if confronted by a genuine witch.

“A woman!” he exploded.

“*Sh-h-h-h!*” warned the other. “Don’t make wild guesses! Are you Jules R. McGinnis?”

“Yes—yes,” gulped the prisoner. “What in blazes is going on here?”

“You were sentenced to fifteen years for forgery?”

“Y—yes. Damn them! I wasn’t guilty!”

“I know all about it. Now listen to this: Will you spend a year of your life fighting those who sent you here, if I get you out?”

Jules McGinnis said, “Eh?”

“Will you do absolutely what I tell you, warring on the men who framed you, for a period of one year from to-night in return for my getting you out of here?”

“What the heck is this, anyway?” gasped McGinnis.

“It is a chance to get out of spending fifteen years here.”

McGinnis swallowed several times. He seemed to be trying to think and having a difficult time getting his thoughts organized.

“I’m to—to do—to do what you say for a year?” he stuttered.

“You’re taking too long to make up your mind.” The deformed prowler then made a move as if to close the cell door on McGinnis.

“Wait!” McGinnis exploded. “I’ll do it! Hell, yes!”

“Help me get the others,” directed the humpback. “There are exactly twenty men here, including yourself, whom I want. They have all been framed by the same men who sent you here.”

McGinnis looked utterly dumfounded. “Twenty! You mean there’s that many here—in this penitentiary alone? That many of their victims?”

“Twenty, exactly,” said the other.

McGinnis made croaking, stunned sounds in his effort to speak.

“I didn’t dream the system was that—large!” he gulped finally.

“The system, as you call it, has become a billion-dollar industry,” said the hunchback. “It has become a Juggernaut.”

There was a gritting, metallic intensity about the strange figure’s remark. A radio actor would have called it a registration of utter hate.

McGinnis peered closely at his strange benefactor.

“Good love!” he muttered, “You’re just about the homeliest hag I ever saw!”

The humpbacked creature seemed to mind the insult not at all. Low, businesslike orders were issued. Cell after cell was opened. Prisoners were questioned as to their identity and then propositioned.

The human male is by nature a suspicious cuss. This was proved by the fact that not a single cell inmate agreed instantly to being freed. Two even flatly refused after hearing it explained that they were to be freed to fight a common enemy.

The humpback calmly blackjacked the two who refused to leave their cells.

“Carry them along,” the creature ordered, harshly. “If they do not want to go willingly, we will draft them.”

Most of the freed prisoners had by this time gotten a fair look at their benefactor. Several had shivered. A movie director would have made up such a monster as this humpback to haunt a spooky castle.

“Who in blazes are you?” asked one of the rescued cell inmates.

“I am your brain for the next year,” said the camel-backed person.

Which was an answer that was something to think about.

A bit later, another of the criminals, after staring for some length at the humpback, said, “I don’t think you’re a woman after all.”

The camel-backed one did not reply.

“Sure, it’s a woman,” said McGinnis. But he sounded unsure.

The last crook on the list was taken from his cell.

The twenty convicts and their remarkable rescuer filed out of the cell block. The convicts saw the limp guards, and they began to get scared.

“We’re in a hell of a jam!” one groaned. “We can’t get outside the walls!”

Another echoed, “Well get solitary for this!”

The humpback spoke with brittle calmness.

“Shut up! Walk to that freight car and get inside!”

The convicts stared incredulously.

“Listen,” one growled, “there ain’t no way of that car gettin’ outside the walls. They even got it fixed so a railroad engine can’t be used to smash down the walls.”

The humpback produced a big revolver. “Get in that freight car!”

The twenty men got in the freight car. They did it very carefully, making no appreciable noise, and when they were inside, the weird figure with the distorted torso produced a flashlight which exuded a tiny beam. This light roved over the box car floor, illuminating a number of objects in succession.

Jules R. McGinnis goggled at what the light was revealing. He was speechless.

“G-g-good love!” he choked. “Why these—what—what—why are the men here?”

The camel-backed individual replied in a violent, fanatical whisper, “They are to be placed in the cells which you men just left.”

Stunned silence held the freed convicts.

Jules R. McGinnis started a laugh; something almost mad was in his mirth. He did not get far with the laugh, because the humpback grabbed his mouth with rough fierceness. “You fool! Be quiet!”

McGinnis had recovered his composure when he was released.

“I don’t understand this,” he said, hoarsely.

“You don’t need to,” rasped the humpback. “This is the first move in a strange campaign.”

Chapter 2

THE AMAZED MEN

IT must have been half an hour later when John Winer, the penitentiary guard in the wall tower nearest the box car, heard a small sound. He peered over the tower side. At first, he saw nothing: then, near the box car, he perceived a skulking figure.

The tower was equipped with a searchlight. John Winer turned this on, pointed the thin beam, and saw a weird figure, a humpback. The humpback drew a gun; the gun banged, and the searchlight went out. It was a good shot.

John Winer knew something was wrong. He seized his rifle, leaned out and began shooting. He could discern the camel-backed figure in the gloom of the prison yard.

John Winer did not realize he himself was outlined against the moon, which was behind the tower, and furnished an excellent target. A bullet fired by the hunchback, hit John Winer almost exactly in the middle of the chest. Then it was too late to think about being a target.

Guards came running and found Winer a broken, dying heap. He was lying in a grotesque position, so they hastily straightened him out.

Words came from Winer's lips. As a dying man sometimes will, he mouthed fragments of speech about something which had lately come to his attention.

"Doc Savage!" mumbled John Winer. "Man of bronze—trouble——"

"Eh?" exploded one of the guards. "Who shot you, Winey?"

John Winer never heard that question. His incoherent mumblings simply continued.

"Doc Savage," mumbled John Winer. "Fights men—outside the law _____"

The guard straightened and growled. "Doc Savage shot you? Who the hell is Doc Savage?"

"If I was that dumb, I'd at least keep quiet," said another guard. "Don't you ever read the newspapers?"

"No. Reading hurts my eyes."

John Winer at this point gave one final great, violent kick and let out a breath that sprayed crimson over the surrounding shoes and trouser legs. When the guards looked again, he was dead.

“Poor Winey,” they said.

“It was a guy named Doc Savage who shot him,” growled the man who never read the newspapers. “Didn’t you hear him say so?”

“You’d better read the papers some, even if it does hurt your eyes,” he was advised. “You’ll learn this Doc Savage is not the kind of a lad who goes around shooting pen guards.”

A deputy warden came up, bawling orders. He wanted the prison looked over to see if anything else was wrong.

They looked the place over and they found plenty wrong.

They found twenty strange men in their penitentiary. Twenty men who had never been convicted by any court of law, or committed to the pen through regular channels. Twenty men whom nobody had seen in the pen before.

The twenty men were asleep. They could not be awakened immediately, so it was judged they had been drugged. The prison doctor went to work administering stimulants in an effort to awaken the strangers.

The senseless guards in the cell house were found. It was also realized that twenty genuine prisoners were missing from the cells in which the strangers had been found.

The siren, a big one which was used only to announce an escape, began shrilling. Squads of searching guards left the prison in cars.

The senseless guards awakened and muttered about a humpbacked witch of a creature who had invaded the place and made them senseless. There was expressed doubt as to whether the camel-backed one was male or female.

About this time, something else that was strange happened. Guards gathered about the freight car and listened. They were hearing a weird noise. It came steadily from the box car.

The noise was like nothing so much as the tiny tinkling of a child’s toy music box.

The guards did not pay particular attention to the tinkling notes at first. At least, the true importance of the sounds as relating to something

mysterious having to do with the freight car did not immediately impress them. But they were curious after a bit.

“There’s a pipe organ in the car,” a man volunteered. “Gift of some bird named Sigmund Hoppel.”

“That noise must be the pipe organ,” hazarded another.

“Nut! Pipe organs don’t play themselves, do they?”

“Well, they have player pianos, don’t they? Maybe this is a player pipe organ.”

In the meantime, the small, fantastic tinkling notes were continuing to come from the freight car. A man went over and tried the freight car door. It did not give. The man failed to notice that the seal was broken and that the car door seemed to be fastened from the inside.

“Must be a mouse running over the pipe organ strings or something,” some one decided.

This got two or three laughs.

“Well, what’s wrong?” demanded the fellow with the mouse theory.

“A pipe organ don’t have strings.”

Bloodhounds were kept in the prison for the purpose of chasing escaped convicts. This old-fashioned method of pursuit had managed to hold its own in the age of radios and high-speed automobiles.

The bloodhounds now set up a baying. They came straight to the freight car and stopped. Immediately, machine guns were trained on the freight car. A squad brought up tear gas. The pups were led in a circle around the freight car and did not bay another trail. It was evident that the convicts had gone into the freight car and had not come out.

A deputy warden rapped on the car and called for those inside to come out. He got no response. An ax was brought. The deputy warden took the ax and his courage in his two hands and chopped the door in. He made an opening large enough to admit himself. He stepped inside.

Instantly, he screamed as if he had lost his legs. As, indeed, it developed, he almost had. For he fell back out of the car and shriek after shriek poured from his lips. All the while, he pointed frantically at his legs.

His shoes were gone. So was a great deal of the flesh off his feet. The awful, denuded bones of his feet clung to the stumps, and as he kicked, these flew off.

Prison guards are hard-boiled babies, but two of the onlookers fainted at the horrible sight.

Quite naturally, there was a bit of a dither during the next few minutes. The prison officials, who thought the escaped convicts were in the car and had managed in some way to take all the flesh off the deputy warden's feet, drew back a safe distance and gave some orders that resulted in numerous drums of machine gun bullets being poured into the freight car. After the shooting, tear gas bombs were hurled into the car.

Guards charged.

But the charge was unfortunate and did not show what could truthfully be called good sense.

First guard through the freight car door emitted a screech which shamed his predecessor, and fell down in some manner. His shrieks increased in terrible violence. In a moment, he came flying out of the car.

Some goopy substance on his shoes had eaten, not only the major part of the shoes, but some of his feet. Moreover, the same stuff was consuming his hands.

The prison guards now used judgment. They brought lights and mirrors. Holding the mirrors and lights in the car, they managed to look the place over without endangering any one else.

What they found was quite a shock to everybody.

There were no prisoners in the freight car.

There was no humpbacked mystery person, man or woman.

There was no pipe organ.

The car, much to the surprise of prison authorities, and later, to the puzzled astonishment of railway officials, was floored with ordinary glass. The glass was thick. It had been covered with the board flooring of the car, every one decided, but the flooring was now gone.

The strange music box tinkling sound had stopped. It had ceased, as a matter of fact, sometime during the machine gun volley which had been poured into the car.

The car's floor was covered to a depth of something like two inches with a goopy mess. This goo was potent. When they thrust a stick into it, the stick was consumed in a remarkably short space of time.

The prison guards stood around muttering profane, puzzled comments, and the guard and deputy warden who had been burned whimpered and

moaned as the prison doctors worked on them.

The warden arrived. His coming focused attention upon the twenty strangers who had been found in the cells vacated by the missing convicts. These individuals were beginning to revive.

Newspapermen were by now on the scene, and they listened in on the interview with the twenty strangers. As a result, the newspapermen had spasms.

Not one of the twenty men could explain how he happened to get in a penitentiary cell in place of a missing convict. They were absolutely insistent upon this point. They just didn't know.

Their stories all agreed upon one point. They had gone to sleep rather queerly after drinking various kinds of beverages with their dinners. Consensus of opinion was that they had been drugged.

The men were naturally asked to identify themselves. They did this without trouble. The result surprised every one.

Each one of the twenty men was quite a big shot in one of two lines.

Some of them were well-known financiers in charge of holding companies. These companies bought stocks and held them for a rise. Besides stocks, they bought houses, office buildings, steamship lines, blocks of farms, or anything else that could be purchased cheaply and might be sold for more money later on. All of these so-called holding companies were very prosperous, among the most prosperous of their kind.

The rest of the twenty men were directors in mutual insurance companies. The companies of which they were directors were large, but not especially spectacular. The companies of which these men were directors were known as conservative. They had never shown any great profits.

A lot of heads were scratched when the twenty men made known their identity. Just what connection twenty men who were prominent in insurance and holding companies could have with twenty convicts was a mystery.

Or was it? A puzzling angle came to light very shortly, when the warden had a brilliant idea and summoned Doc Savage.

"You say John Winer, the slain guard, mumbled that Doc Savage shot him?" the warden asked.

Confirming nods from the rest of the guards and the relating of Winer's last words seemed to convince him.

“Send for Doc Savage,” directed the warden. “He may be able to help us. It is hardly reasonable that he could have had a hand in this murder.”

The warden knew Doc Savage by reputation.

Chapter 3

THE GIRL JOURNALIST

DOC SAVAGE, when the warden's phaëton brought him through the prison gates, created quite a sensation. It was now daylight, and a bright, sunny day well lighting the bronze man's arrival.

The prisoners had been kept in their cells, and from the windows of these, a great many could look out and witness the coming of Doc Savage. More than one of these observers had a cold chill and hastily ducked back. For Doc Savage was the nemesis of evildoers.

The sensation of the bronze man's arrival did not extend alone to the prisoners. The guards craned their necks and their mouths came open and their eyes went wide. They had been wondering what to expect.

When they saw Doc Savage, they were not let down.

The bronze man was a physical giant. After he had stepped out of the car and a bit away from it, so that he was not close to anything to which his size might well be compared, he did not seem so large. This was due to the remarkable symmetry of his physical development.

There were other striking things about Doc Savage. His skin was of an unusual bronze hue, as if burned by countless tropical suns; his hair was straight, fitting like a metal skullcap, and of a bronze hue only slightly darker than his skin.

Most striking of all, perhaps, were his eyes. Weird they were, like pools of flake gold always stirred by tiny gales. They seemed to possess a hypnotic power, an ability to compel.

Doc Savage was taken to the warden's office. There were a number of newspapermen and one newspaperwoman present. The newspapermen had the usual baggy suits and worldly looks, but the newspaperwoman was different. She did not look as if she belonged. She kept in the background and did not seem to care about having her face show.

Doc Savage was presented to the warden. The warden was an honest tough guy who did not believe in beating around bushes and who would have stood up for his rights against the president as quickly as he would have stood up against one of his guards.

“A dying prison guard named John Winer stated that you shot him this morning,” said the warden bluntly. “The shooting occurred at a quarter of five this morning. Have you an alibi?”

“No,” Doc Savage said.

The bronze man had a voice in keeping with his appearance. It was not loud, nor low either, but it had a timbre, a quality of vibrant power and pleasantly musical undertone which marked it instantly. It was a voice which obviously had received years of intensive training.

“Then you’re under arrest,” said the prison warden.

The State prison official who had gone to get Doc Savage shoved himself forward.

“I’m afraid arrest is not the wise thing,” he said. “I found this Doc Savage giving a lecture on something or other——”

“On electrokinetics,” Doc Savage supplied.

“On electro—electro—well, he was lecturing,” said the official. “He was lecturing to a fellowship of big-shot scientists and they had been in session, and this bronze man had been talking to them, all night.”

“Are you sure?” asked the warden.

“Sure I’m sure. And the scientists raised hell when I broke up the lecture!”

“It was an important lecture and demonstration,” said Doc Savage dryly. “We hoped it would lead to the solution of the problem of transmission of energy by Hertzian waves.”

“It looks,” said the warden, “as if you have an alibi.”

The woman newspaper representative eased about among the onlooking members of the press. She held in one hand some small object, a mechanical device of some description, which she was attempting to keep concealed.

Doc Savage waited, his metallic, extremely good-looking features expressionless. Only his flake gold eyes belied his easy attitude; they seemed to be in motion steadily, never to rest in their scrutiny of his surroundings.

The warden growled, “Why didn’t you tell me you had an alibi?”

“An alibi is technically a plea of having been elsewhere when an alleged act was committed,” the giant bronze man explained. “The word somehow has grown to have a stigma attached and does not appeal.”

The warden scratched his head. “You know anything about this?”

“Nothing.”

“And there’s no funny business about stigmas and words about that?”

“None.”

The young woman journalist was still shifting her position. She seemed to be attempting to work into a position where she could lift the object in her hands and point it at Doc Savage.

The warden turned as a messenger entered the office. The messenger bore an envelope which he handed to the warden, and which the latter in turn opened, and read. The warden looked up and eyed Doc Savage.

“From the governor,” he said. “He suggests that while you are here you might be kind enough to look the situation over and afford us some assistance.”

“Of course,” Doc Savage said.

The warden abruptly thought of something concerning this unusual man of bronze.

“Will you want us to send for any of your assistants?” he asked.

“That will not be necessary,” Doc Savage assured him.

The press representatives were permitted to accompany Doc Savage and the warden, together with some prison guards, as they moved on a tour of inspection. The fidgety young woman journalist went with them. She kept hidden the thing in her hands as best she could.

When out in the brilliant sunlight, it became evident that the young woman was rather a looker. She wore a coarse frock with practically no lines, but it failed what it was probably intended to do, conceal a lithe young form that did not leave much to be desired.

She wore a spinsterish hat which allowed only a tendril or two of hair to show, gossamery hair that was almost the color of polished silver. Spectacles did not do justice to a pair of entrancing eyes, and lack of rouge and lipstick did not detract a great deal from the ravishing effect of the rest of her features.

Doc Savage’s examination of the scene inside the prison was rapid enough to surprise almost every one. He seemed to give only a glance here and there.

“The guy ain’t half trying to solve the mystery,” a reporter in the background grunted.

“Don’t fool yourself!” jeered a companion journalist. “That guy is a wizard!”

At this point, Doc Savage said distinctly, so that every one near by heard, “It might be best to interview the twenty men who took the place of the convicts in the cells.”

“The twenty men are being detained in my home,” said the warden. “I will take you to them.”

Doc Savage, the warden and the newspapermen—and the newspaperwoman—made quite a string walking across the prison yard.

Doc asked, “Have you a list of the twenty missing convicts?”

“Yes,” said the warden.

“We need their pictures, finger prints, and a record of their crimes which caused them to be sent here.”

“We’ll stop in my office for the dope,” the warden replied.

A moment later, Doc Savage’s strange flake gold eyes were sifting the data. He had done this only a moment when a small, strange sound became audible—a trilling, tiny and fantastic, tracing up and down the musical scale without definite tune, vaguely remindful of a soft wind going through a denuded tropical forest.

This trilling was a small, peculiar thing which Doc Savage did in moments of intense mental activity. Usually it meant surprise; sometimes it marked advent of a proof which he had sought, and often it precoursed some definite plan of action. The bronze man did this unconsciously.

“Sounds like winter,” remarked a reporter, not understanding that the exotic sound was not the wind.

Doc drew the attention of the warden to the records he had been inspecting.

“Did this rather peculiar fact come to your attention?” he asked.

The warden came over and scrutinized the documents. He started shaking his head, then changed the movement to a sharp nod.

“I see it!” he exploded. “Each of the missing convicts claimed from the time of his conviction that he had been framed!”

“Partly that,” Doc admitted. “But there is also another angle——”

A prison attendant came rushing up.

“They’re gone!” he howled. “The twenty men who were in the cells are gone!”

“Of course they are!” snapped the warden. “But we’ll get those convicts!”

“You don’t understand!” gulped the attendant. “The twenty men who took the convicts’ place in their cells have vanished!”

Chapter 4

PICTURE SHOT

THE warden blinked stupidly, spat on the concrete underfoot, and smeared the wet spot with his foot.

“If it ain’t one thing——” He charged away. “Hell! They couldn’t!”

They had. The twenty men had been confined in the warden’s house, which was against one wall of the prison, not in the true confines of the institution, but inside the outer wall. No vicious prisoners were ever kept in this outer compound.

The twenty men had been convicted of no crime. It was, of course, strange that they had been found where they had. Nor had their story been any too believable.

The men had been confined to the warden’s house under the eyes of two guards.

Both guards had been found senseless. Bars were ripped out of a window in the rear wall. Through this opening, the prisoners had departed.

Word went out to hunt for the twenty men.

They were not found. They had disappeared as completely as if gobbled up by the earth.

Reviving, the two guards explained vaguely that some one had spoken to one of the twenty men from outside the prison, but that the words had not been overheard. Nor had the speaker been seen closely.

One guard, however, believed that the twenty men had been given instructions, as a result of which they had unexpectedly set upon the guards, knocked them senseless, and made good their escape.

Doc Savage was more of an onlooker than a partaker in the excitement which followed the discovery of the escape. He requested and received a list of the names of the twenty men. He got also a set of photographs and finger prints of each man. Each of the twenty had been photographed, as a matter of course, when discovered occupying cells which had lately been tenanted by others.

Doc, after a time, resumed his inspection of the box car near where guard John Winer had been shot.

The young woman reporter had been keeping in the background, making herself inconspicuous. But she chanced to attract the attention of two newspapermen.

“Who is that dame?” one asked.

“Search me. But it strikes me we should know her, don’t you think?”

“Let’s get a chance and strike up a conversation.”

“An idea.”

The two journalists began to maneuver for a position close to the young woman where they could make a remark and thus break into a conversation with her.

The other newspapermen gave a great deal of attention to what Doc Savage was doing as he went through the cell house. The bronze man’s actions were puzzling to most of the scribes.

Doc had gotten a metal case from the car which had brought him. This held a number of devices, one of which was what looked as if it might be an ordinary hand spray.

Doc sprayed a film of chemical from this at various points over the cell house floor and on the locks and cell bars. The stuff seemed to harden instantly. He poured other chemicals onto the film, and these hardened, and he peeled the whole thing off. He put the sheets in the metal case.

“What’s he doing?” a reporter wanted to know.

“The chemical is picking up microscopic evidence from the floor,” explained a reporter who was familiar with such procedure. “He will analyze the stuff later and find out a lot.”

Doc sprayed a different type of chemical on the lever which controlled the locks of the cell blocks. It caused the oily deposit left by human fingers to change color, and shortly he had brought out a set of varied finger prints. He examined these, and gave close attention, through a powerful magnifier, to certain smudges.

“The rescuer wore gloves,” he decided.

At the guard tower, he found the magazine with the pages open to the story concerning himself. He drew the correct conclusions from this.

“The guard had been reading the story,” he said. “In his dying muttering, he repeated the name suggested by the story.”

The warden looked as if he had some doubts on that point.

The woman reporter was crowding into an obscure corner and attempting to use the object she was carrying. The two young men journalists were watching her curiously and keeping close to her, hoping to find something to make a remark about and break the conversational ice.

Doc Savage went to the freight car. He was careful not to touch the liquid on the glass bottom of the car, but thrust his head into the gondola and roved the beam of a flashlight. The flashlight was one of his own development, and operated from a spring generator instead of a battery, giving a narrow, intensely white beam of light which could be fanned out widely when desired.

Having examined the interior of the freight car, Doc went over the outside.

“It is a regulation freight car,” he said. “But it has been rebuilt inside to the extent that the glass covering was put on the floor.”

“But why the glass covering?” the warden demanded.

“The contents of the car and the news of what had happened inside was evidently intended to remain a secret for a longer time than it did,” the bronze man replied.

The warden hesitated, as if not wanting to seem too dumb; then curiosity got the best of him.

“I still don’t see why the glass bottom!” he said, sharply.

“To hold the acid,” Doc explained.

“Acid?”

“A mixture of acids rather,” the bronze man elaborated. “The blending was done cleverly, and shows an enormous knowledge of chemistry. The mixture secured will destroy most metals and other solids in a surprisingly short space of time.”

The warden scratched his head. He started violently.

“How terrible!” he gasped.

“What was, warden?” barked a newspaperman.

“We know the convicts went into that freight car!” gasped the warden. “We know that the car held an acid which would literally consume them alive!”

“The car was supposed to hold a pipe organ,” a man pointed out.

“Yes, but——”

“Is anybody sure it did hold a pipe organ?”

“It held big boxes which were presumed to contain the pipe organ,” the warden explained. “It was searched, of course, when the car was switched into the prison yards yesterday.”

“Who sent the pipe organ, if any?”

“A man named Sigmund Hoppel.”

“Who’s he?”

“We’re going to find out.”

The warden shook his head forlornly and added the conclusion which he had reached.

“Some one took those convicts to their death,” he said. “Some one came into the prison, freed the crooks, and led them into that car filled with acid, where they were eaten alive.”

“Looks as if somebody would’ve heard ’em yell,” said a guard who had heard one of the burned guards yell.

Every one concentrated over the mystery, the newspapermen included, with one exception.

The exception was the young woman who showed traces of such remarkable beauty. She withdrew to the outskirts of the group and maneuvered herself until she had a clear view of Doc Savage. She lifted to her eyes the thing which she had been carrying in her hands.

It was a miniature camera.

She focused the tiny camera on Doc Savage, getting the crossed sighting wires squarely on the bronze man’s chest so that she would get a perfect full-length picture. She pressed the shutter trip.

The *bang!* of a gunshot came from the tiny camera.

Chapter 5

THE FIFTY-DOLLAR PHOTOGRAPH

A BULLET hole, round and neat, appeared in Doc Savage's plain dark suit, exactly over the heart.

The bullet was evidently a large one. The recoil of its discharge knocked the miniature camera out of the girl's hands, skinning her face slightly. The camera fell on the ground in such a position that the lense was upturned, showing that the glass had been blown out to reveal the round snout of the firing barrel concealed inside, and from which the bullet had come.

The girl squinted painfully and saw the bullet hole over Doc Savage's heart. Doc Savage was just beginning to fall backward. An indescribable expression came on the girl's face.

The girl whirled and ran. But she used her head. A guard stood near by, holding a submachine gun.

Loaded submachine guns are commonly kept only in barred towers and other points where convict inmates cannot get to them. When the guns are taken from one point to another, they are first unloaded, and the gun taken to the new point, then the ammunition later and separately, so that both cannot be seized at the same time.

But the convicts were still in their cells, which accounted for this submachine gun being in the yard. And the guard who held it was a slow thinker, which enabled the girl to grab his weapon.

She wrenched. She was strong. She got the gun, reversed it hurriedly and menaced every one.

"Stand still!" she shrieked.

They stood still. The girl backed swiftly to the automobile in which Doc Savage had been brought to the penitentiary. She got in, turned the ignition switch, stamped the starter, shifted from first to second to high, then leaped out, at the same time yanking the gas control wide open. The car was heavy. It hit the barred gate at about forty miles an hour.

The gate did not collapse, because it was of heavy steel bars and had cost the State a nice sum. But it did give sufficiently to make an opening that would pass the young woman. She squeezed through, pointed her submachine gun in the air and pulled the trigger.

The gun discharged with a hideous clamor. Every guard in every tower within sight hastily ducked his head out of sight.

The young woman threw down the gun. It was heavy enough to impede her flight. She put her head down and ran at a surprising clip.

At the first corner, she looked back. Pursuit had not yet organized itself, except for a few guards who were jumping about in the manner of chickens deprived of their heads. The girl continued to run.

She rounded various corners, and seemed to have no definite idea of where she was going, except that she wanted to get on a street where there was no traffic. She succeeded in doing this, and ran swiftly for some minutes. She began to breathe hard and show signs of being winded.

A car appeared on the deserted street and approached slowly. The girl turned around and eyed it. The driver was hunched behind the wheel and seemed to be paying no particular attention to anything.

The girl yanked her spinsterish hat over her eyes, so that it did its utmost to conceal her face. She waited until the car rolled close, at the same time removing a scarf from around her neck and draping it over her right hand.

When the car was abreast, she suddenly leaped onto the slow-moving machine, yanked open the door, and plunked herself upon the seat. She shoved out her hand hidden by the scarf.

“Drive on!” she gritted. “And if you want to absorb some lead, just make a move to call help!”

The driver did not react as he was supposed to do. He reached out and plucked the scarf away, revealing the girl’s empty hand. When the girl gasped and tried to leap out of the machine, he seized her and held her.

The young woman now got a glimpse of the Tartar she had caught.

“Doc Savage!” she squeaked.

Doc Savage drove on, saying nothing. The young woman made an effort to get out again, but the clamp of bronze fingers held her in the car. She discovered that the big man of metal had remarkable strength. His fingers upon her skin felt not unlike warm steel.

The young woman noted that the ignition wiring of the car was hanging down under the dashboard, as if it had been wrenched loose, then patched. She surmised that the car had been locked and that Doc Savage had appropriated it for his own use.

She noted also the round bullet hole over the bronze man's heart. She blinked at this almost unbelievably. Then she reached over abruptly and shoved an extended forefinger into the hole.

"Oh!" she said. "Bulletproof vest!"

Doc Savage said nothing.

They rode in silence. The bronze man drove expertly, and was soon in the country, taking unfrequented roads, speeding up when they encountered other cars, but never fast enough to attract undue attention. His metallic features were expressionless, seemingly in repose, except for the life in his flake gold eyes.

"Cat got your tongue?" the girl asked.

Doc did not reply.

"How did you trail me?" the girl asked.

It seemed at first that Doc was still not going to reply.

"Through the hole in the gate that you made," he said. "The rest was a matter of keeping you in sight and not being seen."

The girl took off her hat. Her silver hair—it was not quite platinum—was quite abundant.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"To meet one of my aides who will take charge of you," Doc Savage said.

"Monk" was human, although some people sometimes expressed doubts on that point. He weighed in excess of two hundred and fifty pounds. The hair on his head was about an inch long and as coarse as rusty shingle nails, and the hair on the rest of him was almost the same.

His full name was Andrew Blodgett Mayfair, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair occasionally. Ordinarily he had the voice of a small child; in a fight, he roared and squawled and whooped and bellowed like the bull ape he resembled; and he was one of the world's leading industrial chemists.

Monk was a millionaire with a penthouse laboratory near Wall Street, and he had a pet named Habeas Corpus, an Arabian hog with elephantine ears, a set of dog's legs and a snout built for inquiry. Habeas, the pet pig, had a mud wallow in the penthouse filled with scented mud, artificially sterilized each day.

Monk was also one of Doc Savage's five unusual assistants. Monk's great love was excitement, which was one of the reasons why he had

associated himself with Doc—excitement and the bronze man were rather steady companions.

Monk stood beside a sedan parked on a country road. The sedan was innocent-looking, giving no hint that its body was made of armor plate, its glass bulletproof. Monk was absently picking Habeas, the pig, up by the ears, swinging him, and dropping him. Habeas liked this.

Next to excitement, Monk's hobby was pretty women. Despite his gorilla looks, he usually managed to do quite well for himself in this direction.

The homely chemist executed his best bow when the blond young woman got out of Doc Savage's car.

"What tree did you come out of?" the girl asked unkindly.

Monk gave her a big grin.

"Don't judge me by first impressions," he told her. Then, of Doc: "Who is she?"

"A young lady who tried to kill me," the bronze man explained.

"Didn't!" snapped the girl.

Doc Savage absently rested a finger on the bullet hole over his heart.

"That was a mistake!" the girl declared.

Monk snorted. "May I take time out for a laugh!"

The girl began to look indignant. "I guess I'm in this over my ears. But when that bullet was discharged, no one was more surprised than myself!"

"Want to tell us all about it?" Doc asked.

She nodded.

"I am a professional photographer and detective," she said. "This morning, a man called——"

"Isn't a photographer and a detective an unusual combination of professions?" Monk interposed.

"Well, I'm combining them!" snapped the girl. "I always did think photography and private detective work should go together. After all, you know, there is nothing like a few good photographs to produce as evidence in court."

"Continue with the story," Doc requested.

"This morning, a man called me for an appointment, and later appeared himself," she went on. "He said he wanted a picture of Doc Savage. He said

Doc did not like him, and would have him thrown out of the prison if he saw him. He offered me fifty dollars to get the picture with his own camera. He insisted on his own camera, and since it was one of the most expensive miniatures, I did not object.”

“You did not know it was a trick camera?” Monk jeered. “And you a professional photographer!”

“Believe it or not, the truth!” snapped the girl.

“The work on the camera was excellently done,” Doc Savage said. “It would have fooled even an expert.”

Monk eyed the bronze man. “You just telephoned me to meet you here, Doc. I ain’t got no idea of what this is all about.”

Doc Savage did not answer for so long that it seemed at first that he was not going to reply.

“The thing is still very much a mystery,” he said at last.

“You think some one simply murdered those twenty convicts?” Monk questioned.

Doc did not answer that.

The girl had been looking at Habeas Corpus, the pet pig.

“Goodness!” she exclaimed.

“Eh?” Monk grunted.

The girl pointed at Habeas. “I can’t make up my mind what it is!”

Monk gave her his oversize grin and said, “We’re used to such cracks, Habeas and me.”

“Did you collect the fifty dollars?” Doc asked.

“Half of it. I was to get the other half later.”

Monk brightened. “Now, that’s something! How were you to get the other half?”

“At Igor De Faust’s hotel,” replied the girl.

“Who’s he?”

“The man who hired me,” she said, pertly. “At least, that’s what he said his name was.”

“You have his address?”

“The Beaux Artiste Hotel.”

Doc Savage said, “Come on.”

They got in the sedan which Monk had driven to the spot. The sedan was one of a fleet of cars, all of special construction, maintained by Doc Savage.

Doc drove.

Monk looked back and said casually, "I see a cloud of dust coming. Must be a car."

Doc got the sedan in motion. The engine made almost no noise and the heavy body and excellent springing made the car ride easily, lightly.

"Care to give us your name?" Doc Savage asked the young woman.

Her answer came without hesitation.

"Syrmanthe Yell," she said.

Monk, who was watching the road behind, laughed loudly over his shoulder.

"And you made cracks about my looks!" he snorted.

The car took a corner and swung in the direction of the city.

"If it's all the same, I'd prefer being called Sandy," said the young woman. "Sandy Yell."

"You're Syrmanthe to me," Monk told her.

The homely chemist continued to watch the rear. His interest sharpened. He jerked a hairy thumb.

"We're bein' followed, Doc!" he barked.

Doc Savage glanced back. A coupe, lean and dark, was like a fleet hound upon their trail. The bronze man increased their speed. The coupe stuck.

The sedan heaved, rocked, in spite of its low slinging and excellent balance. Topping small rises in the road, it seemed to take entirely to the air for yards at a time. Monk craned his neck and saw where the speedometer needle stood.

"Ain't no stock car can go this fast!" he squeaked.

Doc Savage nodded. "That coupe is following us. We will stop and see what he wants."

Topping a ridge, the bronze man applied the brakes. Rubber wailed and the car swayed more madly while the passengers braced themselves against the deceleration. The machine stopped.

Monk dipped into an armpit holster and brought out a weapon resembling an oversize automatic pistol. It was a supermachine pistol perfected by Doc Savage, a weapon of remarkable compactness, firing bullets at a fabulous rate. It was charged with the type of slugs commonly

known as “mercy bullets,” missiles inducing unconsciousness, through a charge of drug contained in a harmless shell.

The coupe came over the hill, brakes went on, and it skidded. Almost broadside, the car came to a stop.

The man who got out had nice shoulders and not much waist. His face was long, his mouth the large one of an orator, and his forehead was high.

His clothing, however, was really something which made him hard to forget. His morning attire was impeccable, both for correctness and neatness. The creases in his trousers looked sharp enough to split paper.

He carried a black cane which managed to achieve the appearance of both plainness and richness.

“Ham!” Monk roared. “You overdressed shyster! You menace to the uprightness of the American bar! What’s the idea of chasing us?”

“Monk, you accident of nature!” “Ham” said, grimly. “What’s the idea of running away from me?”

The two glared at each other as if about to do mutual murder.

Monk and Ham were good, if strange, friends. Ham was Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, one of the most astute lawyers Harvard had ever turned out. He was also one of Doc Savage’s five aides.

Doc asked, “Ham, how did you happen to come here?”

Monk answered that. “I left him a note, Doc, telling him you wanted me to meet you out in the country, and that something seemed to be up.”

“Is something up?” Ham demanded.

“I don’t know,” Monk said. “We’re going to a place called the Beaux Artiste Hotel to interview a guy named Igor De Faust, to find out why he wanted Doc killed.”

Chapter 6

OIL IN MEXICO

THE BEAUX ARTISTE looked from a distance as if it might be a dump. Closer inspection showed the unexpected cleanliness of the front and the neatness of the doorman's uniform. The neighborhood was nothing to brag about.

Monk and Ham, when they came in sight of the hotel, were quarreling. They always quarreled. Ham had parked his coupe and was riding in the sedan.

"I'm going to whittle you down and see if there is any trace of a man under that hair and gristle!" Ham declared.

"Always picking on me!" Monk squeaked indignantly.

"I'm not picking on you!" Ham said. "I'm going to simply assassinate you for teaching my Chemistry to chew tobacco and expectorate in my pockets! I've had to sew my pockets shut!"

Chemistry, object of the verbal fray, hunkered on the floorboards of the sedan and kept one eye on Habeas, the pig. Chemistry was probably a monkey, although there might have been room for argument. Except for size, Chemistry was almost a double for the homely chemist, Monk. Chemistry was Ham's pet, acquired not many months before.

The blond girl, "Sandy" Yell, addressed Doc Savage, who was driving, nervously.

"That squabbling is making me jittery," she said.

"You will get used to it," the bronze man suggested.

"But they may hurt each other!"

"They have not yet," Doc said, "and it has gone on for years."

He stopped the sedan in front of the Beaux Artiste and they went in. A clean-looking clerk told them Igor De Faust had a suite on the ninth floor.

"But I'm afraid you won't find Mr. De Faust in," the clerk added.

"No?"

"He had me reserve a plane ticket on the Mexico City plane," explained the clerk. "A short time ago, he left with his baggage, picking up the plane ticket."

“We will have a look at his suite,” Doc Savage said.

“Well, I hardly know what to——”

Doc showed him a commission as inspector on the police force. It was an honorary commission which Doc had carried for a long time, but was none the less effective for being honorary. It persuaded the clerk that it was all right for them to go up.

Igor De Faust seemed to be a gentleman of simple tastes. There was some clothing in the closets, and the suits were reserved, the ties not too loud.

Doc Savage got the girl aside and asked, “What did De Faust look like?”

“He had yellow hair,” said the girl.

Later, Doc asked the hotel clerk what De Faust had looked like.

“He had yellow hair,” declared the clerk.

De Faust was also a slender man of average height, judging from his suits.

Doc Savage, down on all fours, hooked a folded square of paper out from under a divan.

It was a cablegram. It had been sent from Mexico City the day before, was addressed to Igor De Faust, Beaux Artiste Hotel, and read:

OIL PROPERTY PROVEN AND WORTH MILLIONS STOP MAN HERE AFTER
IT AND INTENDS APPROACH DOC SAVAGE FOR FINANCIAL AID STOP
IMPERATIVE GET DOC SAVAGE OUT OF WAY STOP THEN YOU COME AT
ONCE TO MEXICO CITY.

The fact that the cablegram was unsigned was not unusual, since such missives are often sent without a signature.

“I think,” said Sandy Yell, “that explains it.”

“Sure,” Monk agreed. “He played you for a sucker in his scheme to get rid of Doc.”

In the bedroom they found a small assortment of tools such as might have been used to put a gun barrel, sawed-off, inside a miniature camera. The tools were neatly oiled and wrapped in protective paper.

“This Igor De Faust must have headed for Mexico City,” said the dapper Ham.

They went downstairs when it was evident that the suite held no more information.

Doc asked the clerk, "What air line did De Faust order the ticket upon?"
"Ammex Airways."

Doc Savage went to the telephone and called the Ammex airport.

"Police business," he said. "Can you hold the Mexico City plane? Or has it taken off?"

"There is a Mexico City bus warming up on the runways now," the airport attendant replied. "And we can hold it if this business is very official."

"It is very, very official," Doc said.

They made fast time through the city traffic out to the Ammex Airport, which was on Long Island, south shore. Doc's sedan was fitted with a siren, big and loud, and that helped get them through.

That the bronze man had an excellent knowledge of the city was evident from the short-cuts which he selected. An attendant ran to meet them at the airport. The minute he spoke, it was evident he was the one who had been addressed over the telephone.

"Who do you want off the Mexico City ship?" he asked.

"A man named Igor De Faust," Doc Savage replied.

The attendant swore. "Why didn't you say so over the telephone?"

"Would that have helped, besides letting the De Faust man know, perhaps, that he was wanted?"

"It would have helped," said the attendant. "For instance, I could have told you that this was the second Mexico City plane. De Faust was a passenger on the first one. It left an hour ago."

Blond Sandy Yell teetered on her heels and remarked, "A nice wild goose chase for nothing."

The dapper Ham scowled at her.

"Doc," he groaned, "we can get the route of that plane and radio the pilot to hold this De Faust at the first landing place."

"We can radio the pilot of the plane and have De Faust himself put under arrest on board," Monk pointed out.

"Don't be silly!" Ham snapped. "We wouldn't want to start trouble on a passenger plane!"

Sandy Yell said, cheerfully, "While you gentlemen argue, I am going to get a bite of breakfast, of which I have had none."

She turned and walked to the airport lunch room. This was a square building, situated on a plot of ground depressingly bare of vegetation. It was a building which could be watched most effectively, so Doc Savage and his aides let the young woman go.

“Country sausage, two eggs, buttered toast and a telephone,” Sandy Yell told the waitress in the lunch room.

“Which first?”

“The telephone.”

The waitress pointed to a corner. “There it is.”

Sandy Yell noted that the telephone was not visible through the windows from where Doc Savage and his two aides stood. She called a number.

The voice which answered was strange. There was something wrong with it. The words were delivered slowly and with the utmost care, and even then they were barely understandable.

“You insane devil!” said Sandy Yell, hoarsely.

“You did as you were ordered and attracted Doc Savage’s suspicion?” asked the queer voice.

“Killing that penitentiary guard was no accident, as you claimed,” Sandy Yell said grimly. “I know that now.”

Something in the nature of a mangled chuckle came over the wire. “It is reported that a blond young woman shot at Doc Savage with a gun concealed in a camera, then fled.”

“You devil!” gritted the blond girl. “You almost tricked me into murder!”

The mangled chuckle came over the wire again. “That was necessary.”

Sandy Yell said, hoarsely, “If I had shot Doc Savage, they would have hung me!”

“Do you think I would have taken that chance with so valuable and willing an assistant as yourself?” the strange voice asked derisively. “Doc Savage always wears that bulletproof vest. I knew he would not be harmed.”

The girl rapped. “Willing? You don’t need to rub it in!”

“You do not by chance, think you *don’t* have to take my orders?”

The girl’s reply was slow. “No,” she said. “I wouldn’t kid myself.”

The hardly understandable voice took on a somewhat placating tone and asked, “Is Doc Savage going to Mexico?”

“Looks as if he were. He is going to chase this Igor De Faust, who——”

“Who is a down-and-out actor made up to look like the genuine Igor De Faust,” said the voice over the telephone, “and who knows nothing of the

nationwide importance of this affair.”

“Suppose,” said Sandy Yell, “you tell me what is back of this?”

“There is an old proverb that no poison is as deadly as knowledge of the wrong sort.” The other hung up.

The person with the strange voice removed a hand from lean lips after the conversation with Sandy Yell ended. It was the hand over the mouth which had lent the voice its strangeness.

In order to speak at all coherently through the nostrils, innumerable hours must have been spent in practice. But it was an effective voice disguise.

The room was dark. It was also damp and smelled like the inside of a jug which had been corked for a long time. The occupant of the room shuffled over, opened a door and a little light came in.

The person had a humped back and was stooped. The clothing was carefully chosen to make shapeless the wearer.

The face was particularly striking. It was a wad of wrinkles, much too red and healthy-looking, and white hair hung down from the forehead and hid the ears, if any.

This unique monstrosity shuffled into an adjacent room, which was illuminated by a single small electric bulb. The room was long, had a concrete floor, cement block walls, and was absolutely bare of furniture.

Stretched in a neat row on the floor were twenty men. The convicts who had vanished so mysteriously from the State penitentiary. They seemed to be asleep.

The humpbacked personage explored inside shapeless clothing with a hand that was encased in a rubber glove and brought out a small oilskin sack with a drawstring top. The sack seemed to hold big black pills which resembled small lumps of coal. One of these was inserted into the mouth of each sleeping convict.

Ten minutes later, all the convicts were awake and looking somewhat dazed. They stared at each other. They glared at the cement walls. The latter must have looked like home.

“I knew we’d land back in the cells!” McGinnis groaned.

“And in solitary!” echoed another.

“Do not get excited, McGinnis,” the humpback said, calmly. “You are not in prison. You are, in fact, at a point more than fifty miles from the penitentiary and in a different State.”

“Yeah? How’d we get here?”

“That,” said the humpback, “is something I hope will be a mystery for a long time.”

“What’re we here for?” demanded the baffled McGinnis.

“You are starting a year’s strange warfare for me in return for freeing you from prison.”

The befuddled convicts considered this. Several took their heads in their hands while they thought, or perhaps the gesture was due to bad headaches.

“Mean you took us out of the big house to get yourself a mob?” demanded McGinnis.

“Something like that.”

“And I suppose that now we’ve got to rob banks, murder and give you the loot?”

The hideous-looking humpback was silent while turning slowly to the entire collection of convicts.

“You think I want you to rob for me?” asked the humpback.

This got enough nods to indicate a consensus of opinion.

“You are wrong!” snapped the camel-backed creature. “I want you to work to wipe out a great wrong!”

“Then what the hell do you want us to do?” asked a man who had gained the reputation of one of the greatest living experts on deadly poisons.

“You are going to fight the organization which sent you to prison!” growled the humpback. “We are going to smash it!”

A convict peered closely at the deformed one, then muttered, “Man or woman, whatever you are, you’re crazy! It can’t be done!”

The reflection on the humpback’s mental balance got only an odd laugh from the queer creature.

“Due to a slight misfortune in getting you out of the penitentiary, we must lie low for a few days,” remarked the humpback. “We were, as you may recall, sighted by one of the pen guards as we entered the freight car. I shot this fellow. Shot him in a hasty moment, I admit.

“In dying he muttered the name of Doc Savage. For what reason, I do not as yet know. At any rate, this resulted in Doc Savage being called on the scene.”

One of the convicts got up from the floor where he had been lying. He was noticeably paler than he had been. “We’re bucking Doc Savage, and there’s a murder rap?”

“Yes.”

“Count me out of this!”

“I have taken measures to dispose of Doc Savage for the time being,” said the humpback, ignoring the other. “He has been tricked into following a false scent to Mexico City, and by the time he learns he has been tricked, we shall have our plans so far along that even Doc Savage cannot do a thing about it. In fact, Doc Savage’s frenzied efforts will only add to the unrest.”

“I don’t care to be the object of his efforts, frenzied or otherwise!” snapped the man who had gotten scared.

The fellow’s recalcitrant attitude appeared to be contagious, because the other crooks began to bristle. There seemed to be nothing much between themselves and freedom but a humpback who did not appear to amount to much.

“Thanks for getting us out of the big clink,” one said ironically. “But if you think we’re going to buck Doc Savage and especially that—that other——You’re as crazy as we think you are! We’re blowing!”

The humpback made no effort to retreat or to draw a weapon. The misshapen figure seemed pitifully dwarfed in the face of the grim assemblage.

“I am an alchemist, in a sense,” said the humpback. “Or perhaps you might call me a foresighted witch.”

“You’re a cuckoo!” growled a voice. “Plumb nuts!”

“You were given, a few minutes ago, a black pill apiece,” said the humpbacked one. “The pill caused you to revive from a sleep which, if it had continued another two hours, would have resulted in death.”

A black-gloved hand groped, brought out the pill sack and presented it.

“You will find in here a single pill as a sample.”

“So what?” some one snapped.

“So you will die unless you receive these pills regularly,” the hunchback replied, calmly. “You can take my word for that, or you can leave here and find out I am right.”

The convicts hesitated. This was something to think about.

“I’ve heard of the gag being tried before!” one snorted at last. “It’s a bluff! He—she—got it out of a book.”

"It is not a bluff! No one but myself has the slightest idea of how those tablets are made up. And do not think you can go to a physician or a chemist and do yourselves any good. None of them are smart enough to help you."

There was a brittle decisiveness about the voice that tended to make the words sound true. The convicts shifted uncomfortably.

"I took no chances on you walking out on me," said the new master.

Jules R. McGinnis said, quietly, "You really think we have a chance against—the organization?"

"I am sure of it," retorted the humpback. "I have a plan. It involves a reign of terror."

"Placing those twenty men in the penitentiary in our places was part of that terrorism plan?"

"It was."

"It will take more than that to whip the organization."

"I have got more than that. Much more."

"Yeah?" said McGinnis skeptically.

"I have," said the misshapen one, "a weapon which is the most incredible and effective thing ever developed."

McGinnis shook his head slowly. "More and more, I am beginning to think your sanity is as distorted as your body. You can't have a weapon which will whip the organization."

The humpback leaned forward suddenly and whispered something. The whisper reached no one but McGinnis.

McGinnis reacted as if he had been hit between the eyes with an invisible hammer. He squinted incredulously, massaged his forehead with his finger tips, filled his lungs with air and let it out slowly.

"That's impossible!" he gulped.

"I can assure you it is entirely possible," said the hunchback levelly. "What do you think of it as a weapon?"

"Incredible!"

"Will it work?"

"It will!" McGinnis stared at the humpback. "Just who are you?"

"That, I am not going to tell you."

"Are you one who has been persecuted by the organization?"

"I am."

“And you have no other motive?”

“None.”

“Good love!” gulped McGinnis. “I’m glad of that! With this weapon you’ve got, you could just about take anything in the world that you happened to want!”

The humpback laughed. It was not a very pleasant laugh.

Chapter 7

MUSIC BOX AGAIN

DOC SAVAGE was expressing, almost simultaneously, about the same opinion of the intellect behind the mystery.

“The guiding genius, whoever he or she is, can think quickly,” said the bronze man. “The public hardly had the word that I had been involved in the escape of the twenty convicts when the dying guard mumbled my name, and preparations were underfoot to send us off on a wild goose chase after an imaginary oil field, presumably in Mexico.”

Doc, Monk and Ham were not on their way to Mexico City. They were in Doc’s sedan, rolling through the outskirts of the city.

The blond, Sandy Yell, was with them.

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” Monk admonished the young woman.

“I am,” said Sandy Yell. “You’d never guess.”

“Trying to trick us like that,” Monk continued. “*Tsk, tsk!*”

Sandy Yell sighed deeply. “What I want to know is how you happen to know every word of the telephone conversation I had with the chief?”

“You asked the waitress in the airport lunch room for a telephone,” Monk told her. “Doc had his eye on you, just as a matter of course. He can read lips. You weren’t too far away. So he knew you wanted a telephone.”

“That does not explain how you eavesdropped on my telephone conversation?”

“Hold your hat,” Monk told her patiently. “In this car, Doc carries some of his gadgets. One of these is a contraption which can pick up conversation going over a telephone wire. We do not have to tap the wire. We just drive the car near the phone circuit, if there is only one as there was in this case, and turn a switch on our radio. Our telephone eavesdropping contraption is a part of the car radio receiver. Listen.”

Monk turned a switch and a bedlam of voices, male and female, came from the radio loud-speaker under the dashboard. The voices were too numerous and jumbled to understand. The homely chemist pointed at a telephone cable suspended alongside the street where they were driving.

“Voices coming from there,” he said. “There’s a lot of wires. If we wanted to talk off any one, we’d have to attach a wire to our contraption, then carry it close to the phone circuit we wanted to eavesdrop on. Understand how it is done?”

“Much too well,” said the blond girl.

Monk surveyed her albescent beauty admiringly. It was plain from the homely chemist’s expression that he considered Sandy Yell about the most hugable bit of femininity that had come his way recently. And Monk was something of a connoisseur.

“You’re too sweet a girl to be mixed up in something like this,” Monk told the young woman. “Hadn’t you better confess everything and help us get it straightened out?”

Sandy Yell asked, calmly, “Since when can you tell what is in a package by looking at the wrapper?”

“She’s right!” Ham said shortly.

“Who asked your opinion?” the girl snapped.

“Yeah, you shyster!” Monk growled. “Who pulled your strings?”

Doc Savage said, “We will call the telephone company and get the location of the phone which the girl called.”

The telephone authorities said the telephone was at 617 National Avenue in Norwalk, Connecticut, and that address was, somewhat ironically, the local lunatic asylum.

“Of all the danged things!” murmured Monk.

The asylum was not a large one, nor did it look particularly prosperous. Discreet inquiry brought out that it was not privately owned, but was maintained out of public funds. There was only one telephone line into the place, and Doc Savage located that.

To the telephone line, the bronze man attached certain instruments. When he had finished with adjusting rheostats and resistance coils, he had a Wheatstone effect which measured accurately the resistance of the telephone wire.

Doc Savage told Ham, “Go to a telephone and call the asylum and ask for the head nurse, and after you get the head nurse, hang up.”

Ham departed. Doc was an interested eavesdropper on the call.

A muffled, strange voice answered the call, and Ham asked for the head nurse.

“Just a minute,” said the queer, nasal voice.

A pause. Doc watched the instruments of the bridge.

“Hello, hello,” said a new voice. “This is the asylum speaking.”

Ham asked for the head nurse, got her and hung up. He came back.
“Well?”

“Very simple,” Doc told him. “The wire is cut. A voice answers, and if the call is for the asylum, the institution is then connected.”

“Just where is the circuit cut?” Ham wanted to know.

“Without knowing the normal resistance and capacity of the circuit, it is extremely difficult to tell with accuracy,” Doc said. “But we should not take long in finding it.”

They did not take long. The search narrowed down to a rambling, decrepit-looking brick building. This bore a sign across the front:

NATIONAL WINERIES, INC.

“Now what?” Monk wanted to know when they had surveyed the vicinity and noted nothing suspicious.

“Feel like some action?” Doc asked.

Monk grinned his biggest. “I don’t feel like nothing else but!”

Sandy Yell snapped, “You had better be careful! You are barging into something a lot larger than you dream!”

“Tell us all about it,” Monk invited. “Maybe you can scare us out of rushing the place.”

“Phooey to you,” she sniffed. “Go ahead and get yourselves mopped up.”

They had not ventured close enough to the winery building, which seemed to be abandoned, to attract attention. Doc now guided the sedan into the street which fronted the aged structure. The speed was about thirty miles an hour.

“Get down,” Doc directed.

Monk and Ham sank out of sight on the floorboards, hauling Sandy Yell down with them.

“I got another idea,” said Monk, and produced a string and began to tie the girl’s wrists.

She fought, biting and clawing, and her remarkably blond hair got down in her eyes. She made hissing sounds, but did not swear or call them names.

Then Doc crashed the sedan into the building.

The winery door was large, no doubt originally designed to permit entrance of wine trucks. And while it was a moderately solid door, it had never been expected to withstand the impact of the sedan, which had a frame almost as heavy as railroad rails and a body of armor plate as thick as that which encased some army tanks.

The door caved; the sedan went into the winery building, the heavy bumper nudging a roof pillar, and a part of the roof came down. Dust boiled.

Ham had opened the sedan doors an instant before the impact, so that they would not be cramped shut. He and Doc dived out. Monk followed, leaving the girl lashed to the foot rail. She could free herself, but it would take minutes.

Doc had a small object ready in his hand when he came out of the sedan. He flipped the thing away from him. A tiny flare. It ignited, filled all the gloomy confines of the wine shed with brilliant, white light.

There seemed to be only one man in the shed. He was retreating, and the unexpected brilliance of the flare blinded him somewhat, as Doc had intended. The fellow bumped into one of the roof supports.

Doc caught him. The man was a bit pale, a bit overfat. His suit looked medium-priced and did not fit too well. Doc flung the man toward Monk.

“Hold him!”

“Aw-w, heck!” Monk complained, and gathered the captive in a bear hug.

The girl, craning, saw the captive, but none of them noticed her. They were too rushed. The girl shut her eyes, seemed about to faint.

Doc went on. He discovered a wide stairway, leading down. To the wine cellars, naturally. He descended.

The instant Doc was out of sight, Monk told the captive, “If you think I’m gonna stand around here and hold you and miss out on this fight, you’d better change your ideas!”

Monk belted the man senseless with a hairy fist to the jaw, let the fellow fall, and leaped after Doc.

Reaching the stairs, Monk started down, only to come flying back, propelled by Doc. The two of them got clear of the steps barely in time to let a fistful of bullets come up.

Ham, who had veered to the left to make sure no foes were lurking in the rear of the shed, galloped up. He watched slugs knock holes in the roof to the accompaniment of much noise.

“It appears they are in the basement,” he said needlessly, “with what the newspapers call a Tommy gun.”

Doc did not reply. He inserted a finger in one of the many pockets of a special vest which he wore and produced one of the tiny, high-explosive grenades which he frequently used. He released the firing mechanism and flipped it down the steps.

There was a roar, a gushing storm of dust and concrete fragments. The grenade had not exploded at the bottom, which made it unlikely that the gunman had been killed. But the concussion must have disturbed them, judging from the crackling profanity.

“The next one will come all the way down!” Doc called. “To save a good deal of discomfort, you men had best come out one at a time, without your weapons.”

The swearing underground came to a stop. There was a voice. The voice was predominant, was giving orders. It seemed that the men below moved away.

Then came the tinkling that sounded like a music box.

Doc said sharply, “Monk! Ham! Watch the outside! There may be a tunnel from the wine cellars!”

Monk and Ham rushed for the door and vanished into the outer sunlight. They had supermachine pistols ready in their hands. This section of Norwalk was by no means thinly populated, and the noise had attracted attention. Curious persons were approaching from every direction.

Monk and Ham boosted and hauled each other atop the winery roof, in order to see better.

Sandy Yell called to Doc, “Your two shadows are wasting their time watching the outside!”

“Think so?” Doc asked, dryly.

“Big fellow, I know what you’re up against, and you don’t!” snapped Sandy Yell. “You hear that tinkling noise?”

“What about it?” Doc countered.

“Nothing much that I’m going to tell you,” the young woman replied. “Only you’ll never get your hands on the mob below! Not this time, you won’t!”

Minutes passed. The eerie tinkling continued, a sound somewhat as if mice were running over the strings of a metallic harp.

Outside, Monk howled, “I don’t see no sign of no tunnel!”

Ham added, “In five minutes, we’re going to have a bigger crowd than a circus!”

Doc began easing down the steps. The dust stirred up by his grenade had settled by now. It was dark farther down, and he got out his generator-operated flashlight, used it. Wreckage lay everywhere.

The mysterious musical tinkling stopped.

At the foot of the steps—the stairs had been mangled badly by the explosion—an open underground room of some size, but with a low ceiling. Dust was thick in the air. At the opposite end was a door.

Doc went to the door and found it heavy, sheathed on his side with what appeared to be rather thick steel plates. Certain wines are valuable, and this one chamber had evidently been equipped for the maximum in safety. A test showed the door very solid.

Stepping back, Doc tossed one of the grenades. He was braced when it went off, but the impact upset him even then. Getting up from his knees, he saw the roof sagging. But it did not come down.

The metal door had caved in.

Doc went to it, but did not go through. The room inside did not have great dimensions—was, in fact, about the scale of a bedroom in a New York apartment. The floor, like the other flooring in the wine cellars, was of concrete.

But the concrete floor had been covered carefully with a coating of thick glass.

On the glass, to a depth of perhaps two inches, was a vile-looking liquid.

Doc drew a handkerchief out of a pocket and, leaning forward, let it dangle into the liquid. The immersed part of the handkerchief was consumed almost instantly.

There was no sign of any men. And there was no exit from the small underground chamber. Somehow, mysteriously, the men had disappeared without leaving any trace of their former presence.

Doc studied the room quietly with his flake gold eyes. Then into being came his eerie whistle, this time denoting puzzlement. He left the room and went back up the stairs, heaved the prisoner into the sedan alongside the girl, got behind the wheel, found the sedan would run, and backed out of the building, after some difficulty.

Monk and Ham sprang down off the roof and got into the sedan.

There was a crowd about. Doc spotted a policeman, leaned out and said, "Be extremely careful when you examine that wine cellar. Do not step into the liquid on the floor."

"Wait a minute!" the cop barked. "What's been going on here?"

Without replying, Doc started to drive off. The policeman sprang on the running board, hung on with one hand and put his other hand on the grip of his pistol. Then he recognized Doc Savage.

"Oh!" he said, and got off the running board and let them go.

The bronze man took to the roads on which there was almost no traffic. They drove in silence for a while.

"What happened to them guys?" Monk demanded suddenly.

"They vanished," Doc explained.

Monk snorted. "There must have been secret tunnels or something! Ain't we makin' a mistake not hangin' around to hunt for 'em?"

"We would not find them," Doc said.

The girl, Sandy Yell, eyed the bronze man sharply.

"So you're beginning to learn the truth!" she gasped.

Doc studied her. His flake gold eyes were compelling, alive. "What you know would help us a great deal."

The girl moistened her lips. She had been hard-boiled, brittle, in her dealings with them so far. Her character had seemed more that of a man than the softer nature of a woman.

But her brazen exterior was a shell, a shell that cracked now and permitted a glimpse of an inner soul that was terror.

"I can't double-cross them now!" she said suddenly, wildly. "I can't!"

Monk and Ham both saw now that the girl was scared stiff.

Monk said gently, "You know Doc's reputation, don't you?"

She said nothing.

"You're in a jam," the homely chemist continued. "And you're looking at a bunch of guys who make a specialty of jams. If anybody can get you out of trouble, we can."

The girl parted her lips to speak.

"If talking will get you in bad with that humpback, better keep your trap shut, sister," said their other prisoner, who had unnoticed, recovered from

his senselessness.

“Don’t worry,” the girl said, grimly. “I was going to tell them I can’t talk!”

Chapter 8

SIGMUND HOPPEL

MONK reached down, took the man prisoner by the throat and squeezed. The fellow gargled, floundered, beat Monk and beat the floor with his fists.

“His Adam’s apple feels funny when it goes up and down against the palm of my hand,” Monk chuckled.

When the man’s face was purple, and he had all but stopped breathing, Monk released him. Doc pulled the sedan into a patch of woodland and stopped. There were no houses in sight.

Ham took the young woman’s arm at a nod from Doc.

“This probably will not be anything for a lady to see,” the dapper lawyer told her. “You wouldn’t want to be kept awake nights.”

“You don’t know—what I already have on my mind,” Sandy Yell said jerkily. But she followed the dapper Ham away from the car.

Doc leaned over the prisoner. The fellow did not look as if he viewed the future any too brightly. He rolled his eyes toward Monk.

The simian chemist was not a vision to inspire cheer, for Monk was registering his fiercest visage. Monk, who was at heart a peaceful enough soul got a lift out of using his fearsome appearance to inspire terror in the heart of an enemy.

“Jules R. McGinnis is your name,” Doc said. “You are one of the twenty convicts who vanished from the penitentiary.”

“You’re mistaken!” the pale man growled.

“The prison official furnished your pictures and record,” Doc reminded.

The man glowered at them. He drew a deep breath of resignation.

“All right,” he said. “So what?”

Doc said, “You were at one time employed by an insurance company of which a man named Sigmund Hoppel is president.”

“It’s still—so what?” the man snapped.

“Sigmund Hoppel was the name furnished by the donor of the pipe organ which was *not* in the box car in the prison yard.”

McGinnis grinned thinly, fiercely. “Ain’t that funny now?”

Doc asked, “How were you gotten out of the penitentiary?”

“We went into that box car,” said the other.

“Then what happened?”

The man was silent for a long moment. “Believe it or not, we all went to sleep in the box car after that humpba—after we took some stuff out of a bottle. We woke up in that wine cellar.”

Monk snorted, said, “What a story!”

Doc asked, “What is behind this mystery?”

“Think I’d tell you?” the man asked sarcastically.

“Yep,” interposed Monk. “And here’s a sample of the reason why.”

Monk took the man’s throat again, and began to squeeze.

Results were immediate. The man became purple-faced, and foam flecks appeared on his lips. His eyes protruded. He looked as if he were dying, and became quite rigid.

Monk released McGinnis hastily.

“Blazes!” gulped the homely chemist. “I didn’t squeeze ’im hard enough to cause nothin’ like that!”

Doc Savage whipped back to examine the man. McGinnis seemed to be having some sort of a seizure, an attack which was obviously not caused by Monk’s mild strangulation.

“We’ll rush him to the laboratory,” Doc said crisply.

Immediately they drove toward the heart of the city of New York, where Doc maintained a headquarters which had as a part of its equipment a laboratory which, for completeness, was equalled by few others. The prisoner was talking freely now.

It was not the talk of a healthy man, but the ramblings of an unconscious mind. Not all of the words were understandable.

“Organization—not guilty—organization framed me,” the man mumbled. “—head bookkeeper—wasn’t sure what it was all about—had a suspicion——”

He fell silent for a time.

“Catch all that he says,” warned Doc. “This man was head bookkeeper for the company which employed him. He was accused of embezzlement and convicted.”

McGinnis continued his rambling, “—suspicion—went to wrong man—didn’t know——”

They had to bend forward to catch his words. Ham was keeping an eye on the girl. Monk drove.

“—framed me—didn’t know—even then—what for,” McGinnis continued. “Organization—began to realize—all over country—damned clever—nobody suspects.”

“I wish he’d be more definite, Jove I do,” said Ham.

“—big thing—twenty men in one penitentiary,” rambled McGinnis. “—all framed—got wise—to what was going on failed to prove—smooth—law could not touch——”

Suddenly McGinnis stopped mumbling.

Monk said, “I wonder just what ails him?”

McGinnis did not speak again in his delirium until they were nearing Doc Savage’s headquarters in downtown Manhattan. Then his words had a startling effect on Sandy Yell.

“Sigmund Hoppel’s home—Washington—man named Max Landerstett,” mumbled McGinnis.

The girl put both hands over her mouth but did not keep a low cry from coming out.

Half an hour later, Ham was still pegging questions at Sandy Yell in an effort to make her reveal what had caused her to cry out.

“Come on, come on!” he insisted. “By keeping information from us, you are only making it tougher on yourself!”

If she even heard the question, she gave no visible sign. This was the attitude she had maintained throughout. The name Max Landerstett meant a great deal to her, but what, she would not say.

“Why not lay off her?” Monk growled. “After all, her reasons for wanting to keep quiet may be overwhelmingly in her favor.”

“Keep that ugly face out of this!” Ham snapped.

“But she may be in such a position that she cannot talk without endangering her life, or the life of somebody else.”

Ham looked doubly indignant. He pulled his innocent-looking black cane apart near the handle, and it became evident that it was a sword cane with a lean, keen blade, daubed near the tip with a sticky substance. The adhesive gob on the tip was a drug which caused a prick of the cane sword to produce a form of unconsciousness which was almost instant and lasted a considerable period.

“You,” Ham accused the homely Monk, “are just showing off. Trying to make the young lady think you’re quite a guy.”

That this was the truth was indicated by Monk’s great burst of indignation at the suggestion.

“You shyster fashion plate!” he yelled. “You and your big mouth! I think I’ll pull that long, pointed tongue of yours out and tie a knot in its end!”

“Come on,” Ham invited, and launched into a long and shocking account of Monk’s tree-dwelling ancestors, an account which was none the less vituperative because it was couched in words which could be found in the nicest dictionary.

They were in Doc Savage’s headquarters reception room, on the eighty-sixth floor of one of Gotham’s most impressive skyscrapers, and the establishment was soundproof, so it was unlikely that their quarrel would attract attention.

Their voices, in fact, hardly penetrated to the laboratory, where Doc Savage was working.

The bronze man had taken the usual blood and spinal samples from the convict, and, in addition, bits of tissue, extractions from the stomach, and numerous X-ray photographs.

At present, the bronze man was engaged in burning bits of the body tissue, which he had taken at the expense of leaving a small wound, and photographing the smoke from the consumed tissue through a spectroscope, a method of analysis which was quite speedy.

The laboratory was an enormous room, comprising the major portion of the eighty-sixth-floor. The reception room was small, and the only other room was the library, which was of good size.

Doc fell to using his most powerful microscope.

McGinnis, the prisoner who had been seized so oddly, sat in a metal chair. He had sat there for a long time now without saying anything whatever. Some of his unnatural color had departed and it was evident he was getting better.

His eyes, which had been closed, now opened. They were rational.

Doc came over to him. “I am going to let you go. Can you find this creature who got you out of the penitentiary?”

McGinnis hesitated.

“Yes,” he said finally. “But why are you letting me go? To follow me to my boss?”

“No,” Doc said. “You will not be followed, for the simple reason that it might cause the loss of your life.”

“I don’t get you.”

“You,” Doc told him, “have been inoculated with an enormous dosage of a germ which requires another germ to keep it in check, to prevent death. Inoculation with the germ could be for only one logical reason—to give some one a hold over you. In other words, you will die in the course of the next five hours, approximately, unless you receive inoculation with the counteractant germ.”

McGinnis swallowed. “So the humpback wasn’t bluffing!”

Doc Savage said nothing, but watched McGinnis intently.

“You are right about the business of somebody getting a hold on me,” McGinnis said finally.

“It is a very effective method,” Doc said. “This personage literally carries your life about with him in the form of hypodermic capsules.”

McGinnis shut his eyes. He seemed to be thinking deeply.

“Listen,” he said abruptly, “can you fix up those counteracting germs, or whatever they are?”

“Not before you would be dead,” Doc answered. “Cultures of those germs cannot possibly be produced in less than days.”

McGinnis blinked slowly. “You’ll let me go? You won’t follow me? Why?”

Doc hesitated. “It is,” he said, “against our policy to take human life. If we keep you prisoner, you will die. As a matter of fact, if we attempt to give you truth serum in an effort to persuade you to talk, death would probably result, since truth serums are somewhat hard on the human system.”

McGinnis got up shakily out of the chair. “Can I go now?”

“You can.”

“I won’t be followed?”

“No,” Doc said. “For the reason that your chief might learn of it, and flee from you, causing an interval of time to elapse which would result in your death.”

McGinnis walked across the laboratory, across the library, the reception room where Monk and Ham quarreled, and to the outer door. He paused there, turned and watched Doc for a time.

“That humpback says we are working to right a great wrong,” he said. “But I don’t know.”

Doc was silent. Monk and Ham stared, puzzled, as did pretty Syrmanthe Yell.

“The humpback does things that look queer,” said McGinnis. “The whole business may not be on the up-and-up.”

His listeners held their silence.

McGinnis sighed shakily.

“Thanks for turning me loose,” he said. “And if I decide the humpback isn’t on the up-and-up, you’ll hear from me.”

He went out.

Monk bounded for the door, howling, “You ain’t gonna let that lug walk out?”

“Let him go!” Doc said sharply.

Monk squeaked, in a clumsy effort at furtiveness, “I’ll follow him. See where he goes.”

“No,” Doc said. “Desirable as that is, we do not want to cause the man’s death.”

McGinnis, reappearing unexpectedly in the door, outside which he must have waited and eavesdropped, smiled crookedly at them.

“Thanks,” he said. “I wanted to be sure you meant it.”

He went away again.

Monk made gurgling noises. “But what’re we gonna do now?”

“We will investigate Sigmund Hoppel,” Doc said, “and some one named Max Landerstett.”

Sandy Yell gave him a tight-lipped face when he glanced at her. But back in her eyes was a wonder, and the beginnings of an infinite admiration for the giant man of bronze.

“I guess—the reason you gave for turning McGinnis loose—was sincere,” she said at last, hesitantly.

Chapter 9

TANGLE

SIGMUND HOPPEL was not in the telephone directories of New York City. “Washington, D. C., was mentioned in McGinnis’s delirium,” Doc said.

They found the name in a telephone directory of Washington, D. C., and environs.

They took Doc Savage’s big speed plane to Washington, making time that would have surprised persons accustomed only to the rather good clip of the commercial air lines. Doc’s speed plane was tri-motored, streamlined, silenced, soundproof, could land on water or land, and had been studied as a sample of aëronautical advance by experts.

Doc set the ship down on the Potomac River south of Washington, D. C. They passed the columned white majesty of Mount Vernon, the slave houses, the greenhouses, the landscaping of the gardens, and the hillside tomb of George Washington, a few minutes before they set the plane down for a landing on the Potomac.

“Sigmund Hoppel lives on an estate on the Potomac below Mount Vernon, according to the directory,” Doc said.

Now that they were bobbing on the river—not too near the vicinity, but two miles upshore, where their plane would not be as liable to attract suspicious attention—Ham frowned critically at Syrmanthe Yell.

“You don’t like me very well, do you?” the entrancing blonde asked.

“He don’t like anybody but himself,” Monk said unkindly.

Sandy Yell frowned at Monk. “I think he is perfectly justified in being suspicious.”

Monk stared at her, his expression saying that he considered it incomprehensible that she should be standing up for the dapper and sharp-tongued Ham.

Ham looked out one of the plane’s windows to hide a knowing smile. Ham had been practicing psychology, in order to get the best of Monk. The apish Monk was such a homely fellow that women instinctively felt sorry for him, or something, and wanted to be nice to him.

Ham, on the other hand, was such a handsome fellow in comparison that the fairer sex instinctively resented his unkind remarks about Monk’s

appearance, remarks which Ham could not resist making.

Ham had decided to be particularly cutting toward the next personable young thing they contested for, on the theory that she would think him a woman hater and try to win him over. Ham thought he knew enough about women that this would work out.

It seemed to be working, too.

Sigmund Hoppel did live on the large estate downriver which they had sighted from the air. A filling-station attendant gave them the information after they had beached the plane and gone ashore. They decided to walk to the estate by land.

When they were nearing the estate, pretty Sandy Yell paused and made a strange request.

“Have you any handcuffs?”

“Yes,” Monk told her.

“Then put a pair on me.”

“*What?*”

“Put a pair on me, please.”

While Monk and Ham stood dumfounded, Doc Savage said, quietly, “Do it.”

Sigmund Hoppel belonged to what a radical would term the capitalistic class, judging from the impressiveness of his estate on a wooded bank of the Potomac.

The house consisted of several pillar columns, displayed the old lines of Southern architectural construction. It was laid out somewhat after the style of historic Mount Vernon, except that there was a modernized touch here and there.

There was a small but nice airplane landing field to the rear. Garages for half a dozen cars and as many trucks. A swimming pool. And to the west side of the building a golf course, one consisting of nine holes, and just beyond an array of tennis courts.

The ground in front of the house sloped down sharply to a boathouse, toward a pier to which was moored a fifty-foot cabin cruiser.

“This place,” Monk said, “should be in the movies.”

Doc Savage addressed the blonde. “This Sigmund Hoppel is the same Hoppel who has been mentioned a number of times in investigations into lobbying activities in Washington?”

The girl hesitated, then nodded. "The same."

Monk waved an arm. "And so this show place is to entertain politicians, eh?"

Doc stopped the others and directed, "Wait here."

He left them behind a patch of shrubbery a short distance from the edge of the estate and went forward. He kept out of sight, a simple task because there was plenty of shrubbery. An estate of this size must require a number of gardeners to maintain, but there were none in sight.

There was no wind; even the leaves on the shrubbery hung lifeless.

The only sign of life was a row of lawn sprinklers which were in operation, hissing steadily. The mushrooming mist of water glistened in the sunlight. The spinning sprinkler heads hissed like snakes.

Doc crept forward. The sprinklers were spaced rather closely, and seemed to be permanent installations, with pipes underground. Picking a spot where the sprinklers' spray fell thinnest, Doc scuttled forward. Even then, he was dampened slightly from head to foot.

He approached a window. It was his idea to reconnoiter before making any other move.

But when he was still a dozen feet away from the nearest window, a frostily casual voice addressed him.

The voice said, "That lawn is underlain with a capacity burglar alarm system, consisting of wires surrounded by a high-frequency field which, when the capacity of it is changed by the introduction of a bulk such as yourself, actuates a sensitive relay through an amplifier, resulting in the giving of an alarm almost the instant you were on the place, in case you are interested."

Doc stood very still. He was familiar with the capacity method as applied to burglar alarms. His flake gold eyes roved in search of the individual who had made the rambling speech.

Then Doc saw him. The man was lean, not especially tall, and had the look of an athlete. His lips could have been fuller; there were dark pouches under his eyes, and his hair was a nest. His voice had not lied; he was young.

He held a revolver, and he stood just inside the window, sighting his gun under the sash, which was opened a little.

Doc studied him carefully, and decided the revolver was pointed at his chest. That was better, because he wore a bulletproof undergarment of chain mail in which he had confidence.

With infinite slowness, so that the other could see that he was making no sudden moves, Doc inserted two fingers inside his vest and brought out a small metal object. He let the other see it, and carefully shoved it out in front of him, as if to drop it.

The puffy-eyed young man began, "It is always gratifying to witness what might be called horse sense in a person, since that kind of sense is likely to be lacking under trying conditions such as——"

Doc squeezed the metallic globule. A cloud of black smoke came from it. The smoke came with such abruptness that it was almost a black flash. It hid Doc completely.

Doc leaped to one side, whirled and leaped in retreat.

The young man with the gun did not shoot, somewhat surprisingly. It would not have done much good anyway, since the sepia mass of black smoke hid Doc completely. But nine out of ten men would have cut loose with lead.

Doc was making good speed. It seemed certain that he would get away. He approached the line of sprinklers.

And stopped!

A long moment he stood there, just inside the flying spray. Then he retreated, flake gold eyes fixed on the mist from the sprinklers. That mist had changed color. It was different. It had a bilious aspect, a pungent, rather obnoxious odor.

A chemical had been introduced into the water. To venture into the mist from the sprinklers would undoubtedly mean unconsciousness and maybe death.

It was very apparent now why the house had been surrounded so completely by the sprinkler installation.

A moment later, the young man with the pouches under his eyes came walking around the cloud of smoke, his revolver ready. He reached out a hand gingerly, at the same time keeping a watch on Doc Savage, and inserted a finger into a tendril of Doc's black vapor. He looked relieved when it did not nip him.

"Harmless," he said. "Not at all like the stuff coming from the sprinklers, which, if you venture into it, I can guarantee will kill you instantly."

Doc said quietly, "This place seems to be thoroughly equipped against attack."

"Isn't it, though," smirked the young man. "Such unusual defensive measures, too."

The smirk did not go with the pouches under his eyes nor the worried look, the aspect of strain, which close inspection showed in his eyes and features.

The young man peered steadily at Doc Savage, and seemed to be groping in his memory. He gestured toward the house with his revolver.

"In," he said. "And if you make a move, I shall shoot you neatly between the eyes, or as close to that spot as I can, which I will assure you should be quite close, considering that I have a trunkful of medals for pistol shooting, a number of them won not so many years ago."

They went into a reception hall which was colonial-looking, and held a genuine antique piece of furniture or two, along with some rather good fake antiques.

The young man of long speeches picked up a newspaper from a table and looked at Doc Savage's picture on the front page, under the caption:

DOC SAVAGE
is involved in penitentiary mystery

The young man said, "Your being Doc Savage does not surprise me, since there was something familiar about you which I did not realize at first as being the presence in my memory of the knowledge that I had seen your picture in the newspaper along with the story of your being connected with this affair which has apparently so mystified everybody, but which is actually far more remarkable than any person, even with the wildest imagination, has so far suspected, and the exact nature of which you may or may not know, but if you expect me to tell you much, you are going to be mistaken, because——"

Doc gave up waiting for the sentence to end.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Max Landerstett is the name," said the young man of many words.

Doc Savage failed to change expression and asked, "You are presumably the young man in whom Sandy Yell is so interested."

The wordy young man became very still. His mouth was shut and the faint movement of his nostrils in and out as he breathed was noticeable.

He began, "The fact that you know of Sandy Yell leads me to the conclusion that she has in some manner obtained a contact with you since she was so unfortunately tricked or forced into shooting at you in the penitentiary with the trick camera, a procedure which was nothing if not risky, considering——"

"Sandy Yell is waiting at the edge of the estate," Doc interposed.

"Huh?"

"She could hear you if you shouted from a window," Doc continued. "But two of my men, Monk and Ham, are with her."

"We'll have to do something about that," said the young man with the worn eyes. "Under the circumstances, it is essential that I get my hands on Sandy and especially your two men, but just at the moment it does not occur to me exactly how——"

"With your permission, I shall call to them to come in," Doc said.

"Eh?"

"No tricks," Doc said. "I shall call to them, tell them everything is shaping up satisfactorily, and advise them to come in."

The young man considered. "That means you are willing for them to become prisoners?"

"Right."

"It also means you are perfectly sure you can get away whenever you want to? Am I correct?"

"You are."

The young man showed nice teeth in a smile that was not amusing. "You are at least frank, and I will say that for once I do not appreciate frankness, although previously I have considered it a nobility of character which——"

"Shall I call them?" Doc asked.

"Go ahead."

Doc called.

Monk, Ham and Sandy Yell appeared and began walking across the grounds toward the line of deadly sprinklers.

"I shall turn the sprinklers off for the time being," said the young man, walking to what appeared to be a radiator valve and giving it a twist without interrupting his flow of speech, "and the chemical spray will be out of the

way so that they will not get into it, and they will be safe, providing they keep to the sidewalk, and providing their shoes have no holes in the soles, which I trust will be the case, since your aides are reportedly wealthy men, and one, the fellow called Ham, is noted for his immaculate attire—*hands up!*”

The last was for Monk, Ham and the girl, who had come close to the house.

Verbose Max Landerstett stood in the doorway and showed them his gun for emphasis. After considering a bit, they came in.

Sandy Yell stared intently at the young man with the dark patches under his eyes.

“Max,” she said evenly, “I did not bring them here.”

“Shut up,” said Max. “I know you didn’t.”

Monk and Ham eyed Doc Savage, then fell to staring at the revolver which Max Landerstett held.

“We came here hunting Sigmund Hoppel,” Monk volunteered, wondering if the information would gain anything.

The wordy Max Landerstett smiled with a forced brightness at them. “And hunting Igor De Faust, too, I trust?”

“Huh?” Monk gulped. “Well, we’d like to see him, too!”

“An ambition I can enable you to fulfill,” said Max Landerstett.

Chapter 10

TWO BEFUDDLED MEN

THE prisoners—Doc, Monk and Ham—were now disarmed, first being lined against a wall so that they could be searched without too much opportunity to snatch at weapons. The blond, Sandy Yell, did the searching, while Max Landerstett stood back with his revolver. Sandy and the wordy young man worked together with only an occasional nod or a word of communication.

When she had finished searching Ham, the young lady calmly gave the dapper lawyer's shins a vicious kick.

"That," she said, "is for all the nice things you said about me, you clothes horse!"

Ham lowered his arms, either to retaliate or grab his agonizing shins.

"No, no!" exploded Max warningly. "Be careful, for I should not want to have to shoot you at this point, and, anyway, you must become accustomed to Sandy's eccentricities for if you do not realize now, you will realize later that she can be depended on to give back with interest whatever——"

"If you ever die," Sandy told her associate, "it will be from overtalk. What do we do with these men?"

Max Landerstett motioned with his revolver, indicating that the prisoners should walk toward another wing of the house. They did so without comment, and as the party moved along, Max spoke, addressing the girl.

"You talked to them just how much, my dear?"

"I talked to them not at all, and I'm not your dear," said Sandy Yell. "Listen, you know me well enough to know I can keep my mouth shut."

"Consider me reprimanded," Max grinned at her. "How much do they know?"

"Doc Savage has ideas," Sandy replied. "I don't think he knows what is behind it all."

"I'm damned glad of that!"

The young woman frowned at Max Landerstett.

"Did I hear you say you had Hoppel and De Faust?" she asked.

"You did."

“Aren’t you kind of rushing things?”

“You mean,” said Landerstett, “haven’t I, in a manner of speaking, rather taken the bull by the tail, and if that is your question, that answer is that I am doing, and have been doing, my level best to do so, and I might even go farther and venture to say that I have apparently succeeded to some——”

“Much too great an extent!” snapped Sandy Yell. “Have you got everything or not? Cut out the words!”

“I’ve got Hoppel and De Faust and nothing or nobody else,” said the wordy young man. “I might also say that I have Doc Savage, here, and his two aides, but I have a suspicion the bronze man can free himself, or thinks he can, at any time he desires, although for the life of me I cannot see——”

Sandy Yell looked at Monk and shrugged. “Max’s father was a sideshow barker and you can’t tell me there’s nothing to heredity.”

Max Landerstett opened a door a crack, shoved his gun into the aperture and made his voice ugly.

“You two guys get back and behave yourselves!” he gritted. Then, to Doc Savage, “In with you and your two shadows, and I still say I’ll be darned if I can see how you are going to get away, considering that you are without weapons, and this room is so solidly constructed that I have a suspicion it was intended all along for a prison, although how the builders knew when this house must have been constructed, forty or fifty years ago, that they were going to need a——”

He shut the door behind Doc, Monk and Ham.

Monk looked at two other men who were already in the room.

“The Messieurs Hoppel and De Faust, if I may be permitted a guess,” he said.

There was no trouble about recognizing Igor De Faust. A slender man of average height, and he had yellow hair. Very yellow hair. His eyebrows were yellow, and his yellow beard, although not more than a day’s growth, gave him the look of a man who had yellow jaundice. He had utterly blue eyes.

“That actor,” said Monk, “done a good job on De Faust. A darn good job.”

Igor De Faust gave them a black stare. “Actor—job——”

“The actor who was hired to make up like you and fog it off to Mexico in hopes of drawing Doc on a wild goose chase that would keep him away from things here.”

De Faust blinked and swallowed. “Mexico—goose chase—things here that——”

“Yeah,” Monk said, somewhat vaguely. “Yeah.”

Monk looked at the other man and said, “Hoppel, I think you’ve got a swell place here.”

Sigmund Hoppel grinned handsomely. “Denks, please. Coming from you, dat makes her a compliment, Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair.”

He did the pronunciation of the military title very nicely.

“Yeah,” Monk said, again vaguely. “Well, well. So you know me?”

“In newspapers, your photograph, yes,” said Hoppel. “Me, I remember her.”

“You couldn’t forget her,” Ham said, dryly.

Sigmund Hoppel grinned at them like a big dog that has just met some other dogs. Sigmund Hoppel was a big man, big every way, from top to bottom and around the middle.

His face and his mouth and his eyes and his grin were all big. The diamond on the little finger of his left hand was big. He had been perspiring and that gave his skin a greasy cast, which together with the fact that he was dark made it look as if lard and coal dust in quantities had gone into his make-up.

Both Hoppel and De Faust fell to staring at Doc Savage.

“Poy, Oh poy!” said Hoppel. “Me, am I a relief that Doc Savage are on this pizness!”

Ham, who was never too careful of anybody’s feelings, grinned and started—it was plain in his eyes—to make some crack about the way Hoppel murdered the King’s English. Monk calmly kicked Ham’s shins, all but knocking the dapper lawyer’s feet from under him.

Doc Savage asked, with his flake gold eyes on Hoppel and De Faust, “Just what is happening here?”

Hoppel started to speak too hurriedly. He choked on the English words, then stuttered.

“Please, maybe you could tell us?” he questioned earnestly at last.

“Actor—make-up—Mexico——” De Faust murmured vaguely.

Ham, shifting from one foot to another to favor his agonizing shins, spoke to Hoppel and De Faust. “You gentlemen mean to tell us that *you* do

not know why you are in this room, prisoners?”

“As a guesser, you are a good stabber,” said Hoppel. “She’s the truth.”

“This is surprising,” Ham said.

“She no surprise you half so much as she surprises us,” declared big Hoppel. “Two weeks for now we have been all over with surprise. What you call him? Gatterflast? Flattergas—gasserflat——”

“Flabbergasted,” Monk supplied wearily.

“Denks, mister,” said Hoppel.

Doc Savage asked, “You have been prisoners two weeks?”

“Wait,” said Hoppel. “Let’s count him.”

He went to a window sill. The window beyond was closed with what seemed to be a steel shutter, but along the window sill he pointed to a row of deep scratches.

“My belt buckle put him here,” he explained. “One scratch each time they feed us. Lemme see. Zirteen scratches. Dat whatcha call lucky as hell, no?”

“Thirteen meals, but how many days?” Monk asked.

“Zirteen days, on account they slip us the zoup once a day.”

Monk opened and shut his big mouth. Hoppel’s grammar was getting him down. The man seemed to have a conglomeration of most of the mistakes made by foreigners starting to learn English.

“Actor—make-up—Mexico——” De Faust murmured vaguely.

Monk growled, “Listen, Hoppel, is he nuts?”

“If I am, I would be the least surprised of any one, considering what is happening,” De Faust said calmly and rationally.

There was a rattle at the door lock. The panel opened, and Max Landerstett put his head and a gun inside.

“I have been listening with the greatest of interest, and I am surprised,” he said, “to hear such a strange story, such a fantastic story of a fortnight’s imprisonment coming from two such gentlemen as Hoppel and De Faust, although I never have held any great ideas about their veracity, which is probably in keeping with their character, yet none the less, I am——”

“Going to get Doc Savage out of there,” Sandy Yell interrupted from behind Landerstett.

“Yes,” said Landerstett. “Doc, come out.”

Doc came out. They shut and locked the door on the other prisoners.

Max Landerstett's eyes were bright above their dark pouches, and he made a small gesture to draw attention to the gun in his hand.

"Don't forget what I said about the medals for shooting, for I can assure you that the aforesaid mention was no exaggeration in any sense, but was a true statement——"

"Max," said the girl, "I'll bet you talk after you are dead."

"I hope so, because I love to talk," Max grinned. "Doc, you will walk down that corridor. May I call you Doc, since we are in a way of becoming very chummy?"

Doc Savage said nothing. The corridor was paneled in a cherry red, done in a natural tint that showed good taste. A runner covered only a part of the floor. Passing through a door brought them into a vast room with a ceiling so high that it seemed lost in infinity.

A great expanse of hardwood floor was waxed glassy, and in the center stood a table that was a bulk of mahogany, and several neat mahogany chairs with bright red leather seats.

"Park yourself," invited Sandy Yell.

Max Landerstett waved an arm expansively to draw attention to the huge size of the room and began, "Note the cathedral proportions of our cubbyhole which will make it comparatively easy for me to get at least one, and maybe more, pot-shots at you should you decide to make a break, but of course you will not decide to——"

"*Sh-h-h-h!*" Sandy Yell interposed. She looked at Doc Savage. "We've brought you in here to ask you questions."

Doc watched her as if she did not interest him particularly.

"We want to learn just how much you know," said the young woman.

"What I know?" Doc asked. "Or what conclusions I have reached?"

"That's it," said the young woman eagerly. "What conclusions you have reached."

"You would not like them," the bronze man said, dryly.

The girl blinked both eyes. "So I wouldn't like them?"

The concussion of a great crash filled all of the house. The crash started with the *bang!* of an explosion, and after that there was the uproar of falling debris, and that trailed away to permit the steady ringing of an alarm bell to be heard.

"I don't like *that*," exploded Max Landerstett.

The alarm bell rang monotonously, an even clangor that neither rose nor fell. Over its donging came the noise of men running, of shouting. These sounds were not loud.

“Now what in the hell has happened is the question I want to have answered, if anybody has an answer ready,” said Max Landerstett. “The thing puzzles me greatly, and”—he flung his gun to the girl—“if you will take this firearm, my pretty blond colleague——” He dashed for the door. “I’ll do my best to learn just what the hell has happened.”

He vanished through the door.

The girl looked after him, biting her lips.

Her momentary diversion of interest was a mistake, for it gave Doc Savage an opportunity to leap. His spring was long and silent, and he clamped a corded bronze hand upon the gun and got it as readily as if the girl had handed it to him. The floor was too slick for such gymnastics and Doc lost his balance and came down, bringing the girl down also.

She was fast. She almost jabbed her fingers into his eyes, but he moved enough and her manicured finger nails—she wore them manicured to points after the current fashion—cut his bronze skin a little.

Doc put a hand against her shoulder and shoved hard and she spun around and around on the slick floor, clawing and scratching in an effort to stop herself and making angry gasping noises.

“I told—that windy Max—never to leave me alone—guarding you!” she said in spurts.

Doc got on his feet and left her, confident she had no other weapons, because her snug frock afforded no concealment for any. The floor was so slick that the bronze man found it best to move his feet as if skating on ice.

The girl screamed a warning when he was more than halfway across the room.

“Back of you!” she screamed. “Watch out!”

The warning was a move on the girl’s part that showed her character was not bad, showed that she was involved in the affairs for some inspirational reason, and that she did not approve of life-taking. But the warning was not necessary, for Doc had already heard the door open.

He leaped, putting his feet out straight ahead, so that when he came down, he slid across the glassy floor as if greased, lying almost prone. It was simple to turn his head and note what had happened.

There was a door on the far side of the room; it had opened. He had heard the opening. In the aperture, two men stood spraddle-legged and

aimed sawed-off shotguns at them both.

The men were two of the twenty insurance and holding concern men who had been forced in cells in place of convicts who had vanished so mysteriously from the State penitentiary. Doc recognized them from the pictures taken before they had fled the warden's house through a window.

Their sawed-off shotguns blasted fire, noise and buckshot slugs as large as pistol bullets.

Doc Savage was rolling, reaching for the doorknob when they began shooting. They had come into the room a little too late, and were shooting too suddenly. The buckshot slugs—out of cartridges loaded for deer hunting in brush with shotguns—crashed into the walls, missing Doc.

Then the girl went into action. She tipped the heavy mahogany table over, tried to send it sliding toward the men in the door. Her feet slipped and she fell prone. One of the men shot at her, but the thick mahogany table top stopped the slugs easily.

Doc Savage went out through the door, which he had gotten open.

The big cathedrallike room where the girl lay behind the table was lighted by one chandelier, a fruit tree of bright, small lights hanging from the remote ceiling.

The girl, remaining behind the table, reached, got a chair and heaved it upward. It hit the chandelier. Fortunately, it caused a short circuit which brought a shower of hissing blue sparks, then darkness.

With the darkness, Doc Savage came back into the vast room. It was surprisingly dark. There were no windows in the room, except high up, and these were curtained and draped. It could hardly have been darker at midnight.

“Damn that girl!” said one of the men in the door. “We gotta get her!”

“Sure,” said the other. “Only don't kill her. I can swallow most things. But not woman croaking!”

“Blamed knight in armor!” gritted the first, and cut loose three times with his repeating shotgun, driving slugs toward where the girl lay sheltered. “Dame or guy, it's all the same to this cookie! Come on! Let's fog her out of there!”

The other said, hoarsely. “The human race is lower than damned animals!”

Doc Savage reached out in the darkness and took the first man by the neck, one hand back and below the ears, the other hand back and above the ears. The bronze fingers did something slow and skillful, grinding, exploring a little.

“*Ee-e-e-k!*” said the man, small and mouselike, and he became as slack as a sack of sticks.

Doc Savage lowered the man, who was senseless because of the skillful pressure on nerve centers.

The other had heard his companion squeak.

“What was the idea of making a noise like that?” he demanded.

The next instant he knew, because he made one himself, an almost identical noise, perhaps a bit louder than his comrade had made.

He fought madly. His gun went off, throwing a momentary red blush over the surrounding floor and showing, with almost imperceptible briefness, the sprawled form of the other convict. Then Doc laid the second invader alongside the first.

“Miss Yell,” Doc called.

“Oh,” said the girl’s voice. “So you didn’t run out on me?”

“No,” Doc said. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“That’s too bad,” the girl remarked grimly, “because now I’m going to run out on you.”

She did. Doc raced her madly to the opposite door, but she got through it, got it locked in his face.

It was a heavy door. The bronze man grasped the knob and exerted strength until the screw holding the knob to the lock spindle broke and the lock came away in his hands. He thumped the door once experimentally with a palm, then set himself on the slippery floor and gave a terrific smash. The panel split, let his hand through, and he groped for the key.

When he got the door open, the girl was gone.

Men seemed to be running all through the house. There was one shot, muffled, as if a firecracker had gone off under a tin can. Feet ran more swiftly. Men yelled.

Monk began talking in a high, yammering voice.

“Dag-goned lawyers!” he complained. “All alike! Knock a guy down so they can get away, and what do they do? Try to take charge of things and go one way while I go another! The dumb cluck of a fashion plate!”

A gun banged.

“Ouch!” Monk said. “Don’t you know you might shoot me?”

A harsh voice said, “Did I miss you?”

“About an inch.”

“I’ll try to do better!”

The gun slammed again. Monk emitted a piercing scream, a cry such as a man might give in the throes of violent death. Then there was silence.

The silence did not last long. There was a flurry of blows. Awful blows. They sounded as if a stake maul was beating a quarter of beef. A body fell.

Monk said, “You missed me farther the second time, you dope! I like guys like you! Easy to deceive!”

Other guns banged. Feet came running toward Doc. One man. The tread was a peculiar shuffle and skip which went with Monk’s squatty physique and bowed legs. The homely chemist came close.

“Monk,” Doc said.

“Boy, oh boy!” Monk chuckled. “Have I been having me a time! What makes this place so dark? It ain’t night.”

“Windows curtained,” said the bronze man. “How did you get away?”

“Some lug came and opened the door enough to let my fist out,” Monk said. “He fell over and me and Ham barged out.”

“Where’s Ham?”

“I told him which way to run and it made him mad, so he ran the other way,” Monk explained. “Here I am and no telling where he is.”

There was more shooting. A lone bullet came down the corridor.

“This way,” Doc said.

They ran on tiptoes and opened a door. This room was lighted by sunbeams stringing in through a tall window at the opposite end.

A man stood outside this tall window, his back braced against a porch railing, holding a submachine gun at a level with his waist. When he saw Doc and Monk, the gun opened up.

Glass fell out of the window. Doc and Monk separated. Doc picked up a chair crossing the room, to one side of the window, where the gunner could not see them. The fellow was driving short bursts through the window, nervously.

It had not occurred to him that his bullets might go through the wall of the house itself, the construction of which was not overly thick. But he would think of that soon.

Doc swung the chair through the window without showing himself. The gunner cried out just as the chair hit him. Doc glanced through the window and saw the fellow's heels sliding out of sight over the porch railing.

"Humpty Dumpty fell off his wall," Monk said, cheerfully. "Say, Doc, just what has happened, anyway?"

"The twenty men found in the convicts' cells seem to have organized a raiding party," Doc said.

Chapter 11

THE WORD TWISTER

THERE was swearing below the window, where the man with the machine gun had fallen. He had evidently taken quite a spill, since this portion of the house, which faced the Potomac, was high, due to the downward slope of the ground. Sounds indicated other men were running toward him.

“Hadn’t we better do something?” Monk wanted to know.

Doc said, “We will try to find my gadget vest where that chap Landerstett removed it.”

“Wherever that guy is, I bet he’s talking,” Monk grunted, and followed the bronze man.

It was surprising that they got through the house without being sighted or shot at, for the place seemed to be alive with the raiders. Once they came to a window, and through it could see a large hole blown in the ground beside one of the neat, white outbuildings. The outbuilding was no longer neat and white, but a wreck.

“They blew that hole there,” Monk muttered. “But why?”

Doc indicated pipes and a liquid which was pouring into the hole.

“They blew up the pipes which carried the poison into the lawn sprinkling system,” he pointed out.

“Oh!” Monk looked wise. “Then they had been here before. They knew how things were fixed.”

Doc did not reply, but entered the room where Max Landerstett had placed the articles taken from Doc Savage and his two aides when he had searched them. The bronze man scooped up the vest with many pockets holding his scientific gadgets.

“I’ll take Ham’s stuff,” grunted Monk. “We’ll run into the strong-headed shyster around here somewhere. I hope he gets pushed around some by these guys, though. Running off like that because I told him which way to go!”

Monk sounded worried, and was plainly talking because he was afraid something *had* happened to the dapper Ham.

Doc slipped into the vest and stripped the zipper fastening shut. The foundation of the vest was a light chain mail of a metal alloy of remarkable

strength. It would stop anything short of a modern military rifle bullet with an armor-piercing cap.

Monk was also slipping into a bulletproof undergarment. He draped Ham's bulletproof vest over an arm.

"Now I'm really ready to go to town," he said.

They eased over to a window, looked out. The window faced the Potomac, and the scene looked calm. The waves caused the flashy cabin cruiser to snub gently at her springlines.

Monk began, "She's a nice-looking boat, but——"

Doc caught his arm.

"Huh?" Monk gulped.

Doc pointed, saying nothing.

Monk peered, saw. "The girl!"

Sandy Yell was prone in the shrubbery, crawling furtively across the lawn and doing a very good job of it. They would not have seen her at all, except for a tiny open space which she had to cross.

"I don't see her pal, Mister Talking Machine Landerstett," Monk muttered.

"You'll have to follow her," Doc said, and began opening the window.

"Me?" Monk gulped. "But Ham is——"

"You," Doc told him. "I will do my best about Ham."

Monk said earnestly, "Believe it or not, I'd give my right eye if Ham don't get killed!" He eased out of the window and crouched in the shrubbery below.

"But I hope he gets his socks whipped off!" he added, and crawled away, following the girl.

Doc Savage remained where he was, just inside the window. Monk was taking no small chance, and if he were discovered, Doc intended to divert some of the attention in an effort to enable the homely chemist to get to safety.

But they did not discover Monk.

Doc backed from the window, turned right through the most convenient door, and stopped to keep from stumbling over a body.

The body was that of Sigmund Hoppel. A heaving of the massive chest, a writhing of thick fingers showed that it was not a dead body.

Doc scooped the man up. When he was moved, Hoppel groaned and finally got one eye open.

“I’ve been mangled, positively!” he said thickly. “I am the next to dead!” Doc said, “Where are the others?”

“I wouldn’t know,” groaned Hoppel. “My head! They knock on him with a damned gun when I am look in other direction! Good night—listen!”

They listened, although it was hardly necessary. They could not have helped hearing. Guns were banging. Men yelling.

“Somebody else has joined the fight!” Hoppel gulped.

Doc Savage and Hoppel looked cautiously for a window, but before they found one, the fight had reached its culmination. One crowd of combatants was in flight.

It was the latest entrants into the scrap who had been whipped. Doc got enough of a glimpse of them to recognize them. The convicts!

The humpback, their leader, was with them!

McGinnis, who had been Doc’s prisoner, was one of the crowd.

The convict raiders must have struck suddenly, and they had accomplished something. They had taken some prisoners.

The prisoners seemed to number three. They were tied up with lengths of cloth, probably window draperies, and gagged abundantly, which made it difficult to identify them.

Hoppel said, “Your man Ham, mine friend De Faust, and dat bummer, Max Landerstett. Dat is who they have tied up.”

Doc said nothing, but watched. The fleeing convicts and their prisoners were running down the hill toward the wharf. Their destination became apparent.

They were making for the cabin cruiser. The humpback led the retreat, bending low, for there was still shooting. It was impossible to tell, even in broad daylight, whether the unique creature was man or woman in gender.

They all got aboard the cabin cruiser, cast off the springlines and the craft surged with them out onto the calm Potomac.

The other men, the fellows who had been found in the penitentiary cells so inexplicably, kept up a rattling fire that was ineffectual, and the cabin cruiser got out of range.

“I am not happy!” Hoppel groaned. “Now they will turn on us!”

He had made a good conjecture. The men scattered, and a fusillade of bullets came in the direction of the house, making a great deal of ugly noise.

Hoppel gulped, “They are taking her up where they left off! Poy, Oh poy! Them other fellers, that humpback and his convicts, just ran in, grabbed their prisoners and ran away again!”

Doc Savage said nothing in reply. The bronze man seemed to be deliberating. Unexpectedly, his faint, small trilling note came into being, ran up and down the musical scale and trailed away.

“Come on!” the bronze man rapped. Without waiting for an answer, he knocked glass out of a window with a chair and dived headlong outside. An instant later, Hoppel landed alongside with a loud spat, as if a big piece of liver had been dropped.

“Me, I think we are crazy!” he gasped.

The men who had been substituted for the convicts in the penitentiary cells began shooting more rapidly. The bullets made rodent noises over the heads of Doc and Hoppel, but could not reach them because of the slight bulge in the lawn around the house.

“Them fellers,” growled Hoppel, “sure belonged in the jail cells where they were found!”

Doc began to crawl away from the house.

“You get us killed!” Hoppel warned.

Doc said, “It is possible that we will get killed quicker if we stay.”

Hoppel trailed Doc, muttering, “Sometimes I am a mystery even to myself. Why I follow you, I don’t——”

The earth gave a great jump under them. The side of the house came sweeping over the earth, mashing down shrubbery, like a big white monster trying to lie down on the two men.

Doc grasped Hoppel, leaped madly, and got clear. Dust, smoke and flame climbed high into the air, carrying wreckage, which began crashing back to earth.

“Bomb,” Doc said simply.

Hoppel swallowed several times, and no color came into his face. At last he said simply, “My!”

The shots, which had stopped with the terrific explosion, resumed. Lead came snapping through the shrubbery where Doc and Hoppel lay, and Hoppel seemed to find his tongue.

“Dummers!” he squawled. “What you think you are do to me?”

The shooting promptly stopped. The men who had been doing the firing began to run away from the vicinity.

Hoppel gave Doc Savage an open-mouthed stare. "Did you done see what I just did?"

The bronze man said nothing.

"I tell them to stop," Hoppel muttered. "They did. Am I surprised? Poy! Next, you think I am their boss!"

Thin-wailing sounds came from the north, where Alexandria lay. The noises were vaguely like the night sounds of a distant coyote pack, except more long-drawn.

"Police sirens," Doc said. "The shooting has caused some one to call the State police. Our enemies heard the sirens."

Hoppel nodded.

Noise of automobile engines reached their ears, and it took no stretch of imagination to realize the raiders, the men who had just fled, were taking to cars in which they must have arrived quietly. The cars went away at a high rate of speed, taking a direction opposite that from which the police sirens were approaching.

Chapter 12

THE VANISHING SAILORS

HOPPEL complained, "They are getting away! We don't want that, do we?"

Doc demanded, "Want to stay and watch your house?"

"There is so much left to watch!" snorted Hoppel. "Nix."

Doc said, "Come on!" and ran out of the elaborately landscaped grounds. A bridle path ran near the estate, and they got upon that and ran. Behind them, the wreckage of Hoppel's house had caught fire, and smoke, a dirty dark-brown in color, was bulging upward.

Hoppel began to pant at once. He panted with his mouth wide open—great, whooping pants which carried a distance.

"Poy, am I exhausting!" he panted.

They came in sight of the plane in which Doc and his aides had flown down from New York.

"I wondered where I was going!" Hoppel puffed. "Follow—cars—eh?"

"No," Doc said.

"Huh?"

"The boat," Doc told him. "We never saw the cars. How could we locate them on the road? Traffic is heavy around here."

The plane shook as Hoppel plopped his big weight into the cabin. The ship hardly vibrated as Doc got aboard, although the bronze man was probably heavier than Hoppel, even if he did not appear to be. Doc knew how to handle his weight.

The three big motors began to hiss through the silencer vents, and the propellers became almost transparent discs. Doc got the anchor up.

Seaplanes are notoriously hard to maneuver on the water. This one was equipped with brakelike scoops which, with the yank of a lever, could be projected to engage the water on either side, thus adding to the turning ability of the ship.

Doc got the plane turned, levered the scoops in, and came back on the throttles. The airship trembled, eased up into the air.

Hoppel must have flown before, as what modern person has not. He gave the take-off little attention, but kept his big nose mashed against the cabin window. He was watching the cabin cruiser. Doc banked the plane toward the fleeing yacht.

The cruiser was heading south down the Potomac. She had gotten up, by now, what must be about her full speed. The bows were riding on top; the stern was deep, and the wake crawled up behind in a great pursuing wave that threatened at any moment to come aboard. In the center, directly behind the stern, the propellers hurled up a great, steady spout of foam and spray.

Hoppel expressed it. "She has got a fire on her tail, don't it look?"

She had a machine gun on her foredeck, too, it became apparent. It was a small hand machine gun of the submachine type, and the ammo drums were sprinkled with tracer bullets. A bad weapon. Its slugs began to rattle on the cabin of the plane.

"I am brave same as devil," said Hoppel. "What you say we run away?"

Doc did not tell him that the cabin was bulletproof, that the motors were shielded, and that the most inflammable bullet could be fired into the gas tanks without danger of conflagration. The bronze man was watching a bomb sight. When he had it right, he touched a lever, and a single tapering aërial bomb arched downward.

It struck ahead of the cabin cruiser, and the water climbed up in a great mountain which caused the boat to rock and reel sickeningly.

In the rear of the plane was mounted a loud-speaker horn of the type used to broadcast aërial advertisements. Doc spoke into the mike which actuated this speaker, through a power amplifier.

"You will stop the boat!" he directed. "Then each of you will come on deck, throw down your guns and jump overboard! Such of you as cannot swim may wear life preservers when you go over!"

The words from the great loud-speaker were like small thunder.

The men on the deck of the power boat ran madly inside. In a moment, not a man was in sight. The boat began to slacken speed; it was plain that the engines were in reverse to hasten the stop.

"Poy, Oh poy!" chuckled Hoppel. "Did dem feller scare us, vice versa!"

The cabin cruiser came to a complete halt, rocking a little on the waves stirred up by the bomb. It was a gem of mahogany and chromium.

"She cost me forty thousand," said Hoppel.

Doc Savage sent the plane back not far above the surface, flake gold eyes fixed on the cruiser. He seemed to fly unconsciously.

“You had better begin to worry about your boat,” he told Hoppel.

“No?”

“Notice the boat topping. It is already under the water.”

Hoppel stared. He emitted a squawl of pain that must have been heard in Washington.

“Sinking!” he howled. “She is going up! First mine house, and now mine boat!”

He looked as if he were about to cry.

“That boat, she is eye of mine apple!”

The boat sank. The sinking was about as sudden as was possible for a boat of fifty feet. It disappeared, and water boiled and many bubbles came up.

No men appeared.

A deck chair floated, then some oars, driftwood, a life preserver or two, some cushions. A greasy film of oil covered the surface. Fully five minutes elapsed.

Still no men.

Doc Savage landed the plane on the water and taxied warily toward the spot.

“Maybe we have a trick,” Hoppel suggested.

Doc said nothing, but cut the motors so that the plane drifted over the spot where the yacht had gone down. The bronze man knew about how deep the water would be in this part of the Potomac. He dived.

The water was fairly clear. He had no trouble finding the sunken yacht. The boat lay on her side, and there was a great, gaping hole in the bottom amidships. Doc swam toward the hole. His eyes began to burn.

The burning in his eyes increased. He turned swiftly and swam to the top.

“What did we find?” Hoppel howled out of the plane’s cabin.

“The water is saturated with an acid which ate a hole in the bottom of the boat,” Doc said. “It is the same acid which was found in a freight car inside the walls of a penitentiary, and again, in an underground wine cellar chamber.”

“I don’t understand,” said Hoppel.

“A number of people do not understand,” Doc told him, and dived again.

His eyes burned when he went down, so he came up and waited. There was a strong tidal current which made it but a question of time until the acid would be washed away. The time interval was fifteen minutes, experiment developed, and after that, Doc went down without feeling the acid in his eyes.

The cabin cruiser lay in a scant three fathoms, a depth at which there was only a mild pressure. Doc was careful not to touch the edges of the hole in the hull which the acid had made, for some of the stuff might have stuck there. His tiny generator-operated flashlight would function under water, and he put it in use.

There was a hard sand bottom here. The water was rather clear. Oil streamers were climbing up out of the engine room. Wooden furniture and cushions were up against the topmost sides of the cabin. Some tinned cookies had gotten out of the container and, water-soaked, dissolved into doughy clouds when touched.

There was not a man aboard the cabin cruiser.

Doc made four trips down and he was sure.

Of Ham, Max Landerstett and Igor De Faust, there was no trace. There were no bodies.

“I am doing my best to believe it!” Hoppel said, earnestly, when Doc informed him of what was below. “Poy, am I struggling to believe it! But I don’t know!”

“You saw no one come to the surface?”

“Not a son-of-a-gun, yes!”

Doc filled vast lungs with air and went down again. The bronze man had learned the art of unequipped diving from men who were masters of it—the pearl divers of the South Seas, men who could remain beneath the surface as much as three to five minutes. Using the flashlight, he began to search the cruiser.

Only one thing aboard interested Doc. In the after cabin he found it. He brought it to the surface.

“What it is?” asked Hoppel, curiously.

“An old-time music box,” Doc said.

The music box was a large one, not the parlor type which were designed to sit on the whatnot and tinkle a tune when a lid was lifted, or when they

were moved. This one was more on the order of a street grinder's music box, although it was not fitted with carrying straps.

Doc lifted the lid. The mechanism looked intact, and there was a large brown envelope, water-logged, lying on top of the mechanism.

Doc cranked the music box. A whirring of mechanism responded, then a tinkling, jangling refrain which did not have much musical quality, but did have plenty of volume.

Doc opened the brown envelope. It held a typewritten note addressed to himself. The typewriter ink was waterproof enough that the missive was still legible.

DOC SAVAGE

You have heard the sound of a music box on two previous occasions, would have heard it a third time had the noise of your plane's engines been less, and so I knew you would be interested enough in this music box to take it to the surface. It seemed the logical place to leave this note, which I do want you to read and consider seriously.

I am engaged in a work for the good of the American public. That a few men must die is unfortunate, but not enough to sway me from my objective.

In fact, a campaign of terror is the only thing that will secure my ends.

You are at liberty to take whatever steps against me you wish. You would probably take them regardless of what I said. Of course, you will get killed, and your man Ham, as well as Syrmanthe Yell, Max Landerstett and the rest will die.

Use your own judgment.

I will sign this so you will recognize it—*The One with the Camel Back.*

Hoppel had been leaning over Doc's shoulder, reading, and now he snorted, "Max Landerstett!"

"Why?" Doc queried.

"Them long sentences, yes, no?" said Hoppel.

Doc offered no comment.

They taxied the plane around a bit, and Doc dived once more to the sunken cabin cruiser. He gave attention this time solely to the aperture eaten in the hull. The hole was located at the forward cabin, and it seemed as if the double-planked hull, the ribs, or frames, and much of the cabin interior itself had been eaten out by the acid.

He came up, got in the plane and taxied close to the wharf in front of Hoppel's estate. There was a slight breeze now, enough to keep the plane away from the wharf if it were lashed at the end of a long line.

Hoppel looked at what was left of his house and said, "Mine hermit days are over, or whatcha think?"

There was a crowd of curious people, two fire engines, firemen and several policemen about the house, which had by now rather burned itself to ashes.

Doc asked Hoppel, "Have you any idea why the humpback picked on you?"

"Was Max Landerstett who done the picking," said Hoppel.

"Thought of any reason for his holding you?"

"Yes, not a one."

"You have no idea of what is behind this?"

"Nix," said Hoppel. "Me, I am gasserflab—flattergas—stumped!"

Doc studied the big, strange-talking fellow. Whatever the bronze man's thoughts were, they did not show in his weirdly active flake gold eyes.

"What is your business?" Doc asked.

"Good feller."

"Eh?"

"I am just mix around, sorta circulate. Politicians, they eat and drink me outa house and home and patience. Some time, they do me a favor."

Doc said, "Lobbying must be profitable."

Hoppel sighed. "Oh, I run a holding company on side."

"Holding company?"

"Sure, Mike. We buy things and hope they go up."

Doc swung along the dock toward the shore.

"We will wait for Monk to report," he said. "Monk was to follow the girl, Sandy Yell."

But many hours passed and Monk was not heard from.

Chapter 13

MYSTERY'S REIGN

THAT afternoon, at five o'clock—a chance observer of what happened remembered that a bank clock was striking at the precise instant—a well-dressed man walked out of a governmental department building in Washington, D. C. The man was walking toward the corner when a humpback stepped out of a doorway.

The strange part about this was that none of the onlookers, and there were several before the incident was over, could tell for sure whether the humpback was male or female. All did agree that it was a horrible-looking character.

The humpback overtook the well-dressed man. He said something; nobody heard what, but it must have been a word to attract the other's attention, because the neatly clad man turned.

He was shot in the mouth as he turned. He was shot, as soon afterward as the humpback could pull trigger, in the right eye, the forehead, the right ear, successively. Then he fell on the sidewalk, and two more bullets scattered the contents of his skull over the sidewalk.

The humpback laid the revolver on the chest of the man just killed, then walked to a delivery truck parked near by. This truck had a completely closed rear, and it was later brought out, had been parked there for some hours.

The truck did not drive off. It just stood there. The camel-backed personage had closed the rear of the truck after getting in.

Every one who got near heard the tinkling of a music box which seemed to come from the interior of the truck.

Policemen naturally were not long in surrounding the machine, riot guns and tear gas ready. They yelled for the truck's occupant to come out.

The music box stopped. There was no other answer. The officers got up their nerve, got their guns ready, and advanced. Any one in the truck might kill a policeman or two, but would certainly be killed almost as soon. The truck was found unlocked, and when they opened it, empty.

It was, of course, quite impossible for the truck to be empty.

It wasn't, technically. There was no humpback inside. There was only a cheap music box, such as could be purchased at a number of large novelty shops.

This music box was later traced to a retail concern which admitted selling, not one box, but four dozen, to a humpbacked person. The clerks had been unable to tell whether the rather hideous camel-backed individual was a man or a woman.

By this time, the murdered man had been identified. He had looked commonplace enough, as an individual, in spite of his good clothing. Many insignificant persons wore high-class garments in Washington.

But this particular insignificant-looking man in good clothing had been hell on wheels.

He was a big shot in the U. S. Department of Investigation. A fellow who had made a remarkable record. He had been something of a dictator in the organization, a man who ran everything personally. This was unfortunate. His death left the department in poor shape to cope with what was coming.

In the Federal murder, and the ensuing disappearance of the slayer to the accompaniment of music-box notes, every one was struck with the similarity to the amazing affair where twenty convicts had vanished from a penitentiary. This was the only instance of a mysterious vanishing with which the general public was familiar.

The affair took newspaper headlines by storm.

Doc Savage appeared and examined the scene of the slaying. He was besieged by reporters, photographers and police officers. He told little, said he was merely curious to see what he might find, and added that he had found nothing. "Not even a music box."

He did not explain what significance he believed the music box had.

A number of newspapers remarked on the coincidence of Doc Savage's appearance on the scene of the disappearances. One or two editorial writers criticized the bronze man for not telling all he knew to the police.

They did not explain how they had any means of knowing Doc had not told all he knew. They just took it for granted that he hadn't. It made a good subject to write a critical editorial about.

Editorials are more often destructive than helpful, and these were no exception. They had one effect which no one realized at the moment, since no one knew what the future held. They started the public thinking.

Doc Savage retired from the public eye, as far as any one knowing his personal whereabouts was concerned. As a matter of fact, he joined Hoppel in a Washington hotel, where Doc had a telephone connected—through the courtesy of the telephone company—with the telephone in his New York headquarters.

“Any word from Monk?” the bronze man asked.

“Yes, sir, not a word,” said Hoppel. “Everybody else, she forget to call us, too. Them newspaper fellers, I should think they keep ringing down.”

“This telephone is a private number,” Doc explained. “No one but my five aides know it.”

Hoppel raised his brows. “Five?”

“The other three are abroad at the moment,” Doc replied. “In Europe, as a matter of fact.”

The hotel employees knew Doc was in the hostelry, but they kept their mouths shut because they had been promised, if any of them talked, they would be discharged. Newspapermen called every Washington hotel, but failed to find Doc.

Then something else happened that caught the attention of the working press.

Several things, rather.

New York newspapermen got a telephone call. It was a terse call, placed in a distinctive voice which sounded as if some one was speaking through the nose alone. Not a journalist was able to swear honestly that he could tell whether the caller was a man or a woman.

The scribes were advised to go to the offices of a large insurance company and inquire concerning twenty million dollars' worth of government bonds, held by the company in its vaults. The newspapermen were advised to ask to examine the bonds, and to have an expert along.

They were also advised to ask for the chairman of the board of directors and to take a good look at him.

The gentlemen of the press found it easier to take a look at the chairman of the board, who was a pompous fellow with a wealth of movie dignity, than to examine the twenty million in bonds. They were laughed at the first time they asked to see the bonds. They argued, as newspapermen can, and in the course of time, got to see the bonds.

The whole twenty million dollars' worth of good government bonds were not good. They were counterfeits.

The counterfeiting job was not good enough to fool any one who had ever seen an Uncle Sam bond, and for the life of them, the insurance people could not explain how they had taken the place of genuine bonds.

Nor was this a fraction of the sensation. The journalists looked around for the chairman of the board, the pompous chap, to ask him some more questions. He was nowhere in sight, could not be found.

An hour later, the current warden of Sing Sing Prison called up to say he had found a strange man in his penitentiary. How this man got there, the warden was unable to explain. Furthermore, the man himself was unable to explain it.

The man said he had been walking in the hallway of his office building when a man with a cane had stopped him and asked directions. While they were talking, a strange fainting spell had come upon him—and he had awakened in Sing Sing.

The man found in Sing Sing was the chairman of the board of the insurance company which had discovered twenty million in counterfeit bonds in its vaults.

The public had a hearty laugh over the affair. It looked like some titanic practical joke.

But that afternoon, newspapers connected the incident with the Federal killing—for what reason, nobody was sure. But nevertheless the two were mentioned together, and certain persons began to stop and think.

They had a night to think in.

The next morning, newspapers received another telephone call. In Washington, this time. Reporters were advised to go to the home of another well-known insurance man.

The scribes were also advised to look closely at a water glass standing on a table, or have a finger-print man do so.

The gentlemen of the press broke speed records getting to the house.

They found the well-known insurance man as dead as he might be expected to be with an antique sword out of his own library sticking through his vitals.

A finger-print expert went over a glass tumbler found on the table beside the corpse. He found prints, and compared them, as a matter of course, with a record of prints in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's files.

The prints were found to belong to a man who, as far as any one knew, had never been in the insurance man's home. The glass was checked closely

and found to belong to a set of glassware which the insurance man's servants were positive had been in use for some time.

The man whose prints were on the glass was Doc Savage.

Doc Savage was in his Washington hotel when newspapers hit the streets carrying the finger-print story. The bronze man went into the bathroom and looked at the glasses there.

His exotic trilling sound, which he made without thinking during moments of mental stress, came into being and ran up and down the musical scale.

This time, the sound conveyed disgust. For years, Doc had trained himself to note every suspicious thing occurring around him, a training which had saved his life on several occasions. But this time he had neglected to note that a different type of drinking glass had appeared in the bathroom.

"How was it happened, you would ask," said Hoppel.

"Our humpbacked friend," Doc explained, "knows we are here. A glass was filched from the insurance man's home, placed where I would use it, then taken and placed where it would seem that I had used it on the murder scene."

"Hah!" snorted Hoppel. "Nobody would know that a killer would not stop and take a drink and leave his finger prints on a murder job, not an up-to-date criminal."

"But the prints were there," Doc said. "That will be something to explain."

The bronze man began getting his equipment together.

"They are going to run from us?" big Hoppel demanded.

"We are not exactly going to run," Doc told him. "We will simply change hotels."

The bronze man exercised ingenuity in making the shift from one hotel to another. They changed taxicabs several times, once near one of Washington's beautiful parks which had a large thicket of evergreens. They strolled in one side of this carrying their bags, and strolled out the other side as two gentlemen of color, very African in air.

"Poy, Oh poy, listen to mine Ethiopian accent!" Hoppel grinned.

He spoke a few words of Ethiopian—better Ethiopian, in fact, than he spoke English—to show how he could handle the tongue.

They went to a hotel which catered exclusively to the Negro class, a very neat hotel.

“You will wait here,” Doc Savage told Hoppel.

“Sure, Mike. But what for?”

Doc did not tell him. The bronze man left the hotel, and went to the largest Washington newspaper want-ad office, where he inserted an ad in the leading afternoon and morning papers.

It read:

ALUCOATL—Please return and all will stop insulting Nora’s Nephew.

Doc paid for several insertions of this simple code message to indicate his whereabouts to Monk. The word “Alucoatl” was from the peculiar offshoot of the Mayan tongue which they used, and was a synonym for attention. The rest was simpler. The first letter of each word was taken, with the word “stop” indicating the end of a word.

Doing this, the translator of the want ad would get two words, “Praaw Inn.” Praaw Inn was the name of the hostelry where Doc had taken headquarters.

The bronze man took the next plane for New York.

Plain-clothes men were watching Doc Savage’s New York skyscraper headquarters, somewhat to the bronze man’s surprise. At one time, he had been on the best of terms with the police, but lately they had been quick to ask questions when anything out of the way happened.

A change of police commissioners accounted for this. But even so, the bronze man was surprised to find that a dragnet was out for him on such slim evidence as finger prints on a glass in the U. S. Treasury building.

The real reason for the police surveillance of the place was made evident through a gesture by chance.

A newsboy came past, bellowing, “Read about it! Big news of year! Read about it!”

He was almost abreast before he exploded his bombshell.

“Doc Savage suspected of murders!” the newsboy whooped. “Read about it!”

Doc bought one of the papers and read it in the seclusion of a subway men’s room.

A telephone call had come to the Washington police from another insurance official, asking them to call on him immediately, indicating that he had something of great importance concerning the counterfeit government bonds.

They called on him and found him with a knife sticking in his heart. He had been dead no more than five minutes. The peculiar nature of the knife caused it to be examined at once. An expert from the museum said it was an ancient Mayan sacred ceremonial knife.

Doc Savage's finger prints had been found on the knife.

There was no difficulty learning they were Doc's prints because Doc, along with a great many other persons, had placed his fingers prints on record for use as an identifying medium in case of accident.

Doc discarded the paper, went out and entered the subway tunnel, choosing a moment when no one was looking. He ran down the tracks, reached a niche, ducked into it, and did things to the wall with his hands. A moment later, he was through a concealed door and traversing a dark passage which led under the skyscraper.

The passage terminated at a door which admitted into the shaft through which traveled a pneumatic car running, for special rapidity of transit, between the eighty-sixth floor aerie and Doc's water-front warehouse and hangar.

Doc manipulated buttons alongside the hatchlike door. An instant later, the car arrived. It was bullet-shaped, and did not have much spare room. He entered, closed the hatch and moved the controls.

His skyscraper laboratory, when he stepped from the concealed door which admitted the pneumatic car, was empty. He went directly to the reception room, and to the big inlaid desk which was a prominent piece of furniture there. He searched for an object which he always kept there. The object was gone.

It was a ceremonial Mayan knife which he had brought from a lost Central American valley on a previous adventure.

He examined the door. It was fastened with a mechanical and electrical lock of his own design, which depended on the action of radioactive material upon an electroscopic relay for its opening. The door was intact. Doc examined the windows. One had been forced, but cleverly.

Some one must have gained the roof—it was possible, for there was an observation rotunda and tower up there—and swung down at the end of a rope during the night and entered the place to filch the knife which, of course, would have the bronze man's finger prints upon it.

Doc Savage began assembling apparatus, the securing of which had been the purpose of his trip to New York. He did not have the apparatus already assembled, but spent a number of hours of intensive work in the laboratory, hooking it up and testing it. When he was done, three oversized suitcases would barely contain the stuff.

Doc sent the big metal suitcases by aërial express, and took a plane himself, returned to Washington.

He walked in on Hoppel carrying the suitcases, and Hoppel said, "A gentleman called, said he was answering 'Alucoatl's' want ad, no less. He give us a number for you to call."

Hoppel handed over a slip of paper with a stiffly penciled telephone exchange and address upon it.

"You might ask for Cedric, dot feller say," he remarked.

There was a telephone in the room, and Doc used it. A man's voice, loud, rather insolent, answered, and it seemed that Cedric was some distance away, because an interval elapsed before he came to the telephone. During the interval, Doc could hear the *click* of billiard balls, the gusty laughter of men.

Cedric was Monk.

Chapter 14

A NEAR CAPTURE

MONK said, "Listen, Doc, we're in a heck of a jam!"

"Something like that," Doc admitted.

"You're accused of two murders!"

"True," said Doc.

"No telling what has happened to Ham!"

Doc did not comment.

Monk groaned. "And this girl, Sandy Yell, in whom I was beginning to have some faith, is conflabbing with that humpback!"

"*Where?*" Doc's one word was a metallic clang.

"Meet you at Fourteenth and 'G' Streets and show you."

Doc hung up.

"You can come or you can stay," he told Sigmund Hoppel.

"I come," said Hoppel. "To get at bottom of this mess, I am champing at the bit."

Doc picked up the three big suitcases which he had brought from New York, and carried them out of the Praaw Inn.

At Fourteenth and "G," a swarthy, stoop-shouldered street cleaner was swinging a broom. He seemed to not even look up when Doc and Hoppel came in sight in a rented car. The broom described erratic sweeps, two or three to the right, one or more to the left, with pauses between.

Any one familiar with semaphore code, and with reason to be on the alert, would have been able to read the sweeps of the broom, spelling out, "A-r-o-u-n-d c-o-r-n-e-r a-n-d p-a-r-k."

Doc pulled around the corner, parked, and before long, the street sweeper came up. Under the black-billed white cap, Monk's homely face showed.

"Didja notice how that street shines?" he asked. "I been manicuring it for two hours now."

Doc did not get out of the car. "Where are they?"

"House in the middle of the block," Monk said. "The one with the two cement dogs in front of it."

“You and Hoppel wait here and watch the car.”

Doc got into the rear seat and opened the three big metal suitcases, dragging out an array of contents which looked complicated—and proved complicated judging from Monk’s bewildered expression when he leaned forward and stared.

“Your new noiseless, high-voltage portable generator set,” he said. “But what’s the other stuff?”

Doc did not answer. He began hooking the apparatus together. Several times, he took bearings on the house where Monk said the blond girl was conferring with the humpback. The exact location of the house seemed to have a good deal to do with the apparatus he was rigging.

With fine disregard for the rental company’s property, Doc opened a set of large holes in the top of the car—the machine would later be paid for—and erected an array of metal tubes, shaped somewhat like a large reflector, thereupon.

All of this work took time, and Monk squeaked, “This ain’t the best moment in the world to kill a lot of time.”

Doc spoke without looking up from his work. “On the results secured by this device may depend a great deal.”

“Well, what is it?”

Doc seemed not to hear, which was a small, often vexing habit he had when not wishing to commit himself on a point.

It was nearly half an hour before he seemed satisfied and moved away.

The house Monk had indicated was an old brick box, three stories high, a fourth as wide, and with a bulge of bay windows up and down the front. The door was reached by a long flight of cement stairs, bordered by bulky cement railings, at the lower ends of which sat burly concrete bulldogs.

Doc went in the back, first climbing a fire escape and finding all of the windows were locked, then taking out a section of a glass pane with a diamond cutter and a wad of adhesive gum to keep the fragment from falling inward. He made the aperture large enough to admit his person, which was just as simple, for the pane was big.

The interior of the house smelled of old plaster and disuse. The gluey, featherlight feel of cobwebs kept stroking across his features.

Doc came to a door, tried it and got it open noiselessly. Light was faint, but enough to show him a litter on the floor—a litter usual to houses long

vacant. The walls were papered, and mice had chewed off a lot of the paper in little pieces, probably intrigued by the taste of sweet paste underneath. There was another door at the end of this room. Doc stopped. Voices came from it.

Sandy Yell said, "I am to go to Doc Savage, tell him this imaginary story which will lead him into a trap, and you will kill him. Is that it?"

"Admirably put," said the nasal, disguised voice of the humpback. "I shall also make it look as if Doc Savage killed himself rather than be captured by the police."

"How will you do that?"

"I will telephone the police a tip where to find the man of bronze. Just as they arrive, they will hear the shot which kills Doc Savage."

There was an interval of silence. Some one breathed loudly enough for it to be heard by Doc, who was listening.

"You—you—devil!" the girl gritted. "You have gone completely insane!"

The humpback laughed. "I am engaged in a work for the good of the world."

The girl spoke hoarsely and rapidly. "That is what I thought at first, or I would never have gone into it!"

"Now don't excite yourself, my dear!"

"Excite myself?" shrilled Sandy Yell. "When I was tricked into this? When I was told there would be no killing, that no one but the—the organization—would be harmed? When I thought—thought I was helping get my brother—out of the penitentiary?"

"You did cause him to be freed, my dear."

"Free? When you have dosed him with something that will kill him unless he can get those black pellets from you? You call that freedom?"

The humpback rapped, "Lady, you are in this too deep to do anything about it!"

"What do you mean?"

"What do you think Doc Savage would do if he knew your name is really Syrmanthe Yeltona McGinnis?"

"I think he already suspects it," said Sandy McGinnis in a small voice.

The humpback snorted, said, "You are crazy, my dear!"

"I doubt it," said Sandy. "And I am not going on with this thing! I quit!"

The nasal voice whickered in something that was part chuckle, part guffaw. “You forget that I have Max Landerstett, your boy friend. Something that is not nice might happen to him, if you refuse to trap Doc Savage.”

“I,” said Sandy, “have something, also. Look!”

The humpback grunted. “A gun!”

“It’s a little gun,” Sandy stated, calmly. “But it will kill a man, or a woman—whichever you are.”

There was a short interval of impressive silence.

“What do you propose to do?” asked the nasal voice.

“Take you to Doc Savage, if I can find him,” said Sandy McGinnis. “Maybe that’ll make up for some of the dirty work you made me do earlier, when I foolishly thought I was helping to clear my brother!”

“Ah!” said the humpback.

“Now,” declared the girl, “I am going to come over and yank off that wig and that witch’s false face and see who you are. As a disguise, it’s a silly get-up, but I must admit it’s effective.”

There was sound of steps, then a loud blow. A strangled cry. It was shrilly feminine. A form fell. Feet ran rapidly away.

Doc whipped into the room.

The chamber was big, as wide as the house, and longer than it was wide, and since it was on the top floor in the center of the building, light came only from an expensive skylight in the roof. There was dust and tracks and a slumped form on the floor.

The form was gnarled and grotesque. It had long hair, a hook-nose, an unnatural face and a hump on its back, and it lay quite motionless, one gloved hand mashed underneath, the other outflung.

Doc whipped past the sprawled figure and toward a door which was just closing. The door got shut and its lock *clicked* before he reached it. Doc hit the panel. It was stouter than was to be expected. He used a foot and rammed at the panel near the lock. It held. The door was stout.

Doc withdrew and got one of his tiny, explosive grenades out of his pocketed vest. But he did not hurl it at the door immediately; rather he seemed to be waiting for something. And what he was waiting for came shortly.

A scream. A sound of unutterable agony. It rose and rose and gagged off in a sob that was like something big being pulled out of soft mud.

The scream was shrill. It might have come from a woman, from a man.

There was a pause.

Then the scream was repeated, guttering, frightened as well as agonized. After that, feet ran.

Doc tossed the grenade. The explosion knocked him back a little; then he went forward, and through the door which had been blown down.

Feet were running toward the front of the house, running madly. Then they were going downstairs.

Doc paused in crossing the room, paused to stare at the horrible thing which lay on the floor, almost in the middle of the room.

The thing was a shapeless blob of flesh. Human flesh—you could tell by the skin upon one side of it.

Doc went on, and down the stairs, after the running feet. He heard the front door slam, and knew his quarry was already out. He reached the door. Not locked. He opened it—and ducked backward.

There must have been six or eight men stationed in the street outside, all with sawed-off shotguns and machine guns. Slugs seemed to come through the opened door by bucketfuls. None of them, however, penetrated the brick walls of the old house, and Doc was to one side of the door, behind the walls.

The roar of gunfire was ragged and loud. Almost at once, inhabitants of the neighborhood began to howl in fright—and, no doubt, to call the police.

Doc heaved a few anaesthetic grenades into the street. There was not much chance of their doing good. They were only effective over small areas, these midget ones, and none of the gunners in the street were near the house door.

The gunners began shouting at each other. It seemed that they had been ordered to retreat.

They had cars handy, judging from the sound of motors starting. Doc took a chance and looked out.

The raiders were the convicts who had vanished from the penitentiary so mysteriously.

The gunners had cars, big, powerful, but inconspicuous machines. They went away rapidly.

Doc ran out and down the street, heading for the spot where he had left Monk and Hoppel. He expected to use the rented car for pursuit, although

the machine was a stock job and probably had the throttle set so it would not do over fifty.

Renting companies frequently did that. Barring that, it was doubtful if the machine would be of much assistance against the powerful cars of the fleeing convicts. Doc came in sight of the car.

Hoppel was sprawled out on the sidewalk beside the machine, his face mashed down on the concrete in a widening puddle of red liquid from his body.

Monk was gone.

The car's four tires had been cut open neatly with knives.

Doc Savage ran to Hoppel, picked him up, and perceived that the man's nose and lips were mashed, and that he had a cut and a knob on his big head. He was breathing, and not even completely unconscious.

"Woe is me!" he groaned. "Poy, the guy who first said that should be in my shoes!"

Doc rapped. "Where is Monk?"

"They took him away!" moaned Hoppel. "Poy, can dat feller Monk fight! Mit each hand, he lick three fellers! But they was too many for him!"

"The humpback's men got him?" Doc asked.

"That's the fellers!"

Chapter 15

THE TRAP

HOPPEL was able to walk. Doc helped him, and they ran back to the corner, down the street and into the house where the girl had met the humpback.

There were people in the street, and they saw Doc Savage and naturally, since the newspapers had been carrying his pictures all over their front pages, recognized him.

“Doc Savage!” a man yelled.

“He’s wanted for murder!” another voice cried out.

Doc got Hoppel inside the house and shut the door.

“Poy!” said Hoppel. “Are you getting in deeper and deeper!”

Doc ignored the comment, asked, “How did the mob happen to get Monk?”

“They sneaked up on us,” said Hoppel. “They must have been watching dat place.”

“Had it covered, to protect their chief,” Doc agreed.

There was some shouting out in the street. A lone policeman was blowing his whistle, probably when he should have been at a call box putting in a call which would bring radio cars to the scene. So far, no other policemen had arrived on the scene. Doc led the way up the littered stairs.

Hoppel said, “If you would ask me, you would be told we should be getting far away from here in a little time. Them policemen, they will be too glad to see us.”

“Right,” Doc agreed. “But first, there is something else to take care of.”

“Eh?”

Doc Savage led the way into the room where the gnarled, shapeless figure lay on the floor and pointed.

“There,” he said.

The effect that the sight of the figure had on Hoppel was marked. The big man’s face, ordinarily benign and grinning, took on an expression of utter ferocity. He lunged to one side and picked up a scrap of wood, a bit of

two-by-four perhaps three feet long. He lifted this clublike and sprang in upon the sprawled figure.

“No!” Doc said, sharply.

The man, if he heard, gave no sign. Doc got in front of him and stopped him, blocked him. Hoppel struggled a little. Doc took hold of his arm and held him off, and Hoppel fell to staring at the bronze hand as if unable to credit such strength as was in the grip.

“Dat humpback!” Hoppel muttered. “Cause of all of this trouble. Burned my house. Killed them insurance mens that are my friends. Lemme fix ’im!”

Doc said, “You neglected to tell me these insurance men to whom queer things have been happening were your friends.”

“Sure.” Hoppel’s big face became inscrutable. “They are mine friends, a leetle. But what of it?”

Doc did not comment. He bent over, stripped the hideous mask from the features of the limp, humpbacked figure on the floor.

The face revealed was that of Sandy Yell, or Sandy McGinnis, as Doc had learned in eavesdropping upon the conversation with the humpback master mind.

Hoppel seemed too stunned for coherent thinking.

“Couldn’t be!” he gulped finally.

Doc still made no comment. Stooping, the bronze man gathered up the slender form inside the grotesque disguise. The young woman seemed to be unconscious from a blow.

“Can you walk?” Doc asked Hoppel. “There may be some climbing and running, too.”

“Like Napoleon maybe said, I can try,” muttered Hoppel.

They went on up to the roof, and found a trapdoor which passed them to the top. These houses were built side by side, with no space between, but this house was taller than any of the others.

Down in the street, a police siren was caterwauling. It came up, dying with that peculiar sour moan of which only police sirens seem capable. So far, only the one car seemed to be coming to the scene. No other sirens could be heard in any part of the city.

Doc whipped from inside his clothing a silken cord, thin, immensely strong, to which was affixed a collapsible metal grappling hook. He tied the cord around Sandy McGinnis and lowered her.

“Can you slide down?” he asked Hoppel.

“I should say no,” Hoppel gulped dubiously. “But I will try her.”

He did try, and only fell the last ten feet to the roof below. His groan of anguish was a houndlike howl, but fortunately there was enough noise down in the street to conceal it. Doc hooked the grapple over the coping, slid down himself, and disengaged the grapple with a flip of the cord.

They went over rooftops to the end of the block, found a skylight which they could open, dropped down, and walked out into a crowd, carrying the girl. They had removed her humpback regalia and made it into a bundle which they carried along.

Doc kept his hat yanked down, his coat collar turned up. Hoppel, big and bustling, provided a nice bit of assistance.

“The lady has fainted from hearing the shooting,” he growled. “One side, you fellers.”

They got into a taxi. The driver looked them over, seemed to think deeply, then put his lips together in a tight line.

“I know you, Savage,” he said. “I know the cops are looking for you. I also know that you’ve done more good in this world than any living man, and anything I can do for you, I’ll do, and to hell with the cops!”

Doc said nothing, but studied the driver’s features.

“I mean it,” said the driver.

Doc said, “I know you do,” and got into the machine. “The Praaw Inn,” he added.

Doc Savage maintained, in up-State New York, a strange, secret institution to which he sent such crooks as he caught. In this institution, the criminals underwent delicate operations which caused complete loss of memory. All knowledge of their pasts was wiped out. The crooks then received a course of training in upright citizenship.

Not one of the criminals who had gone through Doc’s unique “college” had ever returned to the avenues of crime.

This taxi driver, solely by chance, was one of the “graduates.”

Sandy Yell—Sandy McGinnis to give her her correct name—must have returned to consciousness with the mental image of the scene as she had become senseless. She shrieked, or would have shrieked, had Doc’s hand not been over her lips an instant ahead of time.

She writhed, struggled, and even continued to fight after her eyes were open and seemingly full of comprehension. Suddenly, she relaxed.

“Oh!” she said, hoarsely. “All of the time I was senseless I kept fighting that—that—humpbacked monster!”

Hoppel leaned forward and said, curiously, “You are the humpback?”

“What?” The girl frowned. “Oh! You mean—you must have found me in that ugly rig! I had just been made to put it on!”

“Eh?” queried Hoppel.

“The humpback,” said the girl, “wanted me to trap Doc Savage. I was to wear the humpback disguise and go to Doc, reveal my identity and tell him I had learned where the secret of the whole mystery could be cleared up.”

She looked at Doc. “I was to take you to a spot where you would be shot. I refused. I tried to hold up the humpback, and the creature leaped at me—and that’s all I recall.”

That part of her story was substantially what Doc had overheard.

Hoppel frowned at the girl. “Miss, hadn’t you better tell us an up-and-up story?”

The girl seemed to consider deeply.

“I guess I had,” she said.

“Good!” barked Hoppel. “Now maybe we learn somethings!”

The girl stared at him.

“You won’t like it,” she said. “I am the sister of Jules R. McGinnis.”

That didn’t click, at first, with Hoppel.

“Well, what of it?” he asked airily. “I should know a McGinnis, maybe, no? I should——”

He stopped. He swallowed. Utter shock was evident on his features.

Doc Savage, shifting position without drawing attention to himself, got in a spot where Hoppel could not get out of the room via the door.

But Hoppel did not try to get out of the door. He grabbed a chair and with lightning speed, brought it down on the girl’s head.

Chapter 16

THE HUMPBACK ACCUSES

HOPPEL had seemed a big oaf capable of no great speed of movement. The truth now came out. He was chain lightning when he wanted to be.

Doc was in the air, springing forward, when the chair struck the girl's head. It was not a light chair. It broke from the impact with the girl's head, until it lost most of its shape.

Animal trainers often take a chair into the cage with them to fend off fierce jungle beasts. Hoppel used what was left of his chair to fend off Doc Savage now, trying particularly to strike at the bronze man's eyes. At the same time, Hoppel danced back toward the window.

He was astoundingly agile on his feet. Too, he did not indulge in any time killing when he came close to the window. He simply jumped backward through the glass.

There was a great uproar of crashing glass, and Hoppel vanished from sight. He landed in a court, on his feet, as nimbly as any cat. And he was off like an apple seed from between squeezing fingers. There was a door. He went through that.

It became evident that Hoppel had prepared in advance for this. He had a key for the door, and he used it. Doc hit the panel. It was an iron thing, too massive for even his developed strength.

Doc had to scale the wall to a window, a feat that took time and would have been well nigh impossible for lesser muscles. By the time he was out in the street, Sigmund Hoppel, hunched big and round as a bear on a shiny red motor cycle, was off in a volley of pops.

Doc did not even trouble to hail a car in an effort at pursuit. The motor cycle could equal the speed of a car, and it could go places where no car could go.

The bronze man, huge and dark in his Negro make-up, walked several blocks, entered a chain cigar store and asked, "Could Ah use yoah tel'fone, suh?"

"Go ahead."

"Yowsuh. Thanky."

He called the police, speaking in a voice which the cigar store clerk could not hear.

“Pick up a man named Sigmund Hoppel, head of a holding company,” Doc directed. “Hold him for investigation and sweat him. Tell him Igor De Faust has confessed the whole thing, laying all of the blame on Hoppel.”

“Say, who the hell are you to be giving us orders?” asked the policeman.

Doc hung up on him, left the cigar store, went to the Praaw Inn, and examined the girl. She was not dead, but she had a concussion, a bad one. Moving her would do no harm.

It would be hours, no telling how many, before she would revive to the point of being able to talk. The length of time was uncertain. No surgical skill would be of much assistance in shortening the interval.

While Doc was making her comfortable on the bed, the telephone rang. He went to the instrument.

“This is the Bureau of Investigation of the Department of Justice,” a voice said.

“Yes,” Doc said tentatively.

“You are Doc Savage,” stated the voice.

Something about the positive tone of the voice convinced Doc there was no need of neglecting to answer the statement. The other knew.

“What is it?” Doc asked.

“We just received a telephone call from a man who gave his name as Hoppel, stating that you could be found at that hotel, disguised as a Negro,” said the voice. “This man Hoppel naturally presumed we would arrest you.”

“Did he?” Doc asked vaguely.

“Listen,” said the voice. “The Bureau of Investigation is up against something that has it baffled, and we are not too proud to ask some help. We know your record. We have not the slightest doubt but that you have been framed with the evidence involving you in those two murders.

“No doubt you are investigating somebody’s activities, and that somebody urgently desires for you to be out of circulation, and took the framing method in an effort to accomplish it.”

“That,” Doc stated, “happens to be the truth.”

“I thought so,” declared the voice. “Now, here is what I want to ask of you. Come to my office, the office of the head of the Bureau of

Investigation, and talk this thing over with us. I am sure we can help each other. Will you do that?"

Doc said, without the slightest hesitation, "Of course."

But there was a small, queer light in the bronze man's flake gold eyes.

"If you wish, I can guarantee that you will be permitted to leave my offices without being molested, whatever the outcome of our interview," said the voice.

"That," Doc said, "would make it seem too much as if we were bargaining. No, thanks."

The two receivers fell on the hooks almost together.

Doc did not leave immediately. He got a few make-up items with which he had changed the hue of his own skin, and went to work on the girl. He darkened her hair, her skin, and in the course of a few minutes, she had become a mulatto with a remarkably pretty face.

Doc rented another room, ostensibly for his sister. He left the girl in it.

The doorman at the entrance of the building housing the Bureau of Investigation stared at him curiously when Doc entered. The elevator operator stared.

"Ever do any prize fighting, fellow?" he asked.

"No, suh," Doc said.

"You oughta. Man, you got the build!"

Doc had been in the offices of the Bureau of Investigation before. He went directly to the door of the chief, heedless of an admonitory gasp or two behind him, turned the knob and went in.

A man with a protruding jaw sat behind a plain metal desk enameled to represent wood. He was not an impressive man, except for his jaw. And maybe, to an extent, his eyes. He had a scrubbed look.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

Doc said, "Doc Savage. A few moments ago, a telephone call came to me, the caller stating that you desired to have a talk and guaranteeing me freedom from arrest for coming."

The man's jaw sagged.

Doc continued, "You did not make such a call, did you?"

"No," said the man. "We didn't. We don't make bargains with crooks."

If he had been bitten by the remark about crooks, Doc showed no sign. The other man was probably but stating a principle of his organization in general, without particular reference to the case at hand.

The man with the jaw now got up. He got up slowly, without effort, and as he moved a hammerless revolver appeared magically, almost, in his right hand. He did not point it at Doc.

“I have heard enough about you to think this is hardly necessary,” he said, with a slight nod at the revolver. “But we try not to take chances.”

Doc sat down in a metal chair.

“There was some reason for that call,” he said.

“There is some reason behind all of this,” murmured the man with the jaw. “But it is slightly elusive, to say the least.”

Doc said, “Would you care for a theory?”

The other eyed the bronze man intently. “From you, yes. I would regard it as being near the facts. But first, is this theory of yours fairly complete? Does it explain everything?”

“Just about,” Doc replied.

“Excellent! Shoot!”

A faint, nasal voice said, “Let me out!”

The man with the jaw started, peered about him, as if striving to locate the source of the faint, nasal voice.

“I don’t believe in spooks,” he growled. “But I’ll swear I heard one.”

“Please open this door and let me out,” said the faint voice.

Doc pointed. “Behind you. In there.”

The room had two other doors in addition to the one by which Doc Savage had entered. They were to the right and left, and the bronze man was indicating one.

The man with the jaw sidled to it, keeping his gun handy, if not pointed, reached out carefully, and grasped the doorknob.

“I can’t understand this,” he said. “This room has no other doors and no windows. It is used merely for records. But I guess some one could have entered when nobody was looking.”

He opened the door.

The humpback came sidling to the opening.

“I have come to tell the truth about the whole thing,” the strange creature said.

The room became so quiet that the *clicking* of a clock was like a movie ghost walking.

Chapter 17

TWO MEN IN A DILEMMA

THE humpback did not come out of the open door. The man with the jaw withdrew a pace, as if pushed back by astonishment and curiosity. He seemed unaware of the gun which the G Man held.

The humpback leveled an arm at Doc. The arm was shapeless in a voluminous sleeve which hid it all. The hand was gloved in black, and one or more of the fingers were either missing or doubled out of the glove fingers. The empty glove fingers hung limp and black and wrinkled.

“I have been shadowing Doc Savage,” said the humpback in the strange nasal voice. “I know all that he has done. Twice, I have tipped you off to murders which Doc Savage has committed.”

The Department of Justice man demanded, “Just who are you?”

“A private detective, employed by myself,” said the other, “and engaged in the business of seeing that right triumphs, and that this clever fiend, this man of bronze, is put where he can no longer deceive the world and further his own infernal schemes, at the same time pretending to be the modern version of an old-time knight in armor.”

Doc said nothing. His metallic features remained inscrutable.

“That explanation,” said the government man, “does not entirely satisfy me. My chief was killed by an individual who answered exactly your description.”

A whizzing cackle of derision came from the humpbacked figure.

“That killer was Doc Savage, disguised as myself,” the deformed one said. “I confess I will have difficulty proving it, however.”

“It will need proving!” snapped the government chief.

The humpback again leveled an arm at Doc. “Do not worry about me. Listen to what I am going to tell you.”

“Go ahead,” Doc suggested.

“Savage is here to make himself an alibi,” snarled the camel-backed individual.

“Alibi?” said the government man vaguely.

The humpback waved an arm. “He is here so that it will not look as if he is involved in another crime which is being committed now.”

The government man showed signs of intense interest. He leaned forward from the hips, and his prominent jaw came out noticeably.

“What in the devil are you driving at?” he grated.

The humpback’s disguised voice began to sound smug, self-satisfied. “Doc Savage’s men are now committing a crime. The bronze man himself is here so that no suspicion will point——”

“What are they doing?” yelled the government man with the protruding jaw.

“Robbing the private vaults of the International Mutual Insurance Co.,” said the humpback.

“The concern of which Igor De Faust is chairman of the board of directors,” Doc Savage said, apparently without relevance.

The humpback crouched a little.

“I hope you act on my information,” the disguised voice said.

Then the misshapen figure bounded back into the room and slammed the door. The humpback, it was noted, did not move with a great deal of agility.

The government man hit the door, and it stopped him dead in his tracks. He tried the knob, yelled, “Open this! Open this!” and as was to be expected, got no response. He drew his revolver and pointed it at the lock. But he did not shoot. Instead he paused to listen.

The sound of a music box was coming out of the room. A tinkling, small and vague, but with the notes coming in quick succession so that they made almost a continuous sound. The music covered whatever other little noises might have been made in the room.

“What the hell’s that?” gasped the man with the protruding jaw.

Doc said nothing. He dug into the tiny pockets in his vest, seeking the pocket which ordinarily held the tiny, explosive grenades. He found it, but it was empty.

“Get back,” he said, and picked up the metal desk.

He threw the desk. It made a great crash against the door, and papers and drawers flew. But the door held. Doc hurled the desk again.

Men, clerks and stenographers came into the office barking excited questions. The man with the protruding jaw waved them back.

“We’ve got the humpback in there,” he said. “The creature can’t get out, because the room has neither doors nor windows.”

Doc said, “Do not be too sure!” and hit the door again. It was giving. He discarded the table and used his shoulder.

“Let’s try this!” rapped the government man, and opened up with his revolver, splintering and mangling the wood around the lock.

The music box had stopped when the ringing echoes of the shots died down.

Doc hit the door again and again. The shots had not helped much, but finally, he got the panel open. He took one look inside, then stepped back.

The chamber was a solid one with no other doors or windows or other openings, and the floor, walls and ceiling did not look as if they held trapdoors—did not hold trapdoors, later investigation disclosed.

But the humpback had vanished quite thoroughly, and the only souvenir of the former presence of the queer creature was a tiny, cheap music box which stood in the center of the floor. Its spring was run down, and it tinkled away merrily when they wound it.

Doc looked, but there was no note inside.

The government man grabbed up some one’s umbrella and ran around the room, jabbing and whacking and tapping, as if he was sure there must be a mirror trick somewhere. He hauled up the rugs, moved the few cases, even hauled the books out of a bookcase.

“Dag-nab it!” he howled indignantly. “That’s impossible! It couldn’t happen!”

He continued to explore.

“You’re wasting your time,” Doc told him.

The government man came over and put out his prominent jaw. “Maybe you can explain what happened?”

Doc looked at him. “In your present frame of mind, you would think I was kidding you.”

“In my present frame of mind, I can’t think at all!” barked the other. Then he thought of something. He whipped out his gun, which he had dropped in the excitement, and pointed it at Doc.

“Arrest this man Savage!” he yelled. “We’ll see if that humpback told the truth!”

The continuous life in Doc’s flake gold eyes seemed to quicken. “You will then——”

“Take you to the International Mutual Insurance Co. and see if your helpers are robbing the vaults.”

“That will not prove me guilty of anything,” Doc said.

“Oh! Won’t it? And why not?” The government man sniffed as loudly as he possibly could. “And if that won’t, what will?”

In a few moments, they were riding behind screaming sirens through Washington. Passing in high-speed review, the city seemed more carefully laid out, more impressive.

The International Mutual Insurance Co. was a building that, like a fat man, inspired confidence. It was big and substantial, not a skyscraper, but a small “big” building rather, the effect of massive stolidity being acquired by girth of the columns in front and the proportions and cutting of the stone blocks which made up the structure.

The hour was now late enough that only a watchman was supposed to be on duty. They knocked, and rang the bell, but there was no response, so they broke in, but carefully, so as not to make too much noise.

They found the watchman standing on his head. He was in a broom closet scarcely large enough to hold him, and he was bound, gagged, and about dead from the rush of blood to his head. They turned him other end up and untied and ungagged him.

“Who did it?” he was asked.

“I didn’t see ’em,” he said. “They sneaked up on me. But one called the other Monk and that one called the other Ham.”

“Two of them? Names Monk and Ham?”

“I think so.”

The government man looked at Doc narrowly. “Your two aides now in the United States are called Monk and Ham.”

Another government agent came up. He had been making a furtive examination.

“The burglar alarm system is out,” he said. “It has been tampered with.”

Two men took up positions on either side of Doc Savage. They did not say anything, but they did not need to.

“Search the building,” the leader of the Federal men directed.

They went into the back, where the vaults were, with big steel doors as round as silver dollars and all studded with dials and incredibly strong-looking gadgets.

A government man who seemed to know something about safes pointed and said, "These boxes have been opened by somebody who was good. Look at the way the wiring is altered, and the holes cut into the lock mechanism with torches. It's as sweet a job as I ever saw, and I started in this detective game back in the days when safe-cracking was an art."

Doc Savage had said nothing, but now he spoke.

"There is some one in the vault," he said.

"Huh?" They stared at him.

"If you will listen close to the door you probably can hear the sounds," the bronze man explained.

They still stared at him. They had heard no noises, and still could hear none.

"He already knew there was some one in there," a man growled. "Only way he could tell! There ain't no noise!"

The leader of the Federal men shook his head.

"I've heard this fellow has managed to develop hearing that is more than normal," he said. "Go over and listen."

A man went over, mashed an ear against the vault door and looked surprised.

"Somebody's in there, all right," he grunted.

They began to work on the door.

"Seems to have swung shut on the guys inside, and the lock sprung itself, fastening them in," some one concluded.

They had trouble with the vault door.

"Let me try it," Doc suggested.

They stood back and let him.

"I will say," remarked the government chief, "that you are not hesitant about incriminating yourself. If you wanted to be sly, you would pretend you knew nothing about such a vault as this."

Doc said, "This frame-up is already so complete that a little incrimination will do no more harm."

He got the door open, and they grabbed his arms and hauled him back. He made no move at resistance, although his strength was sufficient to have bowled quite a few of them over and he still wore his bulletproof vest, which would have made their first shots ineffective.

Monk and Ham came stumbling out of the vault and had guns jammed into their stomachs and handcuffs snapped on their wrists.

Chapter 18

THE JAIL WAIT

THE jail was forty years old, and looked it. But they built jails as strong forty years ago as they do to-day. The jail was red on the outside, a hard stone quarried in Pennsylvania, and the walls were thick. The windows were not large and the bars over them were big. There was nothing modernistic about the place. No inmate could ever imagine for a minute that he was not in jail.

Bad actors had always been kept in the basement cells, which were smaller, darker and more secure. There was only one stairway, narrow, closed by two barred gates, leading to the second floor. A guard stood between these barred gates. He was aided by two more guards at the outer door.

All the guards had orders to keep their eyes open for a humpbacked person.

The guards knew the chief of the Bureau of Investigation, and they admitted him, passed him through the two doors into the basement. He approached the door of a cell.

“We went to the Praaw Inn and hunted for the girl named Syrmanthe McGinnis, who you said would be there,” he said.

Doc Savage, inside the cell, said, “*Was* there, not would be there.”

“Correct. Was there. Or so you say. She’s not there now, and there’s no sign of her ever having been there.”

“The hotel clerk knew I rented another room and placed her there,” Doc said.

“The clerk must have known something,” the government man said, dryly.

“What do you mean?”

“He was found in the room you had rented in the hotel,” replied the government man. “His brains were knocked out with a chair. Your finger prints were on the chair.”

Doc Savage’s metallic features did not change expression, but his small, exotic trilling sound came into evidence and seemed to penetrate to the far corners of the dank old red prison. This quality of penetration was especially

remarkable in that the trilling seemed no louder than usual scarcely a whisper.

“Am I accused of that murder?” Doc asked.

“You have been charged with it,” replied the government man. “That makes three of them.”

“All on circumstantial evidence.”

“Men have been hanged before on evidence no stronger.”

Doc said, “Is that all?”

“No.”

“What else?”

“You have been in here four days.”

Doc nodded. “Right.”

“During that four days, the outrages against insurance companies have entirely stopped,” said the government man. “That makes it look as if we had captured the person committing the outrages.”

“The person who framed us is clever,” Doc said. “Clever enough to stop working so that it would appear the worse for my men and myself.”

“That’s your story.” The government man shoved newspapers through the bars. “Maybe you’d like to read what your public thinks about it?”

“My public?” Doc asked, curiously.

“The newspapers have always held you up as quite a knight in armor, modern version.”

With that, the government man walked away.

Students of mass psychology have long realized that nothing is much more fickle than that ecstatic and unpredictable quantity known as public adulation. Nothing falls with quite the crash of a public hero. The bigger, the more famous the individual concerned, the stronger seem to blow the rumor gales.

DOC SAVAGE MAD GENIUS!

That was one of the headlines, in type three inches high, blood-red. A typical headline. Some of them did not use red ink, but they used red expletives.

They had editorials on the front pages. Editorials only go on front pages when a war is about to be declared or the day before election, ordinarily.

FEAR DOC SAVAGE MAY BE MAD MONSTER OF MANY MURDERS!

It seemed that the newspapers had been getting telephone calls from mysterious sources, hinting that many individuals had vanished after coming in contact with Doc Savage.

“Heck of that is, it’s the truth,” Monk grinned cheerfully. “Them’s the guys we sent to that secret criminal-curing institution of Doc’s in up-State New York.” Monk chuckled heartily. “Boy, has this thing stirred up a tempest in a teapot!” His chuckle became hearty laughter.

“Listen, O Man That Time Forgot, have you no sense of proportions?” Ham growled peevishly.

“What proportions?” Monk wanted to know.

“The proportions of this jam we’re in, you missing link!” Ham snapped. “How can you stand there and cackle like a hairy ape?”

“Why, anybody would laugh if he had to stand around looking at you in that funny striped suit!” Monk said cheerfully.

Ham glowered. He had considered it the height of indignity that they had been forced to don stripes in the jail, although they had as yet not stood trial.

Stripes, he knew, was an indignity inflicted upon especially recalcitrant inmates in most penal institutions. The stripes in their own case was a precaution to prevent their walking the streets unnoticed, should they manage to escape.

Ham, to get rid of Monk’s goading attention, turned to Doc. “Any idea just how this is going to turn out?”

Doc Savage did not respond immediately. When he did speak, it was to advance a question, “You and Monk learned nothing during the time you were held prisoners?”

“Not a thing,” Ham said. “We were drugged. We woke up in that vault, and that’s all we know.”

Monk said, “They glommed onto me on that street, where I was standing with Hoppel while you went to look for the girl and the humpback. Before I even noticed, they had me.”

“Not a difficult feat,” Ham said, sarcastically.

Monk snorted, picked up the newspapers and examined the inner pages. He grinned and snapped one journal open, passing it over for Ham’s

inspection.

“Take a gander at that,” he requested.

The item was a picture, a very good picture, of Ham’s pet monkey, Chemistry. The caption below read:

A PRODIGIOUS TOBACCO CHEWER WAS WHAT POLICE FOUND MONKEY PET OF MAD GENIUS DOC SAVAGE’S AIDE TO BE. OFFICERS ORDER BOX OF LONG GREEN TO KEEP ANIMAL HAPPY.

Ham yelled indignantly, “They’re spoiling Chemistry!”

“Say, he was spoiled by his Maker!” Monk grunted, and began reading another item about his pet pig, Habeas, who was being held by the authorities.

Time dragged. It had been dragging for the last four days. Monk and Ham, with their perpetual quarrel, had managed to occupy long periods, but the most violent altercation hardly led them to feel they were not behind stone walls.

Doc Savage had said little. He had voiced no theories he held, and that had borne down on the souls of Monk and Ham, who—Monk particularly—were verbose fellows. Monk and Ham had even tried to pump Doc, something they rarely did, because they knew it would do no good. It had done no good in this case.

Doc, they were convinced, had some sound suspicions. They even had a feeling that he knew exactly what it was all about, and what was what. But the bronze man never made any rash verbal conjecture on major theories.

It began to get dark in the cells. A jailor came with later afternoon papers. This was practically the only privilege the prisoners were allowed, and it was probably designed to break their spirit, for perusal of the sheets showed plainly that the public was overwhelmingly against the bronze man.

Doc read the papers. He spoke, calling attention to a point.

“None of the insurance men who were found in the penitentiary in place of the vanished convicts have been found,” he pointed out. “Sigmund Hoppel, Igor De Faust, Jules R, McGinnis and his sister, Synnanthe, or Sandy, have not been found. Nor has hide nor hair of the vanished convicts been located.”

“That’s why they’ve got us in the can,” said Monk. “They seem to think we can explain all about it.”

Ham said, "I'll be glad when we get out of here, believe me!"
He was not going to be glad. But he did not know that.

Chapter 19

THE TELEPORTER

THE guards at the jail were alert. They had been warned against a humpback, and although they believed the humpback had been Doc Savage in disguise, they were alert.

They were not, however, on the alert against a dapperly dressed man who strode up to the jail with a snappy stride and presented a folded paper.

The two guards at the outer door saw nothing wrong with the individual. One took the paper and unfolded it, the other staring over his shoulder.

There was a snapping noise as a spring affair similar to a mousetrap broke a tiny glass phial, and a cloud of vapor arose around the faces of the guards, who promptly fell over senseless.

The young man promptly worked the same trick on the inner guard, and, having secured the keys, unlocked the jail doors leading to the second floor.

The young man was one of the convicts released from the penitentiary at the beginning of the mystery of the vanishing humpback, but none of the guards had recognized him.

Striding back to the door, the young man whistled softly, one long and two short blasts.

“All right,” said a harsh, nasal whisper from the darkness. “Stand guard.”

The young man took up a position at the entrance.

There was movement, and an eerie-looking humpbacked creature came out of the murk, entered the prison, and went down into the basement.

An alarm bell promptly rang in all of the near-by police stations.

The alarm had been installed by a foresighted prison official who had an immense respect for the ingenuity of Doc Savage and had feared the bronze man would contrive to escape.

The alarm had been installed secretly, and was one of the new ultra-violet-and-photo-electric-eye type. The bell rang whenever any one walked through a beam of invisible light.

If a guard did not step on a secret button which caused the alarm to stop ringing, the call was to be taken as genuine. In this case, the guard who should have done the stepping was senseless.

So police reserves were on their way to the spot in a remarkably short time. They were shot at by the young man at the door. The shot drew a storm of bullets in return.

The young man sprang back inside, slammed the heavy-barred door, and made sure it was locked, on the principle that most jails are as hard to get into as they are hard to get out of.

There was a great deal of shooting, howling of sirens, and general howling hullabaloo. Doc Savage and his aides were getting away, the police thought, and they knew the newspapers would roast them out of their jobs if the bronze man was successful. This accounted for there being more confusion than was consistent with level-headed action.

Doc Savage, Monk and Ham were looking out of their cell when they saw a hideous humpbacked creature sidling down the corridor toward them.

It was dark in the cell house, almost as dark as it was outside, and by now night had fallen over the city. They had, as a matter of fact, observed the humpback in better light on other occasions. But that did not keep them from goggling now.

The humpback carried a pair of large metal boxes which looked almost identical. These seemed to be very heavy. The creature was breathing noticeably harder when the boxes were finally lowered to the concrete in front of the cell.

The misshapen creature stared about and discovered an electric light globe. The gloved fingers began unscrewing the bulb.

“This power outlet will make it simpler,” the creature chuckled. “But you three gentlemen had better hope the city don’t shut off the power unexpectedly.”

Monk growled, “What in blazes is going on here?”

“Quiet,” Doc advised. “Unless I am mistaken, you are going to go through something you never saw before, and which you probably believed impossible with science at its present state of advancement.”

The humpback looked up. At this close range, they could tell that the hideous visage was a mask. The eye holes were distinct, and one of the adhesive lips had come loose from the lip of the wearer.

“So,” the creature grunted. “You know a lot about it, eh? Maybe you know how it is done?”

Doc said nothing.

The humpback began opening the cases and setting up apparatus. The cases held, it developed, a remarkable array of gadgets.

An affair of rods and balls was clipped together and set up, and became a contrivance resembling vaguely the reflectors used in the directional transmission of ultra-short radio waves.

The humpback donned a headset and listened, the while carefully adjusting the direction of the reflector device.

There was a good deal of pounding on the jail door. Some one had sent for cutting torches. The fire department had two trucks on the scene by now, but they had not accomplished much. Unfortunately, the jail was just as impregnable from the roof as from the walls.

The humpback continued setting up the apparatus. The intricacies of an arrangement of portable electrodes were getting attention.

Unexpectedly, the eerie-looking raider advanced to the cell door, dangling three handcuffs.

“Extend your arms!” the nasal voice directed. “I am going to handcuff you to the bars!”

“Not me!” Monk growled.

The humpback produced a gun. “It makes no difference to me whether you are dead or alive when I do what I am about to do.”

To say Monk was impressed would be a vast understatement. The humpback seemed bothered not at all by the terrific uproar outside, and it would certainly be but a matter of minutes until the police broke in.

Doc advised, “Let him handcuff you.”

Monk did so. Ham was next. Then Doc.

“This is one of the big moments of my life, getting you,” the humpback said, calmly.

More work with the electrodes ensued. Finally, the humpback seemed satisfied.

Three small capsules were extended to the prisoners.

“Take these,” the humpback directed. “They are harmless, holding only a drug which will deaden some of the preliminary sensation.”

“Huh!” Monk growled contrarily. “Not me!”

“Suit yourself,” said the humpback.

The creature stepped back, picked up the electrode device at the end of a control rod, and stooping, manipulated several switches.

The gloved hand also whipped a music box from one of the cases and started it tinkling.

“This,” chuckled the nasal voice, “will lend the proper eerie touch, as well as cover the noise of the apparatus.”

The music box tinkle was sufficient to blanket any sounds the mechanism might have made. Even Doc and his aides could hardly detect the tiny, almost earhurting whine of high-frequency electricity.

The humpback approached the barred cell door to which Doc and his aides were handcuffed. The electrode device was held outstretched.

“As I remarked, you had best hope the electric current is not turned off,” the creature muttered.

Monk gaped, small eyes almost out of their sockets, so great was his suspense and interest. He watched the electrodes. The contrivance seemed to be filled with a bluish electric haze of some kind. He could not be sure. Then he noted the distinct odor of ozone.

The electrode approached Ham, who was to the left. Ham, suddenly and for no explicable reason, became as rigid as if turned to stone. His eyes, his lips, nothing, moved.

Doc was next. With the abruptness of a lightning stroke, the fantastic rigidity seemed to seize him.

Monk squawled. He couldn't help it. He threw back his head and yelled as he had never yelled before. His mind was wild; something was happening that he could not explain. And as the human mind will do in moments of intense stress, small things were noted with almost as much clarity as were major events.

There was, for instance, a fly upon the cell bar to which Monk was handcuffed. It was a large fly, a horsefly, and it did not move when Monk yelled. Monk wondered, quite madly, it seemed at the moment, if noise scared a fly at all. To save himself, he could not remember ever having seen a fly scared by noise.

Then the homely chemist saw something else, something his eyes could not credit.

Ham abruptly had no head.

Monk opened his big mouth so wide that his head seemed to have come in halves. He wanted to yell. He couldn't. He felt as if his heart were pumping lead, that it was clogging up and suddenly going to stop.

Ham had no head. Then he had no shoulders, no arms, no body. In a moment, he was just two legs, and a bit later, shoes and feet—and finally, nothing at all.

Monk made gargling sounds. He noted that the bars to which Ham had been manacled were gone.

The humpback's apparatus had sounded labored for a time, while Ham was being wiped away, but now it whined more freely and the humpback moved the electrodes toward Doc and Monk.

Doc was still rigid, had not moved.

Monk took his eyes from the bronze man, not wanting to see what had happened. He saw the big fly again. It had not moved.

Then the inside of his head seemed to become very black.

Chapter 20

THE PLOT

MONK yelled. The fly did not move. Monk waved one hand slightly. The big fly went away.

There was a jangle when Monk moved, and he looked down stupidly to perceive that the handcuffs were still on his wrist, and that the iron cell bar, which must have been through the handcuff ring, had made the jangle in falling out of the ring. The other cell bars lay near by.

Ham's voice said, "You brought part of the jail with you, Monk."

Monk started violently and looked around. He saw a sight which astounded him—and it took a great deal to astound him after what had just happened.

They were in some kind of a machine. An electrical contrivance. Incredibly complicated, judging from the wilderness of conductors, electrodes and electronic tubes. The device seemed contained entirely within the room, although there was a huge antennæ of unique type above the device.

Doc Savage and Ham were sprawled in the machine, almost at Monk's elbow. Even as he saw them, a large hook of a device came down from somewhere, grabbed Monk and yanked him roughly to one side.

"Might as well take them out," said a voice. "They might kick around and disturb the atomic reassemblance of the chief."

Doc and his two aides were hauled out of the pitlike interior of the device.

There had been a blinding blue light in the pit, they had thought. But it now became evident that this was some after effect residue in their eyeballs or optical nerves. The bluish glow seemed to be subsiding.

Arrayed around the machine was a crowd of heavily armed men. They must number nearly a score.

Jules R. McGinnis was among them. They were, then, the convicts who had vanished so mysteriously from the penitentiary.

Monk grunted loudly. He was beginning to understand how the convicts had gotten out of the pen in such an uncanny fashion. There had, he was sure now, been one of the humpback's weird machines hidden in the freight

car. After it had served its purpose, it had been self-destroyed by a mechanical device which released the consuming acid.

Peering about, Monk could see that this receiver, huge and complex as it was, was ready for destruction. Suspended overhead were huge receptacles, tanks, glass-lined, no doubt, and, if the homely chemist was any guesser, containing the acid which so quickly destroyed metals and compositions.

A gasp from the convicts drew Monk's attention to the receiver.

The thing was a mass of eerie electrical activity. Queer-looking beams were shifting, moving the length of an insulated pit, and as they moved, they left behind the figure of the humpback's young man who had helped raid the prison.

The young man was raked to one side hurriedly.

The humpback arrived next. It was like some incredible dream. The creature still wore the fantastic costume, complete even to dark gloves and false face.

Striving to get erect, the humpback staggered and almost fell. Monk could understand how the creature must feel. His own simian frame felt as if it were on fire from toe nails to hair roots. His head swam. The ugly blue light was still in his eyes, but weakening.

When the humpback finally climbed out of the machine, a great sigh of relief went up from the assembled convicts. A bit later, the significance of that sigh dawned on Monk.

The humpback controlled the secret of the germ counteractant doses without which they could not live. Death of the misshapen mastermind was amounted to death for themselves.

Monk tried his voice again. "I still don't believe it happened!"

His voice was good, just as it had always been. It seemed to be the only unaffected thing about him.

"Damnation!" Ham gritted unexpectedly. "I've been robbed!"

Ham was peering at his cuff buttons. The links had been rich ones, set with diamonds; they were the same links, but the diamonds were missing. Strangely enough, the prongs which had held the gems showed no signs of having been bent back by a pry.

A nasal voice said quietly, "The atomic structure of diamonds is such that their electrons are not readily picked up by the carrier. The diamonds are now in the prison cell."

It was the humpback speaking.

"And the prison cell is where?" Ham demanded.

“Some two or three miles distant.”

Doc Savage put in quietly, “Teleportation is not possible over a much greater distance with a receiving antennæ the proportions of this one.”

“Too much chance of the carrier beam missing the receiver,” said the hunchback. Then the hidden face jutted forward. “So you *do* know a bit about it?”

Doc said, “It was certain that some day some one would stumble upon the secret of completely statisfying, or stopping, all electronic or ionic movement. It is generally conceded that all matter is made up of electrical charges, that the apparent solidity of, for instance, the table you touch, is but an illusion, and that the space is really empty of matter as the ordinary mind conceived it.

“The table is really made up of molecules, which are in turn composed of atoms, and that the atoms are probably composed of protons, electrons and neutrons which in turn surround a nucleus. If the inner life of these elements, the electrical charges, could be completely stopped, then broken down and transported when in the static state, and then released, they would assume their original position and nature.

“In other words, it is the nucleus of the atom which has baffled science. This nucleus of the atom is considered by some to hold the solution to all things.”

Doc stopped. No one said anything.

Doc went on, “The nucleus of the atom is one of a moveable nature. If it is reduced to an inactive state, then moved, it will tend to assume its original relation with the nucleus of other surrounding atoms.”

Ham said, “I have a headache already!”

“Listen, stupid,” Monk said, “it’s perfectly clear!”

“Yes!” Ham jeered. “Put it in small words!”

“The nucleus of these atoms have a homing-pigeon instinct, apparently,” Doc said.

The hunchback interrupted.

“That’s the general idea,” the creature growled. “To transmit the nucleus of the atom, which results in transmission of the entire atom, since the protons, electrons and neutrons of the atom are almost inseparable from the nucleus, I use a high-impact beam of electronic transmission.

“The beam simply scoops up the electrons nucleus and carries it along until it is intercepted by the receiver, which then causes the electronic beams to drop the nucleus, which then reassemble.”

“It’s all very clear!” Ham said, sarcastically. “Listen, I don’t want to hear any more about it! I still say the thing is impossible!”

The humpback, who seemed to have become so completely absorbed in the scientific discussion as to forget that the bronze man and his two aides were prisoners, now straightened and made a sharp gesture.

“Take them into the large room.”

The hunchback thought of something a moment later, and countermanded his first order, directing that the prisoners be stripped to the skin and carefully examined for some trace of weapons. This was done.

Doc Savage’s unusual physical development got a great deal of awed comment.

Doc and his aides were not given back their own clothing. Instead, they were furnished with ordinary coveralls, which they donned. Doc had some difficulty with his. They were far too small.

“All right,” said the humpback. “Now take them into the big room.”

The big room proved to be a chamber that lived up to its name. The proportions of the place also disclosed the nature of the building in which the prisoners were now being held. It was a factory building, now disused. The floor was covered with concrete foundation blocks, upon which massive machinery must once have rested.

Upon these blocks, forlorn figures were seated. They were the insurance and holding company men who had been found in the penitentiary in place of the vanished convicts.

The girl, Sandy McGinnis, was over to one side, as was Igor De Faust.

Doc and his aides were shoved into the place. It was gloomy. There were windows, but they apparently had been boarded up on the outside. No sounds of traffic could be heard, so it was evident the old factory building was some distance from other habitations.

The humpback said, “The rest of you in, too!”

The gnarled individual was addressing the twenty convicts. They filed into the big room, looking surprised, but like whipped creatures, afraid to disobey.

The humpback closed the door, which was massive, and locked it, then mounted to what seemed to be a small balcony along on wall. There was a door leading from the balcony to the outer world somewhere. The humpback unlocked this, and left it a trifle ajar.

There seemed to be no other egress from the building. There was no ventilation to speak of, either, judging from the foulness of the air.

The hunchback leaned on a large wooden rack which stood near the edge of the balcony. This rack held perhaps two dozen glass jugs filled with some kind of liquid.

Doc Savage fell to watching the jugs.

The hunchback looked down for a long time. No one said anything, but the breathing of many persons could be heard. The breathing was strained.

“I have attained the first step, reached my first goal,” said the grotesque-looking individual on the balcony.

Chapter 21

MASTER OF CUPIDITY

No one below said anything.

The humpback waved an arm vaguely. The nasal voice did not carry to all of the big room, and a number got up and moved nearer to hear.

“The most of you people have been, or are connected with the insurance business,” said the hunchback. “You know what was going on.”

Monk grunted, seemed about to make some comment, then thought better of it.

“It was a gigantic ring, an organization of crooked directors of otherwise sound mutual insurance companies,” said the hunchback, apparently for the benefit of Doc Savage. “The directors easily secured proxies from stockholders, which permitted them to vote and direct the affairs of their concerns. This is not an uncommon method of conducting such corporations.

“It was easy for these directors to vote to sell large blocks of stocks to holding companies and investment companies. There was nothing visibly wrong about that. They simply voted that, in their opinion, a given stock was not a good investment, liable to sell for less in the future and, therefore, should be sold.”

The hunchback paused, went on.

“The catch was that the holding companies and investment concerns which bought these stocks were secretly owned by the crooked directors of the insurance companies.”

Ham snapped, “Why, blast it! I see how——”

The hunchback interrupted, “The directors were simply taking the good stocks from the insurance companies and selling them to themselves. If the stocks went down, they hurriedly sold them back to the insurance concerns.”

Doc Savage seemed to show no great interest in the recital. He had selected an individual in the assemblage and was working toward him. The individual was Sigmund Hoppel.

Hoppel began to look worried when he saw Doc coming.

The hunchback on the balcony continued: “A number of persons at different times found out what was going on, or got a vague suspicion.

These persons were framed, usually with embezzlement, and sent to the penitentiaries, where they would be out of the way.”

Hoppel got up and moved. Doc quickened his pace toward the big fellow. Hoppel looked very scared now.

The hunchback twanged nasally, “I am the inventor of the device which we shall call a teleportation machine. It is undoubtedly the greatest invention of the age. I do not intend to be robbed of it as other inventors are robbed. I shall use it to make myself powerful.”

Sandy McGinnis got up in Doc’s path. She looked very pretty.

“Listen!” she gasped. “I want to explain! My brother was one of those framed, and I got into this trying to help him. Max Landerstett was in the power of this humpbacked devil, whoever he or she is. Max came to me and got me to help in the——”

“Where is Landerstett?” Doc asked.

“They killed him!” said the girl hoarsely. “They told me about it. He——he was a swell guy!”

Hoppel was looking scared enough to faint. Doc Savage went on toward him.

The humpback twanged on, delivering an explanatory oration that, beyond a shadow of a doubt, was aimed at attaining some object.

“I learned of this insurance fraud,” the creature said. “I hit on the grand idea of terrorizing these crooked insurance men and their consorts in the holding companies. I got twenty of them, drugged them, and put them in penitentiary cells in place of twenty men they had framed. It just happened that I could catch an even twenty.”

The creature laughed.

“It was a swell gag! It scared the socks off the insurance crooks who were still running around loose. They tried to fight me. They did not know which way to turn. Anyway, I was not afraid of them, for I had a mob—the men they had framed. I told these men we would go after the fellows who framed them. The fools!”

The humpback paused.

“The fools!” The voice lost some of its nasal nature and became a shriek of delight. “The fools! They believed me!”

Monk said, “Too much scheming has run the old witch about two thirds cuckoo.”

Doc Savage caught up with Hoppel. Hoppel trembled.

“You and De Faust were big shots in this insurance swindle?” Doc asked.

Hoppel gulped, looked as if he had no intention of answering, and promptly said, “Yes. Poy, am I sorry!”

“That is why you clubbed the girl?”

Hoppel croaked, “Sure! She was about to tell on me——”

Doc hit him. Doc rarely hit a man without warning. This was not entirely without warning, since Hoppel was standing directly in front of him and looking at the bronze man. But Hoppel probably never saw the fist.

Hoppel raised off the floor as if something invisible had reached down and taken him, and sailed backward, into the air at first, then with his heels dragging. When he hit the concrete, it was as if a whole beef had dropped.

Doc ran to him and leaned down as if to strike again.

“Stop that!” yelled the hunchback.

Doc straightened. In his hand was a length of steel, a bolt which had once secured a machine to one of the concrete foundation blocks.

Monk was the only one present who saw what Doc had done—struck down Hoppel to enable him to pick up the bolt without attracting suspicion.

“Boy, that’s killing two birds with one fist!” Monk grinned.

The hunchback waved arms and squawled, “The insurance crooks have come to terms!”

Utter silence fell in the big room.

“They have agreed to let me run the thing and take the major proportion of the profits!” the harridan squawled.

The utter silence persisted. It was as if a shot had been fired unexpectedly, and the shock of it still persisted.

McGinnis, first to speak, yelled, “Listen! Have you been lying——”

“Not lying,” said the hunchback. “I merely neglected to state fully my aims. You presumed I was a swindled stockholder trying to push the cause of justice. Nuts to justice! I was trying, and have succeeded, in taking over the sweetest little graft that had walked around loose in years!”

The nature of the hunchback’s voice was changing in the excitement.

McGinnis started forward. “Damn your crooked mind! I’ll——”

“—do nothing whatever!” shriled the personage on the balcony. “Look at these!”

These was the rack of glass jugs holding vile-looking liquid.

“A solution of hydrocyanic acid and other ingredients which add the qualities of mustard gas,” said the disguised one. “Fatal, I can tell you with certainty.”

No one spoke. There was very little movement. Color seemed to be going out of faces.

“None of you will get out of here alive,” said the humpback. “I have used you all I desire at present, and it will be simple to get a fresh batch of fools. In a moment, I shall give this rack a shove, duck through the door, lock it and let nature take its course.”

Ham grated, “What’s the idea of telling us all of this?”

“Grandstanding,” Monk said. “Ever see it fail? The type of a mind that turns crooked is egotistical enough to want admiration from others. More crooks have been trapped through their bragging than by any other methods.”

Ham said, hoarsely, “Don’t give me a lecture on criminal psychology! Think of something!”

The humpback said, “I hope you enjoy the noise these jars make breaking!” and leaned against the rack.

Doc Savage threw his bolt. He threw it as hard and as accurately as all of his trained muscles and iron nerves could manage. It was a long throw. It had to be accurate. So he did not launch the bolt at the humpback’s head, but at the body, which was a larger target. He hit it.

The hunchback shrieked, doubled over, fell flat on the balcony and floundered. The balcony had no rail. The humpback rolled over the edge, fell ten feet to the floor and lit on the hump.

The hump burst. There was a small glitter and flicker of short-circuiting electric sparks, and glass, coils and wires came out of the hump.

“Huh!” Monk gulped. “The dang witch was wearing one of them teleportation transmitters inside that hump!”

In the space that it would take to exhale a sharp breath, the place became a bedlam. Men sprang up, yelling, racing for the exits, only to find them locked.

Doc, hurdling, dodging, made for the humpback. He was not first to the creature. One of the convicts, with only a pace to go, was first. This fellow stooped, took one look at the humpback's head, and straightened, screaming.

"Dead!" he bawled. "Skull crushed by the fall! We're all gonna die now!"

"Shut up, you fool!" Monk roared. "What makes you think you're gonna die?"

"The black pills!" the man yelled. "We can't get any more of them now, and——"

"Quiet!" Doc rapped. "The humpback kept a supply of the stuff somewhere. We can find it."

As a matter of fact, they did find it, and without any great difficulty. The black tablets, composite of germ cultures, were found in a car which the humpback had parked near by for a get-away.

The supply was enough to last until Doc and Monk, combining their chemical and scientific skill, managed to learn the nature of the cultures, and to create a supply, doses of which could be gradually tapered until the victims were no longer in need of treatment.

Long before that, however, a terrific fight was waged in the confines of the abandoned factory. The convicts were trying to subdue the crooks connected with the organization responsible for framing them. The crooks naturally objected, and the free-for-all ensuing was something to watch.

Monk, who loved a fight, did himself right handsomely, and was done by handsomely, coming out with two black eyes, a badly bitten left ear, and ragged lips.

"But, boy, we got them guys where they won't hesitate to give us the dirt on the whole swindle!" he snorted when it was over and he stood in front of Doc, panting.

Ham came up, holding his coveralls, what was left of them, with both hands.

"That teleportation transmitter on the back of the hunchback seems to be smashed badly," he said. "The one at the prison was probably destroyed by the acid trick. You reckon we'll be able to get hold of one of them?"

Doc said nothing in reply.

The bronze man later repaired the "teleporter" which comprised the master villain's back hump, and secured a good idea of the theory of the device. He made it work over short distance, and thereby discovered the catch in the device.

It would work only so far as the eye could see. This made it no great value commercially. The “teleportation” electronic beam extended in straight lines, not following the earth’s curvature.

Since the secret was too valuable for general distribution, and had demonstrated itself too dangerous if in the wrong hands, the bronze man simply put it aside, neither affirming nor denying that he knew the secret.

It was assumed that he had failed to solve the device, but he let it go at that.

It was when Doc was removing the “teleporter” from the back of the master villain that Monk got around to taking a look at the face of the person who had been back of the mystery.

“Blazes!” He looked at Sandy McGinnis. “I thought you said he had been shot?”

The young woman nipped her lips. “He must have made them lie to me.”

The man who had fallen off the balcony and cracked his skull on the hard floor underneath was long-winded Max Landerstett.

“Well, hang my head for a hatrack!” squeaked Monk, when he finally found his voice again.

“You should have done that a long time ago!” snapped Ham sarcastically. Immediately another argument was in process.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Vanisher* by Lester Dent (as Kenneth Robeson)]