

Mad Mesa

A Doc Savage Adventure
#66

Kenneth Robeson
[Lester Bernard Dent]
1939

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by

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Chapter I

HONDO WEATHERBEE

The life of Thomas Idle had been an ordinary one. Nothing fantastic had ever happened to him.

Nor, unfortunately was Tom Idle a well-known young man. Had he been a person of importance, the newspapers might have blazed up about his disappearance, and perhaps this would have focused attention on the utterly incredible thing that happened to him.

Still, the thing was so strange that no one might have believed it, even if it had happened to Hitler, or Mussolini, or someone equally well known. No one believed Tom Idle. No one believed him in time, that is, to stop the baby monster of horror which began to grow when it took its first bite and swallowed Tom Idle.

Tom Idle was born on a Missouri farm, soon orphaned, went to high school, then worked on a farm as a hired man. A few weeks ago, he had become tired of farming, and, seeking greener fields, had vagabonded westward on freight trains and by hitchhiking.

Now he was trying to find a job in Salt Lake City, Utah.

So far, the nearest he had come to an adventure was the time old Jinn, the farm mule, kicked him; but old Jinn kicked him on the leg, not the head, so the incident in no way explained what occurred in Salt Lake City.

Tom Idle was using the city park for his hotel.

He awakened on the same park bench he had occupied three nights running. He carefully folded the newspapers he had used to keep the dew off, and placed them in a trash can—he had learned that the park cop, Officer Sam Stevens, did not mind you using the place for a hotel, but resented having the grass littered.

Officer Sam Stevens passed. Tom Idle gave him a grin, and the policeman grinned back.

“Today’s a lucky day, kid,” Officer Stevens said. “I been feelin’ it all mornin’. Today, you find that job.”

“Thanks!” Tom Idle said.

The officer’s hunch made him feel better. He was no clairvoyant, so he could not know what a phantasm the near future held.

Morning air was bracing, the sunshine was bright, and the sky had that remarkably healthful clarity peculiar to Salt Lake City. It did look like a lucky day, at that. Tom Idle went to Skookum’s lunchroom.

“Sinkers and java, Skookum.” He deposited his last nickel on the white counter. He tried not to remember this was the third day he’d subsisted on coffee and doughnuts.

Skookum said, “This monotony’ll get you down, chief.”

“It’ll have to, then,” Tom Idle answered wryly, “because I’m broke.”

Skookum’s name wasn’t Skookum; it was something which nobody but a Greek could pronounce. Everyone called him Skookum because he was always using slangy Indian expressions when he talked. Skookum was liked.

A few moments later, Skookum unexpectedly put a plate of ham and eggs in front of Tom Idle.

“I can’t pay for that,” Tom Idle said.

“Pay when you land job, chief.”

“What makes you think I’ll land one?”

“Don’t kid yourself. Heap plenty job. You catch.”

Tom Idle’s eyes became suddenly damp with gratitude.

“Thanks, Skookum,” he mumbled.

Physically fortified with Skookum’s unexpected ham and eggs, and mentally perked up by Officer Sam Stevens’ statement that this was a lucky day, Tom Idle did his best—but did not find work that day. He visited all the employment agencies, and even solicited from door to door; but as one man put it, “Jobs are as scarce as hen’s teeth!”

Tom Idle slept that night on his usual bench in the park.

Ever afterward, it seemed to him that this was the last really normal day that he ever spent.

The next morning, a strangled rasping sound caused Tom Idle to awaken. He jerked erect, scattering his newspaper blankets. Because he had really starved for several days, he at once felt nervous and shaky.

He batted his eyes in the morning sun, looking around.

He saw the horrified man immediately.

The man stood beside the park bench. He was past middle age, looked seedy, might have been a professional bum. There was much of the furtiveness and insolence of a confirmed hobo in his face.

The man had obviously made the strangled sound which had aroused Tom Idle. There was utter horror on the man’s face.

“*Hondo Weatherbee!*”

“What?” Tom Idle said. “What’d you say?”

“Hondo!”

Tom Idle looked blankly at the man’s shocked, terrified expression, and came to the conclusion that the fellow was a drunk. He was some souse who’d mistaken Tom Idle for someone named Hondo Weatherbee. That must be it.

“Better sit down,” he suggested soothingly, “and get your eyes uncrossed.”

The horrified man acted as if the devil had asked him to come down and sample the warmth. He started back. Whirled. Fled. He ran wildly away, not looking back.

“I’ll be darned!” Tom Idle said.

He gazed after the fleeing man—the fellow looked so comically ridiculous in his flight. But Tom Idle somehow could not smile, because there was something unnerving about the whole thing. He had a creepy feeling.

“Snap out of it, guy,” he told himself. “The bum was only plastered to the gills.”

Trying to get rid of the creeps, Tom Idle made an elaborate business of stretching and scratching himself, then of retying his shoestrings and necktie, for loosening shoestrings and necktie were about the only bedtime preparations he’d made since a park bench was his hotel.

Again this morning, the world was full of beautiful sunshine, with birds singing in the park trees, and the air pleasant with the fruity odor of the orchards surrounding oasislike Salt Lake City, while a few clouds were sitting like big white rabbits on top of the black mountains to the eastward.

But Tom Idle was in no frame of mind to enjoy a balmy morning.

He was looking at his shoes.

They were not his shoes! They were gaudy yellow shoes—his shoes had been black and scuffed. He dropped his eyes and stared at the necktie he was wearing, and it was not his necktie; it was flashy green and yellow in color, whereas his necktie had been a subdued brown. Nor was the shirt his, nor the suit. All the clothes he was wearing were *different*.

He stared in horror at his hands—for they were not his hands either, it seemed; they looked pale, and on one finger was a ring he had never seen before, a big, ugly, yellow gold ring with the top carved in the shape of a skull.

Tom Idle stood up, feeling like a man having a bad dream, and walked out of the park.

He did not see Officer Sam Stevens just then.

Since the incredible thing had already started to happen to Tom Idle, it was doubtful if it would have made any difference had he seen the cop at this juncture.

Tom Idle was partially rid of most of his creeps by the time he entered Skookum’s lunchroom.

But he got them again when Skookum grabbed a gun and began shooting at him.

There were some brief preliminaries.

First, Skookum saw Tom Idle and jumped up. Skookum was eating his own breakfast, and he knocked his cup of coffee to the floor.

“Hondo Weatherbee!” Skookum yelled.

Tom Idle began to think this was all some kind of a gag. They must be having some fun with him.

“Hey, cut it out!” he said. “Heap much is enough.”

But Skookum stood so rigidly and stared with such ghastly fixity, that Tom Idle suddenly saw that it could not be acting. Skookum was not that good an actor.

“Cut it,” Tom Idle muttered. “You know me. I’m Tom Idle, the guy you staked to ham and eggs yesterday. Some darn fool swapped clothes on me.”

Skookum licked his lips.

“Who you trying to kid, Hondo?” he snarled. “I know that nice kid. You’re not him.”

Tom Idle then did something which he habitually did when he was ill at ease; he put his hands in his coat pockets. In thinking it all over later, he realized that Skookum might have thought he was reaching for a gun.

Skookum made a wild dive, got down behind the counter, came up with a sawed-off shotgun. He blazed away.

Gun roar was ear-splitting. The blast blew a hole in the lunchroom wall so close to Tom Idle’s head that he could have put his arm through it.

There was no joke about this. That shotgun was real, and Skookum was trying to kill him.

Tom Idle wheeled, ducked, dived out of the lunchroom. He ran. It was only a short distance to the park. He turned into the park. Behind, the shotgun slammed again. Shot cut leaves off the trees, and frightened birds flew up all over the park.

The Officer Sam Stevens met Tom Idle for the first time that morning.

Officer Stevens was a tall young man, a year or two older than Tom Idle. He came racing through the park to see what all the shooting was about, rounded a clump of bushes, and almost bumped into Tom Idle. Tom Idle never forgot that meeting.

“Hey help me!” Tom Idle panted. “That fool, Skookum, is trying to kill me!”

Officer Stevens stared at Tom Idle.

“Damn!” he barked. “It’s Hondo Weatherbee!”

He struck with his club, swung a blow at Tom Idle’s head. Tom Idle’s reaction

was instinctive. He dodged, and the club hit his head a glancing blow; he grabbed the club and they fought over it. Idle got the officer's billy.

Then the cop reached for his revolver.

Tom Idle struck the officer down with his own club. There was nothing else he could do. Something fantastic had happened, and he wasn't a young man named Tom Idle in search of a job; he was a sallow-skinned, garishly dressed man named Hondo Weatherbee, and everyone was either afraid of him or wanted to kill him. He could not understand it.

Officer Sam Stevens fell senseless.

Tom Idle dropped the club, whirled and ran. He did not know how long Officer Stevens would remain unconscious, and he had no idea at what instant Skookum might haul into view with his shotgun.

"The thing is to get out of here!" he thought.

Professional humorists claim that anything so unbelievable that it is preposterous constitutes a joke. Tom Idle was bewildered, frightened, horror-stricken; but one thing he did know—that no part of the last few minutes had been a joke. Everybody had been in dead earnest, from the seedy bum whose gasp had awakened him on the park bench, to Skookum and his shotgun and Officer Stevens and his pistol.

Probably the most incredible thing of all to Tom Idle was that he had gone to sleep wearing black shoes and a neat, if worn, blue suit—and had awakened with strange yellow shoes and a gaudy suit. And his skin! His tanned brown skin! It had become pale! He was completely bewildered.

The appearance of the black-gloved man did not clarify the situation, either.

Chapter II

THE BLACK-GLOVED MAN

The black-gloved man was in a car, and the machine apparently had been cruising around and around the park in search of Tom Idle. The car was a touring model, the top down. The black-gloved man drove, and he was craning his neck as though hunting someone. Apparently, it was Tom Idle he sought, because he sent the car to Idle's side.

"Hondo!" he yelled. "Get in!"

Tom Idle did not like the looks of the man. Probably he would never have gotten in the car, except for the fact that Skookum appeared in the distance, fired a shotgun blast, and two or three shots stung Tom Idle's skin. He decided to get in the car after all. The stranger at least looked friendly.

The moment Tom Idle landed in the car, the vehicle leaped into motion. Within two minutes, it was breaking the speed limit; and in five minutes, it was going faster than Tom Idle had ever before ridden in a car.

"What in the hell happened?" asked the black-gloved man.

"I don't know," Tom Idle said truthfully.

"You went in the park with that bottle of stuff," the stranger snapped. "That was over two hours ago. You told me to cruise around and be ready to pick you up. While I'm doing that, I see Seedy Smith come tearing out of the park as if a devil were after him."

Tom Idle stared blankly. Here was another man who thought he was someone else.

"Who—who is Seedy Smith?" he asked uncertainly.

"Why, Seedy used to belong to your gang, Hondo. Don't you remember? He double-crossed you, and you've been promising to croak him when you saw him."

Tom Idle swallowed.

"Croak him? You mean kill him?"

"Sure," said the black-gloved man calmly.

"Am I—am I the kind of a man who would kill Seedy Smith?" Tom Idle asked, feeling strange.

The black-gloved man laughed harshly.

"You're Hondo Weatherbee," he said. "You'd do anything!"

Tom Idle looked at the speedometer, and got such a shock that he decided not

to do it again. The needle was kicking close to a hundred. The car felt as if it were a skyrocket, running on the earth only part of the time. They had left the city behind and were now climbing mountains, traversing the first of what promised to be a series of dizzy curves from which sheer precipices fell hundreds, in some places thousands, of feet.

“Not so fast!” Tom Idle said hoarsely.

The black-gloved man stared at him in surprise.

“What the hell, Hondo? It ain’t like you to be made jittery by a little speed.”

Tom Idle didn’t think it safe to startle the man by saying he was not Hondo Weatherbee. Not at the speed they were traveling, and on a road like this.

Clutching the door of the speeding car, Tom Idle examined his companion. The fellow had a long, well-stuffed body that was remindful of a number of large sausages. His face was distinctly uninviting. It was evil. The mouth was vicious, the nose thin, the ears pointed, the eyes small and discolored, like bird eggs that hadn’t hatched. He wore his black gloves, on both hands.

This unsavory personage was in turn eying Tom Idle at such times as he was not busy wheeling the thunderbolt of a car around awful mountain curves.

“There’s something strange about you, Hondo,” he said.

Tom Idle thought of a way in which he might perhaps get a clue to what had happened to him without startling this stranger.

“I must have got a bump on the head,” Tom Idle said, untruthfully.

“So that was it!”

Deciding the man seemed satisfied with the explanation, Tom Idle ventured, “You say I went into that park two hours ago with a bottle?”

“Sure,” the black-gloved man said. “Don’t you remember that.”

“I don’t recall it. What was in the bottle?”

“The stuff you got from a nut chemist.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“You didn’t tell me, Hondo.”

“Who was the chemist I got the bottle from?”

“Well—hell, you never told me that, neither. It was a big secret.”

Tom Idle felt defeated and desperate. More and more he was being gripped by the feeling that something frightful, and something he couldn’t possibly prevent, was happening to him.

“Didn’t I tell you anything at all?” he asked wildly.

The black-gloved man grimaced in a puzzled way. “You talked like you were drunk.”

“What did I say?”

“Something about if you could only find a bum asleep in the park, your troubles would be over.” The man gave Tom Idle a blank look and added, “Damn it, Hondo, I’ll never forget your exact words, just before you walked into that park with the bottle.”

Tom Idle shuddered. “What were they?”

“If I can find a bum asleep in the park, the cops will never get their hands on the brain of Hondo Weatherbee!” That’s exactly what you said, Hondo.”

The touring car continued its headlong speed. The engine must have special power, because the steep grades did not seem to bother it. They had climbed so high now that the air was already much cooler, and the clouds, the great clouds that seemed like white rabbits, were close overhead.

Tom Idle sat so tensely that every muscle in his body seemed to ache. He was trying to make his mind grasp the situation. It was *his mind*. But his body—and his clothing—were the property of an outlaw named Hondo Weatherbee. His black-gloved companion apparently belonged to a bandit gang ruled by Hondo Weatherbee. And the bum, Seedy Smith, had been a man whom Hondo Weatherbee had promised to kill. And Skookum, the lunchroom man, and Officer Sam Stevens, had both known Hondo Weatherbee by sight, and had tried to capture him. Tom Idle took his head in his hands. It was too impossible to believe!

A violent start by his companion aroused him. Tom Idle realized the car had slowed, and that they were traversing a series of terrible curves.

The black-gloved man wiped his forehead.

“That one was close!” he croaked.

“What’s wrong?” Tom Idle gasped.

“Cops!”

“Huh?”

“They’re after us. Whatcha think we been drivin’ like a bat for? They’ve got high-powered rifles. They’re shooting at us.”

“Police shooting at us?”

“Look back, if you don’t believe me!”

Tom Idle was turning to look back when the inside of his head seemed to explode in a flood of blackness—and the blackness, spreading, washed completely through his body until all of him, mind and flesh alike, was composed of nothing but darkness, empty and still.

Chapter III

THE FINGERPRINTS

The penitentiary had high stone walls, and they were gray. The summer sun beat down on the place; hot desert winds blew across it and heated the interior like a furnace. In the winter, the same winds were as cold as solid ice, and refrigerated the place thoroughly. The penitentiary had a reputation as being a place of which to steer clear—the kind of a reputation a penitentiary should have—in spite of the fact that it was modern, and had a warden who was perfectly fair to every inmate.

There was a cell block to itself where the desperate criminals were confined. This was isolated. The cells were bare. No luxuries were allowed. There were no windows, but plenty of light came through the cell doors. There were great frosted windows across the corridor, and light from these fell through the cell doors and cast bar-checked shadows across the cell floors.

It was the shadows of these steel bars which Tom Idle saw when he regained consciousness.

He had the sensation of something being wrong about the way he regained consciousness. Back in Missouri, he had once fallen out of a tree while trying to twist an opossum out of a hole with a forked stick, and it had knocked him senseless. He recalled how he had felt when he regained consciousness. This awakening was different. He felt as though he had been ill for a long time. But then, everything that had happened had been different.

He stared at the bar shadows on the cell floor until his eyes hurt.

“Hey!” a voice said. “Wake up!”

Tom Idle turned his head to look at the speaker.

The man was big; he was incredibly huge—and as long as Tom Idle knew him afterward, the man appeared to get each day a little bigger. Maybe it was the increasing evil of the man that made it seem so. Each day that you knew him, you realized he was a little more vicious than you had thought he possibly could be.

“Who . . . who are you?” Tom Idle stuttered.

“Big Eva,” the man growled. “Who’d you think it’d be, Hondo?”

There was nothing distorted about Big Eva’s size; he was not puffy, he did not seem to have a thick neck—just big. He was about seven feet tall.

“Where am I?” Tom Idle demanded.

Big Eva chuckled. “If it’s not the Utah State Penitentiary, I’ve wasted three years in the wrong place.”

“How long have I been here?” Tom Idle asked.

“Eleven years and three days.” Big Eva showed large snaggle teeth in a grin. “Mean to say you don’t remember?”

Tom Idle was stupefied.

“I’ve been in here eleven years?” he croaked.

Big Eva pointed at the cell wall beside Idle’s bunk. On the wall was a series of marks made with a pencil, marks in groups of seven, as if they represented days and weeks.

“Count it up on your calendar, if you don’t believe me,” the giant convict said.

Tom Idle gripped the rail of his bunk. His head ached, felt as if shingle nails were being driven into his skull. His self-control slipped, and suddenly he was on his feet, gripping the barred cell door, rattling it madly.

“The warden!” he screamed. “I want to talk to the warden!”

A burly man in uniform appeared before the door. A penitentiary guard, Tom Idle presumed.

“How’d you like solitary confinement?” the guard asked harshly.

Then Big Eva had Tom Idle by the elbow and was pulling him back.

“I dunno what’s got into you, Hondo,” Big Eva growled. “You’re startin’ the day wrong.”

That day was a nightmare for Tom Idle, and it was the first of a series. Because there seemed nothing else to do, he went to breakfast with the rest of the convicts, and later to work in the overall shop. As Hondo Weatherbee, it developed that he was supposed to know all about operating one of the sewing machines; but since he knew nothing about the device, he at once got the thread snarled, then accidentally did something which broke the machine. For this, he was put in solitary confinement the rest of the day, the guards thinking he had broken the machine maliciously.

He took off a shoe and beat the steel door of the cell. He also kept up a steady shouting, demanding to see the warden.

Later in the afternoon, they took him to the warden’s office.

The instant he entered the warden’s room, Tom Idle yanked to a stop and stared.

There was a huge mirror on the wall. Tom Idle was seeing himself for the first time since things had started to happen to him.

His face *was* different—and yet, not completely. It was sallow. The cheeks seemed lumpy. He brought his hands to his face and explored, discovered that there were indeed lumps in his cheeks that felt as though they might be old scar tissue. But

his eyes were the same. Bloodshot with strain, it was true; but still his eyes.

“Ahem,” said a voice.

Tom Idle realized he must seem a lunatic, staring at the mirror in that fashion.

“Are you the warden?” he asked.

“Yes.”

The warden was a lean, weatherbeaten man who resembled the movie version of a cowboy sheriff. The squint that came from looking at far places was in his eyes, and he had a jaw built like the device they once put on the front of railway locomotives to knock cows off the tracks.

To this quiet, determined man, Tom Idle told his whole story exactly as it had happened, from his awakening in the Salt Lake City park to his becoming unconscious, presumably from the effects of a bullet, on the mountain road.

To all this, the penitentiary warden listened with intent interest.

“Let’s feel the top of your head,” he said.

Tom Idle let the warden’s fingers explore in his hair.

“This where the bullet hit you?” the warden asked.

“Well, it hit me on the head.”

“There’s no scar there,” the warden said.

“But something hit me!”

The warden’s voice had turned cold, and now he got to his feet, put his capable hands on his lean hips, and looked Tom Idle up and down without sympathy.

“I don’t know what your game is, Hondo Weatherbee. But you’d better not try to put anything over.”

“I’ve told you the truth!” Tom Idle said desperately.

The warden snorted. “Do you remember how you were captured eleven years ago?”

“No! Of course not!”

“You were found asleep on a Salt Lake City park bench, and you were pursued by a policeman and a lunchroom man, and you were captured fleeing up the mountains in a car driven by an accomplice.”

“I . . . but—”

“In other words,” the warden snapped, “you’ve just been telling me the story of how you were captured eleven years ago. Only you trimmed the story up a bit.”

Tom Idle was stunned.

“What date is this?” he wanted to know. “What day and year?”

The warden told him.

Tom Idle repeated the date under his breath. Five days had elapsed, somehow,

into blankness. Only five days. Five days ago he had been in that Salt Lake City park, and he couldn't remember anything about how the ensuing interval had gone; that was just more of the incredible mystery.

"But I'm Tom Idle!" he said wildly.

The warden sighed. "I'm a patient man, Hondo, and a fair one. Nobody can say different and talk truth. What do you want me to do? What will satisfy you?"

"Have you got Hondo Weatherbee's fingerprints here?" Tom Idle asked.

"Yes."

"Compare them with mine."

The warden had Hondo Weatherbee's fingerprint card brought from the files, and he inked Tom Idle's prints onto a white paper and put it side by side with the fingerprints of the outlaw.

Even Tom Idle could see that his fingerprints and Hondo Weatherbee's were the same.

If it were possible, Tom Idle was more stunned.

Being a young man with a perfectly normal mentality, Tom Idle realized that the best thing for him to do now was to settle back and get himself accustomed to the position in which he found himself. Rushing around screaming that he was Tom Idle, a Missouri farm boy, would not help. The mental agitation might even drive him insane.

He behaved, kept his eyes open, and tried to work out some way of helping himself.

He learned that Big Eva was afraid of him. So were most of the other convicts. Or rather, they were afraid of the man they thought was Hondo Weatherbee, which gave an idea of the kind of reprobate Hondo Weatherbee must have been. There were some tough jailbirds in that penitentiary.

He obtained but slight information about Hondo Weatherbee. The man had been a prospector at odd times when he was not in assorted penitentiaries. Eleven years ago, he had stood trial for murdering his partner, and received a life sentence.

It was a tribute to Tom Idle's character that he did not sink into a black abyss of despair. He could not, no matter how much he thought about it, understand how he had become another man serving a life sentence in a penitentiary, and the desperation of that situation might have broken his will. But Tom Idle bore up.

He took to reading a great deal.

That was how he happened to learn about Doc Savage.

Tom Idle started reading the magazine feature about Doc Savage without much interest. But halfway through the article, he became so excited he had to stop and let off steam.

“Say!” he said. “Say, boy!”

He was seeing the first ray of hope that had come his way for days.

When he had calmed himself, he continued reading about Doc Savage.

The article stated that Doc Savage was a man who had one of the most remarkable scientific minds of the day. The item added that Doc Savage made a business of solving unusual mysteries—but he did this, it was stated, only if a wrong was righted or someone was helped as a result.

Since a career of righting wrongs was an unusual one for a man to follow, the author of the magazine story went to lengths to explain that this was Savage’s most spectacular activity, hence got the most attention, but that his real career was that of a scientist.

The author of the magazine article waxed enthusiastic about the “Man of Bronze,” as he called Doc Savage; he wrote that the Man of Bronze was really a man of mystery, because he avoided publicity, and very little information concerning him came to the attention of the public.

Tom Idle realized that here was exactly the kind of man he needed to help him. But the author of the article made Doc Savage out to be such a combination of scientific genius, mental marvel and physical giant that Tom Idle was skeptical about such a super-person existing. The magazine item said that the name of Doc Savage was enough to strike terror into the heart of the most hardened crook.

Tom Idle decided to test this out. He made his experiment on Big Eva, who was a hardened crook if there ever were one.

“Doc Savage!” Tom Idle said unexpectedly.

The effect on Big Eva was impressive.

He dropped the pencil with which he was marking up the day on his own wall calendar across the cell. He whirled. His expression was stark.

“What about Doc Savage?” Big Eva snarled. “*Is he mixing in this—*” The huge, bestial crook swallowed two or three times. “But hell, he couldn’t have gotten wise. There’s no way—”

At this point, Big Eva appeared to realize he was saying too much.

“What about Doc Savage?” he growled.

“I was just reading about him in this magazine,” Tom Idle explained.

Big Eva took several large gulps of relief.

“What the hell do you mean,” he exploded, “by scaring people that way?”

Several days later, Tom Idle learned about the prison grapevine. This was an important event, because indirectly it saved thousands of lives.

But in the meantime, Tom Idle had given some thought to the blurtings of Big Eva when he had been so startled.

“What did you mean,” he asked, “by what you said?”

“Said when?”

“When I told you about Doc Savage,” Tom Idle explained. “You seemed worried for fear he’d found out about something.”

Big Eva stood up. He doubled his huge fists.

“Shut up!” he snarled. “If you ever breathe a word about that to a soul, I’ll kill you!”

He meant it. Nobody could doubt that.

The prison grapevine is a furtive thing. All penitentiaries have them. This was how it functioned:

Tom Idle was served four pancakes for breakfast, ate two of them, and left two on his plate with a letter secreted between them. In the kitchen, the convict dishwasher was careful to put the two pancakes, still with the letter between them, on top of the garbage can. The driver of the garbage wagon mailed the letter.

The magazine article had not given Doc Savage’s address.

But Tom Idle had a sister in Missouri. The letter was addressed to his sister. It told Tom Idle’s story, and asked his sister to get Doc Savage to investigate.

The letter got off successfully, and on its way to Missouri.

But two nights later, Tom Idle talked in his sleep, mumblingly, and told about the letter he had mailed to his sister asking her to appeal to Doc Savage for aid—and Big Eva listened in open-mouthed horror.

Chapter IV

THE MYSTERIOUS PILOT

Sue City, Missouri, is a settlement that can be found on the larger maps. It does not have a reputation for size, but it is a lively place, supplying the needs of the agricultural community, and on Saturday nights staging square dances and boxing matches, as well as holding, once a year, a homecoming that is an event.

Samantha Nona Idle lived near Sue City, in the big white house on the gravel road. She kept house for her Aunt Annie and her Uncle Herm, who had raised her.

Nona was a striking girl. She was tall and firm and streamlined, and bore some resemblance to her brother, Tom Idle. She had managed to drop the Samantha from her name by carefully telling nobody about it for a number of years. She was intelligent, and was specializing in voice at the State University in Columbia. The boys liked her looks, and her college professors liked her determination to make something out of herself.

The mail carrier left Tom Idle's letter in the galvanized mailbox under the big elm tree at the gate.

Nona did not mention her brother's letter to anybody. He had requested this. He did not want the neighbors to know he was in the penitentiary.

The next day, Nona left for New York to see Doc Savage.

She went by bus because it was cheaper. Money was a scarce commodity around there.

That evening, the airplane landed at Sue City. The plane was piloted by the man with the black gloves.

The plane came wabbling down out of the sky as if something was wrong, and landed in a cow pasture on Nona Idle's farm. The pilot climbed out and doubled up on the ground.

"Damn, but I'm sick," he croaked. "Must be somethin' I ate."

His condition improved quickly when there was talk of taking him to a hospital. He stated that all he needed was a rest, and he managed to persuade Aunt Annie and Uncle Herm to put him up for the night.

"You seem depressed," remarked the pilot, at the supper table that evening.

"I reckon as how we're gettin' old and lonesome," said Uncle Herm. "Anyhow, we sure hate to see one of the family leave."

The pilot had not removed his black gloves to eat, but he did explain that he

intended to consume only a bite or two because of his upset stomach. He was suave, effusively friendly, and his manner had overcome Uncle Herm's first dislike for the fellow. His body—like jointed sausages—was dressed in an expensive, neat suit, and dark glasses concealed the evil character of his eyes, which were like bird eggs that hadn't hatched.

"One of your children leave recently?" the pilot asked.

"Not exactly. It was Nona Idle. We raised her." Uncle Herm sighed regretfully. "That's sure gonna be a long bus trip, all the way to New York."

"Nona Idle has gone to New York?"

The pilot barely kept a rasp of anxiety out of the question.

"Yep," said Uncle Herm.

"Why?"

"That's what kinda worries us," Uncle Herm explained. "She didn't say. Ain't like the girl not to tell us, neither."

The pilot took off in a hurry in his airplane. His stomach was better, he said—but as a matter of fact, he looked sicker than when he had landed.

He flew toward New York.

Mixed with the motor fumes in the wake of his plane was sulphurous haze of curses which the pilot flung at the Idles, brother and sister, at Big Eva, at himself, but most of all at a man named Doc Savage. He swore himself into such a stew that he began talking aloud to his plane.

"What if I don't manage to stop that girl?" he yelled at the plane.

The possibility was good for several minutes of anxious snarling.

Later, he settled down grimly to the business of flying to overtake Nona Idle.

Nona Idle reached Columbus, Ohio, with a conviction that bus travel was almost as comfortable as railroad. She had the good sense to resist the impulse which seems to seize bus patrons to fill up on hamburgers and ice-cream cones at every hot-dog stand. When she reached Columbus, she was hungry, but she felt well.

Beyond Columbus, on U. S. Highway No. 40, the bus swung into one of the comfortable roadside stations, and Nona Idle, noting the clean-looking restaurant in connection, decided to have her first meal.

A man wearing black gloves slid onto the adjacent seat shortly after she started eating.

The man did not say anything, did not appear to as much as notice the tall, very pretty girl at his side. When a waitress came, he spoke in a loud voice.

"I am Dr. Joiner," he said. "Has anyone called for me?"

“Dr. Joiner. No; no call,” the waitress replied.

“I am a medical doctor, and I was supposed to receive a call here,” the man added, a bit unnecessarily, Nona Idle thought.

Nona noticed the man’s black gloves, and thought it curious that he did not remove them. She wondered what was wrong with his hands—or did he wear gloves to keep his hands soft and supple? Incidentally, she was aware that he did not once look at her. Men who did not notice Nona Idle were scarce.

Suddenly, the man whirled and pointed out of the window.

“Look!” he exploded.

Nona Idle naturally turned on the stool—they ate on white stools in the lunchroom—and stared. But she saw nothing except a car passing.

“I’m sorry,” the black-gloved man said. “I guess I’m seeing things. That car looked just like an elephant when I first saw it.”

Nona went back to her chicken-fried steak, French fried potatoes and buttermilk. “He’s a goof,” she thought.

She had not noticed the man empty a small bottle of amber liquid into her buttermilk while her attention was diverted by the imaginary elephant.

Nona finished her meal, got off the stool, took one step and buckled to the floor.

“Here, stand back!” barked the black-gloved man. “I’m Dr. Joiner!”

He made a phony examination of Nona Idle. The waitress pushed people back and told them to give “Dr. Joiner” some room.

The black-gloved man straightened and made a weighty pronouncement.

“This young lady has compound pulmonary palpitation,” he said.

He gave the bystanders a look of heavy seriousness.

“I must rush her to a hospital!” he added.

Nona Idle was carried out and placed in the black-gloved man’s car. No one happened to notice, due to the excitement, that this was a rented machine. The man drove off with his unconscious passenger.

When he had left the roadside dining room behind—he was not driving toward a hospital—the man spoke grimly to himself.

“That,” he said, “keeps Doc Savage out of it.”

Chapter V

THE DUMB WAITRESS

Doc Savage had often considered changing the location of his headquarters. Too many people knew that he could be found on the eighty-sixth floor of the New York skyscraper that came near to scratching clouds, and not all of these people wanted to see the “Man of Bronze” go on living.

That was why Doc Savage, or one of his five assistants, always X-rayed the incoming mail. The X-ray would show which packages contained bombs. The bomb percentage in the mail had been high during the last year. Also, all the mail was subjected to a spectroscopic analyzing device which detected such clever ruses as perfume on a letter, to invite one to sniff, coupled with a subtle poison to bring death with the sniff.

In fact, the headquarters was a maze of scientific gadgets to protect the bronze man and his five aides.

But in spite of these irritations, Doc Savage had maintained his establishment on the top floor of the skyscraper, an aerie which could be seen from any part of the city, and on a clear day, from far out to sea. He wanted certain kinds of people to find him.

Doc Savage had been trained from childhood for the strange avocation which he followed—that of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers in the far corners of the earth. It was an unusual profession. In medieval times, knights in armor went around following the profession, but it had been out of fashion for several hundred years. The knights helped others for the glory of it, whereas Doc Savage did all he could to avoid the glory. He had a genuine horror of publicity; as a result he almost never went to a theater, a prize fight, or walked the streets any more than he had to.

But his avocation was helping other people out of trouble, so he used the skyscraper in order that persons with trouble would not have difficulty finding him.

People’s troubles came to him in many fashions.

Tom Idle’s trouble—which had now become that of his sister, Nona—came in the form of a letter.

The letter was X-rayed, tested for poisons, then passed on to Doc Savage on the theory that it was a safe letter—no one dreaming that it was going to cause more excitement, terror and bloodshed than all the bombs and poison letters they would ever receive.

The letter was lying on the big inlaid table in the reception room when Doc

Savage came out of the laboratory. Doc was a physical giant with a handsome but not a pretty face; and he had strange flake-gold eyes which had been known to give an enemy a large case of the creeps, but which could be very persuasive and friendly when the bronze man wished. A peculiar aspect of Doc's size was that he appeared to be a man of normal build when seen from a distance; it was only on close examination that one realized here was a physical phenomenon, a man who could probably tie a knot in a horseshoe.

Doc Savage wore a germ-proof suit, something like a featherweight diving regalia, as he came out of the laboratory, and he was throwing back the hood. He had been in the laboratory twelve hours straight, trying to perfect a cure for the common cold.

"Hello, Doc," said Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett (Monk) Mayfair. "Here's this mornin's crop of mail."

Monk Mayfair would not have to be seen in a very thick jungle to be mistaken for an ape, masculine gender. He was built very wide, and there was no danger of his ever having to stoop for a door. He did not look like one of the world's noted industrial chemists. Monk was one of the five Doc Savage assistants.

Monk asked, "Did you find a cure for colds, Doc?"

Doc Savage looked at Monk and sneezed.

"All I found out," he admitted, "was how to catch one."

"How?"

"Work standing in a draft."

"Ah, so that's what science has come to," Monk chuckled. "Here's the mail."

The contents of the envelope was ample explanation of the reason for its arrival. There was really another letter inside, and this was accompanied by a note.

The note, addressed to Doc Savage, read:

The inclosed letter, received from my brother, Tom Idle, will explain itself.

There is something so incredible and mysterious about the whole thing that I thought it best to mail my brother's letter ahead, and not carry it on my person. Perhaps I am foolish. At any rate, will you hold this letter until my arrival? I am coming to New York by bus.

Nona Idle

The inclosed letter that the note mentioned was the one in which Tom Idle had

explained to his sister exactly what had happened to him, beginning when he was awakened by the exclamation of a bum known as Seedy Smith, in a Salt Lake City park, and ending where he was now, sitting in the Utah penitentiary with the name of Hondo Weatherbee, outlaw.

While they were reading, Colonel John (Renny) Renwick came in. Renny was a tall, bony man with a long face that always wore a my-but-aren't-these-funerals-awful expression. He was famous for two things: One, his boast that he could knock the panel out of any wooden door with the two coconuts which he called fists. Two, he had few superiors in ability as a civil engineer.

"Holy cow!" Renny rumbled, having read the letter.

This was his favorite expression. Also, he had a voice something like a troubled bear in a deep cave.

"Holy cow!" he repeated. "That's fantastic enough, to be one of these nut letters like we sometimes get."

"Me, I like it already," Monk said.

"You would!" Renny rumbled. "But you don't know whether she's good-looking."

"I didn't mean the girl," Monk disclaimed.

"You're a liar," Renny assured him. "You like anything that's got a girl connected with it."

"You're gettin' so you ride me as bad as that over-dressed shyster, Ham Brooks," Monk complained. "Some day, I'm gonna bob both your tails off right up next to your ears."

Doc Savage had not joined the discussion. He rarely had much to say. However, he had seated himself at the telephone, put in a call, and was waiting.

Doc sneezed twice.

Monk grinned. The idea of Doc Savage catching a cold while conducting a scientific experiment to find a cure for colds was something Monk found amusing. He knew that Doc Savage was one of the greatest living scientists, and the more remarkable because his knowledge covered a number of lines. He knew more about electricity than Long Tom Roberts, another associate, for instance, and Long Tom was supposed to be a combination of Steinmetz and Marconi. Personally, Monk was sure Doc knew more about chemistry than he himself.

Doc Savage finished that telephone call, and made several others.

"The girl disappeared," he said, "at a highway dining room near Columbus, Ohio."

"Then we'd better investigate!" Monk exploded.

“It might not be a bad idea,” Doc admitted.

Doc Savage maintained a combination hangar and boathouse on the bank of the Hudson River, on Manhattan Island. The huge building masqueraded as a warehouse.

Brigadier General Theodore Marley (Ham) Brooks was waiting at the warehouse when they arrived. Ham was another Doc Savage assistant, as well as being a noted Harvard lawyer, and one of the best-dressed men of the twentieth century, as a noted men’s magazine had recently dubbed him.

Ham, a thin-waisted man with the large, mobile mouth of an orator—he was a sharp-tongued talker who could stick words into a man as though they were knives—was always correctly dressed for the situation.

Ham wore an extremely natty aviator’s outfit for their flight. Monk scowled at the lawyer. Monk considered Ham’s attire unnecessary affectation, since they were to fly in a cabin plane and business suits would be just as appropriate. Moreover, Monk had quarreled with Ham for years.

“You’ll probably turn up in the hot place,” Monk told Ham unpleasantly, “equipped with an asbestos suit.”

Ham scowled and suggestively fingered a sword cane which he always carried.

“Listen, you missing link,” he said, “you start anything with me today, and I’ll take this sword and sculpture you into something that bears some resemblance to a man!”

Monk glared. “Start any old time! I’ll thread you on that sword cane like a fishin’ worm on a hook!”

In the past they had risked their lives for each other, and would doubtless do so again.

Doc Savage entered the control cockpit of a large twin-engined, streamlined monoplane. He had scarcely spoken, but that was not unusual since he never did any pointless talking solely to make conversation. As Monk frequently put it, words only came out of Doc when they were jarred out.

Yet it was an undeniable fact that the big bronze man completely dominated any group and every situation. It was not necessary for him to tell anyone who he was to make an impression, and he never appeared to issue an order directly. Yet his quiet presence carried complete power.

They landed—Doc Savage, Monk, Ham and Renny—in a meadow near Columbus, Ohio, less than three hours later. Alighting from the plane, they crossed to the roadside dining room at which Nona Idle had last been seen.

Doc Savage questioned the waitress who had been on duty.

“I remember the girl you mean,” the waitress said. “She fainted, or something, and Dr. Joiner took her to a hospital.”

“Do you know this Dr. Joiner?” Doc asked.

“Why, no. I never saw him before that night, nor since. But he said his name was Dr. Joiner.”

“And the hospital?”

“Why, he never said what hospital.”

Doc looked meaningly at Monk, Ham and Renny, who at once got busy on telephones.

“There is no Dr. Joiner,” they reported later.

Which was what Doc had expected.

Monk scowled. “This guy turned up and drugged the girl and carried her off.”

Ham said, “That was to keep Doc from learning anything about Tom Idle. The fake Dr. Joiner didn’t know she’d mailed the letter.”

Big-fisted Renny rumbled, “Holy cow! There’s somethin’ blasted queer behind this.”

Doc said quietly, “We will have to do some detective work.”

Shortly after this, the bronze man disappeared.

The vanishing of Doc Savage startled his assistants, but it did not surprise them. Doc had a habit of dropping out of sight when he wished to pursue a private investigation, and he usually turned up again with something accomplished.

The three aides, waiting at the roadside dining room, marked time. Monk and Ham went into a competition, to see who could date up the waitress. The waitress was not good-looking and did not seem overly bright, and neither man really wanted a date.

What they did want was something to quarrel about. Renny got in a corner with a pencil and paper and sketched out a bridge which he was supposed to construct soon across a tide rip between two Florida cays.

They did not discuss the mystery of Tom Idle and his sister Nona, because they had not yet found out enough to make sense.

Two hours later, Johnny and Long Tom turned up. These were the remaining members of Doc’s group of five associates.

Johnny was William Harper Littlejohn, one of the tallest and thinnest men alive—you wondered how such a bony man could stay alive—and was also a famous archæologist and geologist. He could read an ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic as freely

as his afternoon newspaper. He could say, without hesitating, what kind of rock was ten thousand feet under Sapulpa, Oklahoma.

Johnny at once went into discussion with Renny, for he was to help on the Florida bridge. He began using big words. "I'll be superamalgamated," he said. "An enigmatical verbal summation precipitated our eventuation."

Big words were Johnny's bad habit. He could have said merely that they were here because they had gotten a call from Doc.

Long Tom was Major Thomas J. Roberts, a scrawny fellow who looked as if he had spent his early life in a mushroom cellar. He was an electrical wizard who knew more about the innards of an electron than the average citizen knows about the construction of his fountain pen.

Long Tom and Johnny had come by plane, and they had brought along Habeas Corpus and Chemistry. Habeas Corpus was a runt pig which was Monk's pet; and Chemistry was, according to his owner Ham, a thoroughbred South American jungle chimpanzee, although Monk had other opinions. Chemistry looked distressingly like Monk.

The five men looked at each other and wondered what Doc Savage was doing. They fell into a discussion.

The waitress, neglected for the moment, made her way to a back room, where there was a telephone.

The waitress put in a call.

"Listen, Dr. Joiner," she said, "do I get that fifty dollars you promised me for information?"

The answer she received evidently reassured her about the fifty.

"Well, you better be sure you mail it to me," she said. "Here's the information: Doc Savage's five assistants are right in this place now. And Doc Savage is out roaming around somewhere."

After she had listened to Dr. Joiner swear for a while, the waitress hung up.

Doc's men had made a mistake about both the moral level and the deceitfulness of that waitress.

Chapter VI

HELL IN OHIO

Doc Savage had been doing some routine detective work, and had finally unearthed a clue. He was talking to a man who wore overalls and had greasy hands.

“And this so-called Dr. Joiner seems to wear black gloves all the time,” Doc finished a description.

“That’s the guy,” said the man, wiping his hands on cotton waste.

Outside the garage, it was late afternoon. Cars were passing at high speed on the highway, making long, windy screaming sounds. In a field nearby, a boy with a stick was chasing a dog which in turn had been chasing some cows. It was a peaceful highway crossroads scene.

“You rented this Dr. Joiner a car?” Doc Savage inquired.

The garage man nodded. “Sure. We rented him the heap right after he landed in his plane.”

“The man came by plane?”

“Yep. Left by plane, too.”

“Alone?”

“He had a girl when he left. Right pretty, too. One of them kind of long girls. He carried her and put her in the plane. Said she was sick, and he was takin’ her to a hospital.”

“You didn’t,” Doc Savage suggested, “get the number of the plane?”

“Nope.”

“Can you describe the plane?”

The man scratched his head. “Well, I don’t know much about these flying machines. This was one of them kind that only had one wing, whatever you call ’em.”

A man who did not know what a monoplane was called was not going to be of much assistance in identifying a plane.

Doc said, “You might show me where the ship landed.”

“Sure.”

The bronze man’s idea was to measure the span of the plane wheel tracks. Different planes had assorted wheel spans, and it was possible he could determine the manufacture of the plane. But in the field, he ran across luck.

“Here was where I cleaned the stuff outa the plane wheels,” the garage man said.

Doc looked at him. "You what?"

"Some weeds had got stuck in the wheels and in that skid thing the hind end of the plane drags on," the man explained. "The feller gave me fifty cents to clean 'em off."

"Where did you throw the weeds?" Doc asked.

The garage man squinted at Doc Savage as if he thought the bronze man's interest in weeds might be a sign of mental deficiency.

"Over here," he said.

Doc Savage found the "weeds." He studied them thoughtfully.

The garage man lifted his head and looked about, seeking the source of a sound which had come into being. It was a strange sound. A trilling, low and exotic, mellow and not unpleasant, a note that was as fantastic as the noises of the winds among the ice pinnacles of an arctic waste.

"What's that?" the man demanded.

The sound ceased then, but Doc Savage did not answer, did not explain that the trilling was a small, unconscious habit, a thing which he did in moments of mental or physical stress—and did most frequently when he had discovered something of importance.

Doc made a package of the "weeds" from the plane wheels, wrapping them in paper and placing them in a pocket.

He went back to the roadside dining room.

"What'd you learn, Doc?" Monk asked.

Before Doc Savage could answer, three strangers stood up in the dining room and took guns out of their clothing.

"If one of you guys move," one of the men said, "there'll be quite a party!"

His five aides had frequently remarked on Doc Savage's apparent lack of emotion, and it was true that he had trained himself to a point where he could control his feelings. But his training had not overcome his natural instincts, and it is the instinct of a surprised man to give a start.

Doc started. But after that he stood very still, only the animation in his flake-gold eyes showing he was not exactly composed.

"Have they been entertaining you long?" Doc asked.

"Holy cow!" Renny rumbled. "They just came in, sat down and ordered hamburgers. Fifteen minutes ago, maybe. They hadn't said nothin'."

Long, thin Johnny said, "They interlocuted the viand purveyoress infinitesimally."

Ham snapped, "Why not just say they asked the waitress somethin'."

“Probably asked her if we were the guys,” Long Tom said. He scowled at the waitress. “So you tipped ’em off we were here?”

The waitress grew nervous and started to back out of the room.

One of the men with guns beckoned her back. “You stick here, sister.”

To Long Tom and the others, he said, “And you birds lay off barkin’ at her!”

The raiders were organized. One whistled. Promptly, an engine started outside, and a large moving van drew around in front of the dining-room door.

“Get in!”

Monk bowed his thick arms and pulled his big mouth into a fierce shape. Monk wanted to fight. He liked to fight. He always howled and bellowed when he fought, and now he drew air into his lungs and got ready to bellow.

“Too risky!” Doc warned.

Monk subsided. With the others, he went out to the van. The van driver searched each of them hurriedly, and from everyone but Doc Savage, he took one of the machine pistols, very like overgrown automatics, which the bronze man’s aids carried. On Doc, the man found no weapon.

The waitress had been trying to sidle away again.

“You too, babe!” a man rapped. “You go along!”

She began to look horrified. She screamed, “But I tipped off your boss that they were here!”

“It was the boss said take you along,” a man told her.

“But—”

“Go on and get in that van, hasher!” the man snarled. “You know too much.”

They had to toss the screeching waitress into the van, where she at once clamped herself on Monk’s arm and demanded that he, “For God’s sake, save me!”

Monk steered her toward Ham. “Have him save you. He was makin’ passes at you all afternoon.”

Ham yelled indignantly, “You made as many passes as I did!”

Big-fisted Renny let out a rumble of disgust. “You two clowns sure got a choice for girl-friends!”

The truck began to roll. The three men with guns rode inside, lined up in the rear, holding their weapons ready and making the prisoners sit on the floor.

There was considerable silence. Monk and Ham were regretting their attentions to the waitress, and she made it no easier by clawing at both of them frenziedly and squalling, “Save me!” incessantly.

Finally, Doc Savage asked, “What is this all about?”

The bronze man's tone was calm, but the three gunmen stiffened and instantly pointed their weapons at Doc; so it was evident they had heard a good deal about him.

"The less words you use," one of them said, "the longer you'll live!"

"Mind giving a reason for this?" Doc asked.

The man scowled, and finally said, "A girl tried to get in touch with you."

"I know that," Doc said.

The man stuck out his lower lip. "Let's hope that's all you'll ever know."

Renny rumbled, "I don't like the way he said that!"

There was more silence, until one of the men picked up the package which Doc had been carrying, and which he had brought into the van. The man tore the paper apart and contemplated the contents, puzzled.

"What's this?" he wanted to know.

"Weeds," Doc said.

The man used the fingers of his left hand to twist the end of his nose around thoughtfully for a while, after which he wadded the "weeds" up in the paper and hurled them in a corner.

"Hell!" he said.

There was a small barred window in the forward end of the truck van; the sun was now so low that its rays blazed directly through the window, making a large barred patch of light on the van interior. Renny got the attention of their captors and pointed.

"You're liable to see your sunsets with that pattern for a long time," Renny remarked. "Through jail bars, I mean."

"At least, I'll be cooler," one of the men said, "than where you're going."

And all three gun holders showed their teeth with unpleasant satisfaction.

It is a fact which cannot be disputed that nature is not only the greatest creator, but also the most grim destroyer. Nature can build an ocean like the Atlantic, but Boulder Dam is the best man has been able to do. Nature can wipe out an Ohio valley town with a flood; the best man can do is blow up a few houses at a time with bombs.

The burning coal beds are a case in point. Lightning or natural combustion sets a vein of coal afire, and it burns underground, sometimes for years, and covering areas of thousands of acres.

Where there is a burning coal bed, the earth splits cracks yards wide, the cracks pour forth lurid fumes, and deep in the apertures there is white heat that will promptly melt steel. At night, gory red glow and sulphurous stink comes out of the

bowels of the earth. A burning coal bed is a closer imitation of hell than any Hollywood movie mogul will ever create.

The truck stopped on a hill and waited for complete darkness. The spot was a lonesome one, for no one cared to live within miles of the hell-stink of a burning coalfield. At the foot of the hill, the earth glowed red veins, and yellowish smoke crawled upward. Years ago all hope of extinguishing this coalfield fire had vanished.

The prisoners had not been permitted to look out of the van interior.

“I smell sulphur,” Monk muttered.

Doc Savage made his small, exotic trilling sound, and it had a startled, uneasy quality, for he understood what the stink of sulphur meant.

The van door opened, and their captors got in. It was so dark that the men were using flashlights.

“Lie down!” one snarled. “We’re gonna tie you!”

Doc and his men could either permit themselves to be tied, or get shot. They let the men tie them. The waitress whimpered and screamed; so they gagged her.

“Maybe we better gag ’em all,” a man suggested.

Doc and the others were gagged with sleeves torn off their own arms.

“Now there won’t be any yellin’ when them and the truck go into one of those cracks,” a man growled.

The men got out, stood waiting for it to get darker. They contemplated the burning coalfield. The appalling nature of the thing, and its resemblance to Hades, evidently gave each one of them a bad case of red ants on the mind, because they kept talking.

“You sure this will finish ’em, Heek?” one asked.

The man called Heek snorted. “Listen, we drive that truck in one of them cracks, and in five minutes it’ll be a puddle of melted iron. The truck, all the bodies, will be gone.”

The first man muttered, “It seems kind of a nut way of doing.”

“Listen,” said Heek, “did you ever try to get rid of a body? By damn, I did one time.”

“You did. When was that?”

“The hell with you,” Heek said.

There were clouds packed in the sky, and finally it became intensely dark. The men could see each other only as lurid devillike shapes against the crimson fumes of the burning coal bed.

“I’ll get in there and make sure they’re tied,” said Heek, the man who had once tried to dispose of a body.

Heek climbed into the truck. The others stood outside. They kept close together, making their eardrums crack with listening, for they were naturally afraid of being discovered at the last minute. They heard grunting and scraping sounds from inside the truck.

“Heek’s doin’ a good job of makin’ sure they’re tied tight,” a man mumbled.

It seemed a long time before Heek’s voice spoke from the van.

“Don’t show any lights,” the voice ordered. “Ain’t no use takin’ chances.”

The vicinity of the truck remained black.

“You guys stick here,” Heek’s voice continued. “I’ll drive the truck into a crack.”

There were no objections to Heek taking care of that part of the job. It was Heek who had known of this place, so it seemed appropriate for him to take care of the dirty work. The other three stood back.

A shadowy form moved around to the front of the truck and disappeared behind the wheel. The engine came to life; the big van lurched toward the inferno at the foot of the hill.

Once the machine paused, and they could hear the engine laboring.

“I hope Heek don’t get stuck,” a man gasped.

The truck went on after a moment. It moved like a square-backed turtle. Drawing near one of the largest cracks, it seemed to have trouble again. It came to a standstill.

“Hey!” Heek’s voice yelled. “I think I’m stuck! C’mon and help!”

The other three men dashed forward.

But before they reached the van, the engine gave a louder roar and the thing leaped. A *leap* was the only way to describe the way it moved. It seemed to jump—into the crack.

There was a crash. A burst of gory red flame as gasoline exploded. Then smoke.

And then screams. Awful, agonized screams. Shrieks of death—in Heek’s voice.

The three gunmen stopped as if embedded in invisible ice.

“Heek!”

“Heek didn’t get out of the truck!”

The death shrieks took only a short time to come to an end.

A man croaked again, “Heek didn’t get out!”

“The door on that side was hard to open,” another muttered. “He musta forgot

that!”

For moments they were held petrified, the accident having gone off in their faces with the unexpectedness of a gunshot. Then the same idea hit them all at about the same time. Get out of here! Leave the spot before anything else went wrong.

They ran like wolves caught in a sheepfold.

Behind them, red flame and yellow-black smoke continued to boil out of the great fiery crack into which the truck had plunged. There was the smell of burned rubber with the natural sulphur stench of the smoldering coalfields. There was a screaming whistle as the truck spare tire let loose.

But in time, these sights and sounds and smells ceased, and there was nothing to show that a truck had gone into the crack except the tracks of the vehicle, which of course would be plainly discernible with daylight.

Deep in the crack, where the superheated gases came out from smoldering coal that underlay the surroundings, in the very depths of the crack where there were rocks that glowed always whitehot, and other rocks that had melted and become lava, there was a dirty-looking, semi-liquid mess.

Heek had been right. No one would ever recognize that mess as a big van which had contained Doc Savage, his five aids, and a waitress whose fingers itched for money—and Heek himself.

It only looked as if someone had junked an old jalopy by rolling it into the crack.

Chapter VII

TWO TRAILS TO TROUBLE

The three killers ran until they remembered that their fast pace would seem strange if anyone heard them, after which they walked. There was not much talk. They had seen death, and the sight had taken their words.

Once one of the men cried out in horror. That was when an owl said, “*Huh-huh-hoo-o-o!*” and the sound seemed like nothing that could have been. The night was as black as a bat’s idea of Valhalla, and such was the state of their minds that the men used their flashlights sparingly. They were cold with horror. They felt as men always feel when it is too late, particularly too late to do anything about a murder. At this moment, they would have paid high for the chance to live their lives over.

And so they came to a filling station, where they conferred; then one man went ahead into the station, leaving the others behind. He made a telephone call. The man tried to be funny.

“Dr. Joiner’s operation,” he said, “was a success.”

His mirth sounded like a rattle of skeleton bones.

“You sound,” growled the voice of the black-gloved man known as Dr. Joiner, “like a buzzard that has just laid a square egg.”

“Heek got killed.”

If there happened to be a telephone girl listening in on that conversation, she probably never forgot the profanity she heard.

Later, the man who had telephoned went back to the other two.

“The boss blistered the paint about what happened to Heek,” he said.

“It wasn’t our fault.”

“I know. I told ’im that. He finally said he guessed it was worth what happened to Heek to get everything back in running order.”

The other two shivered.

“I’d hate to think,” one muttered, “that anything was worth my neck.”

“They fight wars over nothin’,” the other said thoughtfully. “But you take us—we’re gonna get more outa this than a lotta people think they’re gonna get when they’re fightin’ their wars.”

The third man snorted disgustedly.

“If you two philosophers will follow me,” he said, “we’ll go find a depot and wait for the first westbound train.”

“What about Tom Idle’s sister?”

“We pick her up and take her with us. The boss says we’ll hold her, on account of we can threaten to hurt the girl and keep Tom Idle quiet.”

The three birds of a feather descended the road into a valley and found a village railway station. They sat in the station and waited.

Doc Savage could see the three men through the depot windows.

Doc waited in silence until Renny joined them. The big-fisted engineer had gone to ask train times.

“Holy cow, there’s no westbound train for almost two hours,” Renny reported. “They’ll just sit there for that time.”

“Let us get everybody together for a minute,” Doc Savage suggested.

They moved away from a sidetracked boxcar, from which concealment they had been watching the depot, and crept silently to a spot in a brush patch a hundred yards away, where a sheep went, “*Ba-a-a-a!*”

“All right, Monk,” Doc whispered.

Ham said, “Monk sounds very natural as a goat, don’t he?”

“That wasn’t a goat,” Monk hissed. “It was a sheep.”

“You put too much of your own personality into it, then,” Ham assured him.

Johnny and Long Tom shushed the pair of perpetual quarrelers. Doc Savage and all five assistants then gathered in a close group.

A few yards away, just out of earshot, lay Heek and the waitress. They were bound and gagged.

Doc said, “There is no need of letting the waitress and Heek overhear plans.”

“I’ll say not,” Monk agreed vehemently. “And we gotta hang onto that waitress. Boy, would she have a story to sell Dr. Joiner now. Whoever the guy is, he’d pay plenty to know we’re alive.”

Renny chuckled. “I wonder what they’d do to Heek if they found out how Doc got his ropes loose, then knocked Heek senseless when he climbed in the truck,” he whispered. He added: “But then, the other three were more to blame than Heek. They didn’t know what had happened. They thought it was Heek talkin’ when Doc imitated Heek’s voice, and volunteered to drive the truck into the crack in that burnin’ coalfield. They stood there as trustful as babes while Doc faked gettin’ the truck stuck, so we could climb out.”

The big-fisted engineer chuckled again. “Holy cow! What a case of creeps they got when Doc faked the last cries of Heek burnin’ to death.”

Renny’s whisper was almost as bullthroated as his voice.

“If you don’t want ’em to hear you over in Kentucky,” Long Tom breathed,

“you’d better tune down.”

Doc Savage interrupted to summarize the situation.

“We have done some rushing around, and nearly got ourselves killed,” he said. “But we have actually accomplished little.”

“Me, I’ve accomplished something,” Monk muttered. “I’ve dang well proved to my satisfaction that somethin’ mysterious is goin’ on. Also, that the brains behind it dang well don’t overlook any bets. Also that we’d dang well better be careful.”

“Maybe you’ve dang well got some idea what we’d better do next?” the dapper Ham suggested to the homely chemist.

Doc Savage spoke, quiet-voiced.

“Suppose we split,” Doc said, “You five trail those three men waiting in the depot. Find Tom Idle’s sister, and do whatever else you can.”

“What about you, Doc?”

“I’ll put Heek and the waitress in college,” Doc Savage explained. “Then I’ll fly to the Utah State Penitentiary and look into the mystery of how a man named Tom Idle could turn into an outlaw named Hondo Weatherbee.”

“We’ll keep in touch with each other by radio, as usual?”

“Right.”

Doc Savage and his men had referred to the “college” casually. No one else would have been prosaic about the place. But then, very few knew the “college” existed. The newspapers didn’t, certainly. Or they would have broken out the type they used for war, earthquakes and the World Series.

The “college” was a cluster of grim, graystone buildings located in the unpopulated mountainous area of upstate New York, and it was surrounded by several different, high man-proof fences bearing signs that said:

WARNING
GERM RESEARCH INSTITUTION
—YOU MAY CATCH A DISEASE—
KEEP OUT

The warning signs were mildly misleading, for the disease that was treated was not contagious, not by germs. The disease was crime. Such criminals as Doc Savage captured were taken to the place, where they underwent delicate brain operations at the hands of specialists whom Doc Savage himself had trained. The operations wiped out all the patient’s memory of the past.

Permanent mental amnesia was created surgically. After this, the patients were

trained to hate crime, and were taught trades at which they could earn honest livings. Finally, they were discharged, specialists in some profession, with no knowledge of having been criminals in the past.

As far as the outside world was concerned, existence of the “college” was a secret.

Doc Savage landed his plane—he had taken the small plane, let his associates use the large one—at the “college” while it was still dark. There was a lighted landing field, and after Doc set his ship down, several quiet and efficient young men helped unload Heek and the waitress.

“The girl,” Doc said, “will go through in the usual way.”

The waitress was not much of a criminal, and she had received such a scare that she would probably reform. But the course of training would benefit her, so Doc was putting her through the place.

“We’ll use truth serum on the man, first,” Doc announced.

The administration of the truth serum was a success. Sometimes it wasn’t. The stuff was given as a gas, the same way a surgeon uses an anaesthetic, and its effect was to stupefy the victim so that he could not consciously refrain from answering incriminating questions.

About Heek, Doc learned:

Heek was a local Ohio hooligan, with a record of two prison terms. Eleven years ago, however, Heek had taken an Idaho vacation to permit the police to forget him, and while in Idaho he had associated himself with an outlaw gang dominated by a man named Jan Hile and another man named Hondo Weatherbee.

Pickings in the wild and woolly West had been thin, however, and Heek had returned to Ohio, where he’d led a typical crook’s life—in jail and out, hiding from police, double-crossed by fellow crooks, and suffering from disease—until as recently as yesterday. Yesterday, who should appear but Heek’s old Idaho outlaw acquaintance, Jan Hile, who at once hired Heek to take part in the murder of the Doc Savage group and the waitress.

About the mystery, Doc learned:

Nothing. Heek didn’t know what was afoot. The total of his knowledge was that he had been hired to commit a murder by an old-time outlaw associate named Jan Hile.

Jan Hile, of course, was the same man as Dr. Joiner.

Having expended six hours in obtaining this negligible information, Doc Savage was not enthusiastic about the progress.

“Go ahead with the treatment,” the bronze man said.

So the specialists took Heek into the operation room and prepared to make him forever forget that he had been a crook.

Doc Savage left by plane.

Great Salt Lake glistened in the afternoon sun as Doc Savage slanted his plane down the side of the last black mountain. The salt flats, the same flats which displaced Daytona Beach as the rendezvous of speed demons trying to set world automobile records, were an expanse as flat as a marble table-top. Altogether, it was a very bright, cheerful afternoon as Doc put the plane down between the red-and-white striped poles that bordered the Salt Lake City airport.

He did not alight at once. He used the plane's powerful short-wave radio.

"Monk," he said.

"Yes, Doc," Monk's small squeaky voice answered over the radio.

"Where are you?"

"We're on a westbound passenger train that just pulled out of Marceline, Missouri," Monk explained. "Our three guys are in the car in front. They still don't dream they're being followed. I've got this portable radio in a drawing room."

"Tom Idle's sister?" Doc asked.

"Somewhere ahead, the three men are going to meet someone who is holding the girl. What progress have you made, Doc?"

"Practically none."

This terminated the bronze man's contact with his five associates.

Doc Savage next did something that appeared to be entirely senseless. Something for which there was no apparent reason. One of the last things he might have been expected to do.

His act was a typical example of the kind of thing which later developed in such a way as to give his enemies unpleasant shocks.

Doc went to police headquarters. Since the Salt Lake City police department was very modern, the rogues' gallery contained a picture of Big Eva, and a description which included the huge convict's measurements and weight.

Tom Idle, in his letter to his sister, had mentioned that a convict named Big Eva was his cellmate. Doc Savage examined Big Eva's photograph and description for some time.

"Thank you," he said thoughtfully.

The bronze man now went to a hotel. He took along two articles, the first being the paper which contained the "weeds" that the garage mechanic had removed from the wheels of Dr. Joiner's plane in Ohio.

Doc Savage mailed the package of “weeds” to himself, care of general delivery, the Salt Lake City post office.

The second article which Doc carried was a metal equipment case. In the privacy of his locked hotel room, he opened this. It contained make-up articles, but nothing as conventional as grease paint and false whiskers.

There was a bottle containing a colorless chemical, and when Doc applied this to his ears and around his mouth, a harmless swelling of considerable degree at once developed, greatly changing the aspect of his face.

Another contained dye which made his bronze hair black, and could only be erased with the proper chemical remover. There were glass eyeball caps, like the “invisible” spectacles which the better opticians supply, and these were dark enough to disguise the flake-gold of his eyes. They were made of transparent, nonshatter compound instead of glass, for safety, and could hardly be detected with a magnifying glass.

Doc Savage, walking out of the hotel room, was a man who bore a striking resemblance to the convict called Big Eva.

Chapter VIII

SKOOKUM'S IDEA

Skookum's lunchroom had changed. It had lately received an addition which had almost doubled its size, and the exterior was bright with a fresh coat of paint, while a new and elaborate neon sign advertised the place. Inside, there was much new equipment, including booths and a hardwood floor on which couples could dance to music that was furnished each evening by an orchestra of four colored gentlemen.

Skookum had spread himself

Doc Savage said, "Lesh have shervice aroun' hersh!"

He sounded very intoxicated when he said it. He sank in a booth and pounded a table with his fist. The waiters—Skookum himself no longer stooped to anything as undignified as waiting table—frowned at Doc, and decided it would create more commotion if they tried to throw him out than if they served him. They brought him ginger ale. His pockets already bulged with bottles bearing alcoholic labels.

Doc Savage looked as if he had emptied a number of such bottles. His hair, now black, was down in his eyes. His thick-lipped mouth was loose and his expression was stupid. His speech was none too coherent, and it grew worse as he downed drink after drink.

There was nothing alcoholic in anything the bronze man drank, but there was nothing to indicate such a fact. Only one bottle contained genuine spirits, and he spilled some of the contents at intervals to create the proper smell.

He spent an hour deliberately making a noisy nuisance of himself.

Then he slumped forward, buried his head in his arms and emitted a loud snore.

Skookum had been watching for some time. Skookum had taken to wearing striped trousers, lap-over vest and cutaway coat for his daytime working garb. At night, he wore full dress.

It was the hour when Skookum usually changed to his claw-hammer coat, but he was so interested in watching the big drunk who had invaded his place that he had put it off. When Doc apparently went to sleep, Skookum looked elated.

"Carry him in back room heap sudden," Skookum ordered.

The back room of Skookum's lunch stand was also a new addition, and if the police found out about it, there would be trouble. The room was a high-powered gambling establishment which Skookum had started on the side.

As a number of persons had remarked, Skookum had certainly branched out

recently.

“Make track,” Skookum told his waiters.

The waiters departed and closed the door.

Skookum seated himself at the telephone and made long-distance telephone calls, each to a hotel in a different city. He began with Kansas City and Tulsa, then worked westward past Pueblo, Denver and Cheyenne. In Sheridan, Wyoming, he located the man he was seeking.

“Hello Jan Hile,” he said.

Skookum listened, and his expression showed that he was being abused over the telephone.

“Sure, chief, the name is Dr. Joiner. Heap sorry,” he said. “You fan out ear and listen. Me catchum big idea.”

Jan Hile, or Dr. Joiner, as he seemed to prefer being called for the time being, evidently told Skookum where he could take his ideas.

“Now you got me wrong, chief,” Skookum said desperately. “Listen. A drunk came in my place a while ago and passed out. He’s layin’ here on the floor by me, heap much asleep.”

The other man’s angry demand could be heard all over the room.

“What the hell about it?” he yelled.

“This drunk, he looked plenty like Big Eva,” Skookum explained.

“Eh?”

“Same size. Same thick mouth, thick ear. Same black hair. Heap alike.”

There was a long silence, but Skookum could hear the other man whistling thoughtfully, so he knew the fellow had not hung up.

“How much, Skookum?”

“Ten thousand dollar,” Skookum said.

“Not a chance!”

“Heap cheap.”

“Listen, you crazy Indian-talking hotdog merchant, ten thousand is all you got for helping with the Tom Idle thing. That was different. Five hundred this time. Not a cent more.”

There was protracted dickering, during which Skookum was insistent that ten thousand was as cheap as dirt, and the matter was compromised on six hundred dollars, with the added promise that Skookum would get his entrails kicked out if anything went wrong.

Skookum hung up the telephone receiver.

He called, "Hey, Seedy!"

One of the new waiters came in, scowled uneasily and said, "Damned if I don't think you'd better quit callin' me that name."

Tom Idle would have recognized the waiter as that blowsy fellow, later identified as Seedy Smith, whose startled ejaculation had aroused him that incredible morning on the park bench. It was this waiter who had addressed Tom Idle as Hondo Weatherbee, then fled.

Skookum pointed at the limp form of Doc Savage.

"Heap watchum," Skookum said.

The waiter looked puzzled. "Huh?"

"Watchum," Skookum ordered. "Just watchum."

Skookum left the lunchroom and strolled to the neighboring park, where he looked about until he found a young man who was carrying a big broom and pushing a large tin can equipped with wheels.

"How?" Skookum said.

"Not so hot," snarled the young street cleaner. "There must've been twenty picnics in the damn park today, and they all scattered papers. To say nothin' of the fact that a whole blasted regiment of cavalry rode their horses through."

Tom Idle would also have recognized the surly young street cleaner as the man he had thought was Officer Sam Stevens, the park cop. The fellow's name was actually Sam Stevens, but the nearest he had ever come to being a policeman was in wearing the uniform which Skookum had bought him.

Sam Stevens eyed Skookum cunningly.

"You wouldn't have another job for me?" he asked. "Maybe somethin' like playin' cop again."

"Sure," Skookum said. "You bury bottle of stuff we use first on Tom Idle. Show me where."

"Heap betcha," said Sam Stevens.

Skookum and Sam Stevens went on hurrying when they thought no one would notice, until they reached the park bench on which Tom Idle had awakened that ill-fated morning. Skookum was not concerned with the bench, but he was interested in the soft ground behind a patch of shrubs which stood at a short distance. He watched Sam Stevens get on all fours and dig.

The bottle which Sam Stevens unearthed was half emptied of its contents, but tightly corked.

"This is it," Sam Stevens said. "There's enough of the stuff left in the bottle."

"Want help me?" Skookum asked.

“Sure.”

“Fifty dollars.”

Sam Stevens swore. “That ain’t enough, but I’ll do it.”

They went back to the lunchroom. Doc Savage still lay on the floor, breathing in what they took for a drunken stupor, and watched by the waiter who had taken the part of Seedy Smith in the Tom Idle melodrama.

“This heap easy,” Skookum said.

He poured some of the liquid from the bottle on his handkerchief. He was careful to avert his head, so as not to inhale the pungent fumes, and the others did likewise.

Skookum had held the handkerchief under Doc Savage’s nose for hardly a minute before the bronze man became unconscious.

Chapter IX

LIFER

The storm rumbled and crashed. Lightning jumped in jagged streaks and impaled clouds, stood in white heat and shook; it stabbed straight down out of the sky with gunshot reports. Thunder made the sound of cannons, and the roaring was all mixed with echoes that came bouncing back from the mountains, so that the night was a hideous, cackling bedlam and a flame-flushed inferno.

The penitentiary was like a grimy gray goat crouching near the mountains; there were two towers at the gate, these sticking up like the goat's horns. Bolt lightning suddenly came down out of the sky, touched one horn tower with a sizzle and a bang, and in the penitentiary cells a hundred convicts lay rigid while fear chills walked their spines. They hoped with all their minds that it was not too late to begin better lives.

The lightning glare came in through the bars and licked the cells with ethereal red tongues. Thunder shock made ironcot legs tremble grittingly on concrete floor.

Doc Savage awakened in all that; he sat up with the feeling that he had aroused because of the uproar. But he pushed this idea out of his mind, for he knew the anæsthetic he had been given in Salt Lake City had finally worn off.

The last thing he remembered was Skookum bending over him. Skookum with a handkerchief wet with stuff that had come from a bottle. Skookum saying, "This heap easy."

Now the bronze man ached, his stomach wanted to rebel, and there was uneasiness in his mind as well.

"Hello," he said.

There was another cot in the cell; on it a form in a blanket. The form stirred.

"They never had lightning like this on Bear Creek," a voice said.

Bear Creek was near Sue City, the Missouri home of Tom Idle. Doc lay very still and thought about that.

He asked, "How long have you been asleep, Tom Idle?"

The other man bolted up in his cot. Hearing the name—Tom Idle—had torn him loose from his control. His glare was mad in the red flush of lightning.

"Stop it!" he snarled. "Don't begin callin' me Tom Idle! I'll go nuts!" He shook both fists in a frenzy. "Cut it! I can't stand it, Big Eva!"

Doc Savage knew that he was looking at a man who had been under a fantastic strain for weeks, and who could not stand much more.

Doc got up and went to the cell mirror that was of stainless steel—convicts have been known to break glass mirrors and use the fragments on each other or themselves. There was no light in the cell except the lightning, but that was sufficient.

Doc Savage was looking at Big Eva, the convict. He showed the mirror his teeth, and it was as if Big Eva had snarled.

The likeness shocked the bronze man. He had gone into this deliberately while holding in his mind the suspicion of what would happen, and hoping it would happen. But suddenly he doubted himself. His confidence slipped.

He gripped the cell bars with both hands. He exerted force. Was this really *his* body? He had to know that. The sinews stood out in his arms and shoulders. His temples pounded with effort—and the cell bars slowly gave.

“Great grief!” Tom Idle croaked.

Doc Savage released the bars, his uncertainty gone. He knew now. His body was still his own body.

Tom Idle was ogling the distorted cell bars.

“For the love of mud,” he muttered, “I didn’t think any man was strong enough to do that.”

Doc Savage went back to the cot and lay down. He thought for a while.

“Idle.”

“Yes?”

“A while ago, I asked how long you had slept.”

“I went off like a log right after supper,” Tom Idle said. “Darnedest thing, too. I haven’t been sleeping worth a toot. But tonight I sure made up for it.”

“So they drugged you.”

“Eh?”

“Drugs. They had to be sure you would sleep through it.”

During the next few moments, the roar of thunder was pounded into insignificance by the abrupt coming of hailstones, some as large as bantam eggs, which struck by the millions in a hammering avalanche that beat pits in roofing and frayed edges of fence posts out on the range.

Unexpectedly, the lightning revealed Tom Idle, leaning over Doc Savage.

“I thought so!” Tom Idle muttered. “You look different.”

“I am not Big Eva,” Doc said.

“Huh?”

“I am Doc Savage,” Doc explained. “You wrote your sister to get in touch with me. Remember?”

It must have been a minute before Tom Idle said anything. He sank back on his cot and just sat there.

“I guess I’m crazy after all,” he said.

He sat with his head in his hands for a while longer.

“It’s kind of a relief at that,” he muttered finally, “to know that I’m nuts, and there really ain’t any explanation for what happened, on account of it didn’t happen.”

He lay back on his bunk and pulled the blanket up around his chin.

“I wonder what booby hatch they’ve really got me in?” he pondered gravely. “I wonder if it’s the one at St. Joe?”

He began to laugh hysterically.

The warden of the penitentiary returned from his cow ranch the following afternoon. The ranch was located near the prison, so the warden had ridden a horse. He still wore his cowboy boots and was turning a five-gallon hat thoughtfully in his lean hands as two guards led in Doc Savage.

The warden looked at Doc Savage and recognized him only as Big Eva, whom he did not like. He lost no time making known his impatience.

“As a hardened criminal, you’re second only to that cellmate of yours, Hondo Weatherbee!” the warden said grimly. “If this is some kind of a trick, you’ll land in solitary confinement so fast you won’t know it!”

Doc Savage spoke in a calm voice. He said that his name was Doc Savage, and that he was certainly not the convict known as Big Eva. He made this statement with conviction.

The prison warden put on his cowboy hat, then took it off again. “I’m a son of a gun!” He sat down behind his desk. But he jumped up almost at once in a rage.

“What the Hades is this?” he yelled. “Hondo Weatherbee tried to pull the same trick!”

“My cellmate is named Tom Idle—not Hondo Weatherbee,” Doc Savage said.

The warden snorted.

“And you’re Doc Savage—instead of Big Eva?”

“Yes.”

“You two stir-bugs must have been eating loco weed from the same patch,” the warden said angrily. “I know both Hondo Weatherbee and Big Eva by sight. I ought to. They’ve made me enough trouble. You’re Big Eva. And your cellmate is Hondo Weatherbee.”

“There may be a physical resemblance,” Doc said. “But the whole thing is a trick to get Hondo Weatherbee and Big Eva out of the penitentiary.”

The warden jammed his hat on his head. "I'm going to be reasonable." He lifted his voice and yelled for a clerk to bring the fingerprint identification file.

Doc Savage looked at Big Eva's fingerprint card when it was put before him. Doc knew his own fingerprints by sight, and did not need to compare to know that the prints on Big Eva's card were his own.

"They're your prints, ain't they?" the warden asked. "Just the same way the prints on Hondo Weatherbee's card are the prints of the man you've got for a cellmate now."

There was a magnifying glass on the desk. Doc Savage put the fingerprint card under this for an examination. He held the card up to the light. He rubbed the print to test the dryness of the ink, until the warden angrily ordered him not to smudge them.

Doc said, "According to the date, the card went in the file three years ago."

"Sure. When you were committed to this institution."

"But the card," Doc said, "was manufactured less than a year ago. And the fingerprints have not been inked on it more than twelve hours. Doesn't that strike you as strange?"

The warden scowled and picked up the card.

"I'll have an expert look at this. You go back to a cell, meantime."

It was five hours before the warden visited Doc Savage.

"Expert says you're crazy," the warden growled. "This card is three years old, and the fingerprints on it are three years old, too."

"What expert?"

"Our fingerprint expert right here in the penitentiary. He takes care of all the prints, and these cards."

"That explains it."

"Explains what?"

"He is probably the man they hired to switch cards."

The warden was doubtless justified in considering the whole thing a ruse on the part of two prisoners. There were clever prisoners in this penitentiary, and the devices they tried were strange.

"You're not going to get out of this penitentiary with a trick," the warden snapped. "You serve out your sentence."

"And how long is Big Eva's sentence?" Doc asked.

"Life," the warden growled. "Furthermore, you get two weeks in solitary for trying to pull a phony story."

"May I send a telegram to a man named Monk Mayfair?" Doc asked.

The warden shook his head.

“You don’t send or receive anything. It’ll be a hot day when I trust Big Eva.”

The solitary cells were three feet wide, so an inmate could always get plenty of exercise by bracing his feet against one wall and pushing with his back on the other, a form of exercise that had a depressing effect because it brought a full understanding of how close and how hard the walls were. There was no light, a small barred aperture in the door being closed by a lid on the outside. Ventilation was through a pipe, there was practically no sound, and it was an excellent surrounding for deep thought.

Doc Savage, being a giant of a man, was cramped for space. He leaned against one cold stone wall in the utter blackness for which a solitary cell is famous, and his thoughts were not cheerful.

No doubt every visitor going through a penitentiary has stopped at least once and thought, “What if they don’t let me out of here?”

Doc Savage was no exception. Here was the predicament come to life.

It was obvious that Hondo Weatherbee had been taken out of the penitentiary and Tom Idle substituted in his place, Tom Idle being selected simply because he looked something like Hondo Weatherbee. Doc Savage had surmised this when he disguised himself to look like Big Eva. He’d suspected Big Eva of knowing of the hoax, and helping it along by claiming Tom Idle was Hondo Weatherbee. The man would have known Tom Idle wasn’t his cellmate.

Because there was a chance that Big Eva was also slated for release from the penitentiary, since he had once been a bandit associate of Hondo Weatherbee, Doc had disguised himself to resemble Big Eva and offered himself as a sacrifice to see if he was guessing right.

So he was in the penitentiary—in a great deal more solidly than he had anticipated. Still, it should be only a question of time until he could manage to get word out to Monk or another of his five aids. After that, it would not take long for them to extricate him.

His only hope of getting out of the penitentiary was undeniably through the aid of his five assistants. Without outside help, he might easily become a permanent fixture.

The outlook could have been more cheerful. Disgusted, Doc Savage finally went to sleep.

It was well after midnight when the man in the gray suit crept into the section of the prison containing the solitary cells.

The man in the gray suit was pale with strain, and desperate, for he was the

prison fingerprint expert who had switched fingerprint file cards of Big Eva and Hondo Weatherbee for cards holding the fingerprints of Doc and Tom Idle—prints placed there while the latter were drugged, just prior to being spirited into the penitentiary.

He drew a blackjack from his pocket, and creeping forward, managed to slug the solitary cell-block guard. The guard collapsed without knowing what had hit him.

The grim-faced fingerprint man then skulked toward Doc Savage's cell.

"They killed Doc Savage in Ohio," he muttered. "So this guy can't be him."

He took from his clothing a bottle that contained one of the most deadly poison gas mixtures ever contrived for modern warfare. It was a gas against which there was no known defense. Its fumes would kill through the skin pores. Days afterward, if a man handled an object which the stuff had touched, death would come almost instantaneously.

Holding the bottle ready to throw into the cell, he fumbled with the fastening of the lid over the barred opening in the door of the solitary cell which Doc Savage occupied.

Chapter X

SUITCASE TRICK

The passenger train pulled slowly into Salt Lake City, the wheels clicking over rail joints, and stopped in the station, where the air brakes emitted tired hisses; the porters swung down with their little steps, and the cars began to spew luggage and passengers.

Two of the porters were short men, although one of these was much wider than the other, and had arms fully as long as his legs. Both porters were as black and shiny as Concord grapes, and each carried a load of suitcases that would have dismayed a mountain burro.

Ten yards behind the two porters walked a feeble-looking old lady who wore colored spectacles and hobbled with a cane. She had stringy white hair, and her face looked bony and unhealthy. This old lady had gotten on at St. Louis, and she was a confirmed train-prowler. That is, she had made innumerable trips from one end of the train to the other. She carried a cheap brown suitcase.

Another ten yards back came a very tall, very thin man with flowing white whiskers, and who walked with a pronounced stoop.

Still farther back, and bringing up the rear of the procession, was a huge news butcher with a bundle of magazines under his arm and a tray containing candy, cigars, cigarettes and toys slung around his neck by a strap. He was also as black as a Concord grape.

In the middle of this parade walked the three men who thought they had killed Doc Savage in a burning coal bed in Ohio. They did not know they were the center of a parade, any more than they knew they had not killed Doc in Ohio.

At the station exit, the three rascals became six when they were joined by Skookum, Seedy Smith and Sam Stevens. There was enough handshaking all around to show that they knew each other.

“How’s it go?” Skookum asked.

“Swell. And with you?”

“The same.”

“Did they get here with the girl all right?”

“Sure,” Skookum said. “Everything heap good. We pick her up later.”

The men hurried over to swear at the porters who had their luggage. The porters were in some kind of a mixup. It was the short, thin-waisted porter and the one who had arms as long as his legs—the pair that were as black as Concord grapes.

Unnoticed, the porters had already switched a bag belonging to the three men for the one the feeble-looking old lady was carrying.

The three men were not aware of the swap, and loaded themselves into the new sedan which Skookum had recently bought. The six men and the bags made quite a crowd, and it ended up by one of the men having to hold a bag on his lap. The bag was the one the porters had switched.

Skookum and his companions drove away, unaware that any manipulating had occurred.

At the station, there was at once a furious scramble, and the two porters, the old lady, the bony man with the white whiskers, and the big black news butcher all landed in a taxicab.

“Follow that car ahead.”

The huge news butcher gave the order, then settled back on the cushions and contemplated his companions.

“Holy cow!” he rumbled. “We sure make a freaky collection for one taxicab!”

“You haven’t got these skirts to fuss with, Renny,” snapped the little old lady in a voice that belonged to Long Tom Roberts, the electrical wizard. “You should kick.”

The two porters—Monk and Ham—were already scowling at each other.

The bony old man picked up the ends of his white whiskers and contemplated them distastefully.

“A hirsute incongruity,” he remarked.

Renny, the news butcher, looked puzzled.

“Johnny means,” Long Tom translated, “that his whiskers get in his soup.”

Renny sighed, blocked his huge hands into fists and eyed them thoughtfully, then shrugged.

“We’ve gone to a lot of old-fashioned gumshoe detective trouble; and trailed those three guys so close that we know how many breaths they took between here and Columbus, Ohio,” he rumbled disgustedly. “And what’s it got us?”

Monk said, “Well, whoever had the girl brought her on ahead to Salt Lake City.”

“You . . . always thinking about a girl!” Renny thumped. “That’s another thing!”

The taxi rolled swiftly through the midsection of the town, stopping frequently for the rather unusual Salt Lake City traffic lights, each of which was connected to some kind of a gadget that emitted a shrill policelike whistle each time the lights changed.

Doc Savage’s five aids were silent. They were tired. Long Tom, as the old lady train-prowler, had kept close touch on their quarry. Monk and Ham, as porters, and

Renny, as news butcher, had eavesdropped. Johnny, as a white-whiskered old gentleman, had occupied a seat in the car with the trio they were trailing. But the sum total of their success was that they had trailed the men as far as Salt Lake City.

Furthermore, there had been no word from Doc Savage for some time.

Renny rumbled, "Maybe our last gag will get some kind of results."

He lifted a small equipment case onto his knees, opened it and disclosed dials and loud-speaker aperture of a portable radio receiver.

"Bet it don't work," Monk muttered.

Long Tom, the electrical wizard, flared up with, "Sure, it'll work! You switched suitcases, didn't you? And one of the men is holding the case on his lap, isn't he?"

"Yeah," Monk admitted.

"Well, there's a short-wave radio transmitter in that case, isn't there? And the microphone is mounted behind a label on the suitcase, where it'll pick up anything said, isn't it?"

"Um-m-m," Monk said. "What if they open the suitcase?"

"I took care of that when I made the device!" Long Tom snapped.

Long Tom always had confidence in his electrical work. He had mounted this transmitter in a suitcase which they had managed to buy en route, a suitcase that was an exact imitation of the cheap one carried by one of their quarry. He was sure the device would function.

They listened to what was said in Skookum's car.

Skookum drove with his shoulders back proud of himself. Obviously he considered that he was getting along in the world.

"Ugh!" he remarked. "Heap no profit in goin' straight."

The others looked at him, wondering what had brought that out.

"Long time ago, I belong to bandit gang with Hondo Weatherbee and Jan Hile," Skookum explained. "Hondo Weatherbee kill a man he was prospecting with, and the gang split up!" Skookum scowled. "Me, I turn heap honest and run lunchroom. Ten years, I run him. Ugh! What he get me?"

"Well, what'd it get you?" a man asked indifferently.

"Headache," Skookum said. "Heap headache."

He puffed his chest until the big imitation diamond in his tie pin scratched his chin. He patted the steering wheel of the shiny car as if it were a new pup.

"A few weeks ago, I have talk with Jan Hile, and decide to turn bandit again. Now look at me! New car. Almost new lunchroom. Heap wampum."

"Wampum?" One of the men was puzzled.

“Money. Dough and spondulicks to you paleface.”

Skookum peered at himself in the mirror as if he were observing the acme in wit, wisdom and worldly goods. Anyone else would have seen a greasy brown fat man with the eyes of a cow pony and jowls which appeared packed full of hickory nuts, gopher fashion.

“Where was Jan Hile,” a man asked, “all these years?”

Skookum looked at the other belittlingly.

“Hile go to Chicago,” he said. “Got to be heap famous lawyer.”

In the trailing taxicab that was some distance behind, Brigadier General Theodore Marley (Ham) Brooks, the pride of Harvard law college, gave a violent start.

“Whew!” Ham exploded. “I didn’t dream *that* Jan Hile was the man behind this!”

Monk frowned. “What about *that* Jan Hile?”

“Haven’t you heard of him?” Ham demanded. “He’s one of the sharpest criminal lawyers in America. He’s saved more killers from the gallows than any other four lawyers put together. He should’ve been hung years ago!”

“Hung along with all the rest of the lawyers,” Monk suggested.

Ham ignored the inference. “I wonder,” he pondered, “what is back of this? That Jan Hile is a millionaire. He doesn’t touch anything small.”

Renny held up one of his big hands.

“Sh-h-h!” he said. “That Skookum is bragging again!”

Skookum was speaking in a tone of deep-throated resonance which—little did he dream—made an excellent radio voice.

“I’m in charge of this,” he said. “I’m running it. Get that heap clear.”

The men in the car eyed him, not greatly impressed.

“If you know so much,” one said, “suppose you tell us what is going on?”

“Why,” said Skookum grandly, “Jan Hile wanted Hondo Weatherbee and Big Eva out of penitentiary. I get ’em out with heap good trick.”

The man snorted. “I don’t mean that. I mean—Why? What’s in the wind?”

“Yeah,” another man echoed. “What’s going on around Mad Mesa?”

Skookum opened his mouth, then shut it. His expression showed that he knew no more than the others, if as much. He shoved out his jaw belligerently.

“I ain’t tellin’ what I know!” he snapped.

He at least knew that the safest refuge for a dunce is an air of mystery.

When Skookum entered the back room of his lunch stand, he gave a violent

start.

“Ugh!” he said. “Me think you in Wyoming.”

Jan Hile said, “There’s such thing as an airplane.”

Hile did not move from the chair where he was seated. He nodded to each man, spoke in a way that showed he had known all of them in the past. He wore his inevitable black gloves, and there was about him a fierce predatory air. Men usually grew uneasy in his presence, and these men were no exception. They did not look at him any more than they had to. They could not have explained why.

“You three”—he eyed the trio who had arrived by train—“tell me what happened in Ohio.”

“Well, we got Doc Savage, his five men, and the waitress who knew too much,” one of the men said. “And we put ’em in a truck and ran ’em into a crack in a burning coalfield. Heek couldn’t get out of the truck, and he was burned up, too.”

Jan Hile’s black-gloved hands made an impatient gesture. “Details! I want details! I want to know every damned move you made that night, no matter how inconsequential!”

They told him. When one of them overlooked something, the others broke in with the omission. One thing was evident when they had finished. That night in Ohio was printed in their minds with red ink.

Once Jan Hile interrupted.

“You say,” he snapped, “that the truck seemed to get stuck just before it went into the crack?”

“Yes.”

“Was it dark? Could you *see* the truck then?”

“Well, not exactly. No.”

Jan Hile scowled at his black-gloved hands grimly.

“That comes under the head of supporting evidence,” he said with sudden furiousness.

The man who’d had the suitcase switched on him had brought his suitcase inside, and was sitting with it between his knees. The label—it was one which advertised a gaudy Colorado Springs summer hotel—was turned outward, but there was no evidence that behind the label reposed the microphone of a radio transmitter.

Doc Savage’s five men, in a taxi parked in the street nearby, were looking at each other dubiously.

“That Jan Hile is a clever devil,” Ham muttered disgustedly. “He’s guessed that we didn’t die in Ohio.”

Jan Hile’s harsh voice came to them again from the radio loud-speaker.

“It’s lucky,” he said grimly, “that I ordered the guy who took Big Eva’s place in the penitentiary killed.”

Monk scratched his nubbin of a head.

“Now I wonder who he’s talkin’ about?” the homely chemist pondered.

Jan Hile was still scowling at his hands, which looked so sinister in the murky gloves. He seemed in deep thought, and none of them interrupted him. Abruptly, he stood up.

He went to a steamer trunk which he had evidently brought with him. He opened this, and disclosed firearms, bulletproof vests and gas masks.

“Stock up,” he ordered. “We’ve got one of those nights ahead of us. I don’t think it’ll get tough, but it might.”

The men clustered around the steamer trunk, selecting weapons which suited their fancy, taking off their outer clothing and donning the bulletproof vests.

The man with the suitcase grinned.

“Them new guns is all right,” he said, “but I got Old Reliable in my suitcase here. I think I’ll get her out and strap her on.”

In the parked taxi nearby, Monk clenched his furry fists and looked apprehensive.

“He’s openin’ his suitcase!” Monk blurted. “Now we’re sunk!”

Long Tom—the suitcase was his idea and creation—said, “Hold your horses.”

They held their breaths as well, for a good two minutes, after which they heard a disgusted grunt come over the radio.

“I can’t get the dang thing open,” complained the man with the suitcase. “The lock seems to be out of order.”

Long Tom cocked an eye at Monk. “You see, I jimmed the lock.”

The man with the suitcase spent some more time trying to make his key function, then gave it up in defeat.

“I guess I pack one of the new rods,” he said. “Later on, I’ll take a hammer to this lock.”

He placed the suitcase on the table, selected himself a gun from the steamer trunk, then followed the example of the others in putting on a bulletproof vest under his outer clothing.

Jan Hile got up, sauntered idly to the suitcase and scrutinized the thing. He ran his hands over it. His fingers seemed sensitive in spite of the gloves, for they came to the label—and dwelled there, exploring.

Jan Hile did not say anything.

He went into the front of the lunchroom, looked out of each of the windows in turn. He whistled disgustedly, for he could discern nothing suspicious.

Suddenly he went to a telephone—and not one in the rear room where the suitcase was located.

“Big Eva?” he asked.

“Yeah,” said Big Eva’s ugly voice.

“You got the men all set?” Jan Hile demanded.

“They’ll be spread all over that freight train when it pulls out.”

Jan Hile made an ugly, satisfied noise.

“Doc Savage’s men are here in town and have been eavesdropping on us with a radio gadget,” he said. “We’ll have to take care of them. Think you can do?”

“If they’re alive in the morning,” Big Eva said, “you can send me back to that penitentiary.”

Chapter XI

PHANTOM FREIGHT

The driver of the taxicab which Doc Savage's five aids occupied was a good Mormon who attended to his own business and did not usually inquire into the affairs of his passengers. But the crew he had aboard at the present time obviously had him puzzled.

His passengers had identified themselves as being associated with Doc Savage, but that meant nothing to the driver, since he had never heard of the Man of Bronze. The fares seemed a daffy crowd. They were jammed in the back seat now, listening to squeaks, scratches and—at rare intervals—understandable words that came out of a portable radio set. They were very serious about this.

Furthermore, they were three black men, a white-haired old lady and a tall skinny fellow with snowy whiskers. A circus assortment.

The black one who looked like an ape said, "I wonder who that was in the penitentiary they ordered killed?"

This made several times the fellow had wondered aloud about that killing.

The taxi driver made a mental resolution to report this business to the police as soon as he got rid of his passengers.

"Holy cow!" one of his passengers rumbled. "There they go!"

A moment later, the hackman was ordered to follow the same car which he had trailed to this spot, and also an additional machine which had been pressed into use by the men his strange assortment of fares seemed to be following. The driver obeyed. After all, he had a wife and four children who would get hungry if anything happened to him.

"I wonder what's become of Doc?" the black ape passenger growled.

"An enigmatically obfuscated interrogation," stated another.

There's a sample, thought the driver. You couldn't understand that one if you did know what he was talking about.

It got dark suddenly, the way it does in clear, dry countries. A bank of clouds pushing up in the west to shut off the twilight made the coming of night doubly swift, like a curtain being drawn.

The pursuit wound its way to the railroad yards, where the two cars ahead discharged their passengers, who promptly disappeared into the thicket of railroad side-tracks with obvious furtiveness.

"As soon as we find that girl," growled the black ape of a passenger, "I'm gonna

start in bustin' necks!"

The taxi driver shuddered and resolved to buy some life insurance. He had never believed in insurance.

His fares alighted.

"You wait here," one of them ordered.

The five men moved away as silently as ghosts, and were swallowed by the darkness. The driver peered after them, but saw no sign that any of them had lingered near. It was now quite dark.

The taxi driver decided to leave the spot, call the police, and be rid of a bad job. He started the motor, meshed gears, and the cab began to move.

A man came out of the darkness and landed on the cab running board.

"Going some place?" the man snarled.

The driver realized the man was a stranger. The fellow had the kind of face that interests policemen.

"I was just driving off," the driver mumbled.

"You're wrong. You're walking!"

The stranger had a gun, and the driver went with him into the darkness of the railroad yard, without argument.

"I'm a straight guy!" protested the driver.

"Sure," agreed the stranger. "I could see the I'm-gonna-tell-a-cop in your eye."

Somewhat to the bewilderment of Doc Savage's five assistants, the men they were following gathered in the shadow of a pile of ties and proceeded to do nothing for some minutes. This was puzzling, and aggravating. Doc's aids intended to trail the men only until the gang led them to Nona Idle, after which they were going to close in.

Near by, an engine coupled onto a line of freight cars with a crash. It was a short train, no more than twelve cars.

There was more silence. Then the engine whistled a highball, and a peal of thunder ran down the string of a dozen freights as the train began to move.

Jan Hile, Skookum and the others suddenly dashed for the freight and scrambled into an empty box car.

"Holy cow!" Renny thumped. "Come on!"

There seemed to be only one empty box car on the rear portion of the train, and they climbed into that, Monk and Renny, who were most agile, going first, and helping Johnny and Ham, and particularly Long Tom, who was hampered by his skirts.

There was a little hay on the floor of the box car. They crouched down in that, all except Johnny, who prowled around and explored the car with as much interest as he would have devoted to the tomb of a Pharaoh.

“A superimpregnable—”

“Whoa!” requested Long Tom. “Bob the tails off them words.”

Johnny sighed and said, “This box car is one of those modern things made out of steel, and there is some baled hay in the other end that we can use for chairs.”

Renny rumbled. “Holy cow! He does know little words!”

They dragged hay bales around and made themselves comfortable, except for Monk and Ham. The latter two kept a lookout from the one open door. The other was closed and locked.

“We don’t want them guys droppin’ off without us seein’ ’em!” Monk said grimly.

The night was dark, the wheels roared and pounded over rail joints, and the engine whistle howled at intervals.

The inactivity began to pall on Renny.

“I think I’ll climb out of this car and have a look around,” he said. “There’s a kind of hatch here at one end.”

“I’ll go along,” offered Monk, who was acrobatic by nature. “We can mosey along the tops of the cars.”

The two skinned off their coats, preparatory to beginning their trip.

“What if you meet somebody?” Ham demanded.

“We’ll say we’re brakemen.”

“And what if it’s a brakeman you meet?”

“To you,” Monk said, “the fruit of the peanut bush.”

He leaped and knocked at the underside of the hatch in the roof of the car. “Hey! This thing seems to be locked!”

“We’ll go out of the door, then,” Renny advised. “You lift me up, and I’ll grab the roof, then pull you up.”

The open box-car door rolled shut as they approached it.

Both men stopped.

“That’s danged funny,” Monk muttered.

Ham called, “The motion of the train probably rolled it shut.”

Monk tried vainly to open the door, then said, “Well, the motion of the train’ll never roll it open again.”

They unconsciously held their breaths. The thing had been a little spooky. It did not help any when Long Tom let out a gulp.

“The hatch!” he croaked.

Long Tom’s croaks were always effective. Generally, they were reminiscent of a crow caught in a bear trap, and this time was no exception. Everyone looked at the car roof.

They could see a vague square of dark slate which indicated the trapdoor in the top of the car had opened.

A moment later, two heavy objects were shoved through the hatch and thumped on the car floor.

Then the hatch started to close.

Monk took a running jump and clamped fingers onto the hatch rim.

Monk considered that he had gone far too long without action. He intended to have some. He hung to the hatch edge with one hand, grabbed with the other. He got something. A man’s arms, he always thought. It did him no good. A hard article landed on his head.

The article was very hard, and it struck his head with force. A rifle stock, he reflected, and saw stars. He hung on. He tried to jerk his victim down into the box car. Failing in that, he did his best to jerk the man’s arm off. He was not successful there, either. The rifle stock hit him again.

Monk landed, flat-backed, on the two objects which had been tumbled down through the hatch.

The hatch slid shut with a sound like a bowling ball going down an alley.

Johnny said, “I’ll be superamalgamated!”

Monk got air back in his lungs, felt around with his hands, and gave a hiss of astonishment.

“Hey!” he exploded. “Man and girl!”

“Well, what did they throw in here?” demanded Ham, who thought Monk was swearing a new oath.

“I told you,” Monk snapped, “a man and a girl!”

They made several ineffectual attacks on the top hatch, and as many futile attempts on the door. Then Long Tom gave the spring-motor generator of his flashlight a twist, and they had light on the individuals who had been dropped through the roof lid.

A man and girl, as Monk had said.

The girl they recognized instantly.

“Nona Idle!” Renny rumbled.

“Man,” Monk breathed in an aside to Ham, “is she a looker!”

They had heard Nona Idle described at the lunchroom in Ohio with sufficient detail that they were sure of the identity of this girl. As Monk was whispering, she was a looker. Much more so than they had expected.

They got her loose.

“What’s happening?” Renny thumped. “Why’d they throw you in here?”

The girl’s breath had been knocked out by the fall.

“Let me . . . get . . . wind back!” she gasped.

Long Tom got down beside the other man with his light and said, “Who’s this guy? Blazes! He’s our taxi driver!”

The hackman was gagged with tire tape and tied with copper wire which had not treated his wrists kindly. He was relieved of these handicaps.

“What’re you doing here?” Monk asked him reasonably.

“Why do the worst things always happen to honest people like me?” the taxi driver demanded wildly.

Monk said, “Listen, you’re not the only honest guy around here. Answer my question!”

The taxi driver began to shake.

“There’s somethin’ gonna happen to this train!” he groaned. Then he fell to making sounds and rattling his teeth.

Monk grabbed the taxi driver and began shaking him and demanding to know what the fellow meant, and the cabby recovered enough to start calling Monk words that even Ham had never dared apply to the homely chemist.

In the middle of the uproar, Nona Idle began speaking. What she said silenced them all as suddenly as if their throats had been cut.

“I do not understand it,” she said, “because I know only what I overheard. But as the man says, something is going to happen to this train. And that isn’t the worst.”

“Worst?” Monk muttered. “What do you mean?”

The girl’s face looked stark in the flashlight glare.

“I’m going to tell you something that doesn’t sound reasonable,” she said. “I’m going to tell you that thousands of people are soon to die. I don’t know how. Nor why. But a lot of people are going to lose their lives before this is over with.”

The horror in her voice was a hammer that made her words drive like nails.

They stood there in the locked, rumbling box car, each man with a blank feeling. Finally, Monk muttered, “A train is a pretty big article for anything to happen to it.”

“They may plan to wreck it,” Renny rumbled.

It wasn't a wreck.

At first, the railroad officials decided it was nothing more mysterious than a coincidence. First an engineer, fireman and brakies—a whole train crew—had simultaneously gotten tired of their jobs and decided to quit railroading and had disappeared. Second, a dispatcher had made a remarkable error and showed a train running on his division when there wasn't any train. Not even a short one of a dozen cars.

These two coincidences were farfetched.

But not as farfetched as trying to believe an entire train had disappeared.

The train dispatcher got red in the face when the freight was not reported past a little way station, and he called the operator, accused him of sleeping while the freight went past, and gave him hell for not sending in an "OS" report. The telegrapher swore up and down that there was no more wide-awake brasspounder on the system, and that no freight train had passed.

It began to look as if no freight train had passed anywhere.

They called the superintendent out of bed. He listened, then howled his disbelief.

"Who the hell do you think you're talking to?" he yelled. "A freight train can't disappear!"

But one had. It had vanished thoroughly, without a trace. An engine, eleven box cars and a caboose.

The initial suspicion was that they would find the freight piled up in a canyon somewhere. Or maybe it had run off on a siding.

The roadmaster went over the track; then section crews, trackwalkers, and platoons of railroad detectives who had been told that if they didn't find this missing freight train, good-by jobs.

There was no wrecked freight train in any canyon.

There was no freight train standing on a sidetrack anywhere, and for a very good reason. There was no sidetrack at any point along that line.

There were no spur tracks running to abandoned mines, or anything of the kind.

In substance, the freight train couldn't have disappeared.

The president of the railroad, the superintendent, and numerous lesser officials boarded "go-devils" and went over the section where the train had vanished.

There was a stretch of about a hundred miles in which the train must have disappeared. Half of this was arid, semidesert prairie, and the other half mountains. There were no train tracks on the prairie, and a train off the rails could not have gotten far in those mountains.

The railroad men on their go-devils gave the track an intense inspection,

devoting particular thoroughness to the point where it ran along the edge of Stone Mountain Dam.

Stone Mountain Dam seemed a likely point at first.

Stone Mountain Dam was a great and worth-while project, in spite of the fact that it had chopped the political heads off a number of politicians. It had obviously been a great undertaking from the first—it was one of the highest dams in the world, and also one of the most expensive. It was the expense that had done the political head-lobbing, all the politicians who had voted for the dam having been defeated at the next election.

Now that Stone Mountain Dam had been completed for two years, it was proving to be a better investment of the public's money than some others the politicians had made. The dam supplied water which was piped three hundred miles to one of the largest cities in the West. It also furnished irrigation canals with water, and numerous millions of volts of electricity were generated in the powerhouse at the dam.

The railroad tracks followed the highwater line of the dam for about two miles. The dam lake itself was almost seventy miles long. A newspaper reporter had once taken a ride on the lake, then written that it reminded him of what he had always thought the Grand Canyon would be like if it were dammed.

The railroad tracks ran, at some points, in a groove cut in the sheer stone walls of Stone Mountain Canyon. From the groove, there was a sheer drop to the water, only a few yards away.

But the railway officials decided no train had left the track at that point, because: First, there were no broken rails; second, a train could not jump a track and plunge into a reservoir without leaving some trace; third, and clinching the impossibility, the telegraph operator at Stone Mountain Station, just a little beyond the point where the track ran close to the water, had reported the freight train as passing his station on schedule.

The mystery of the vanished freight train got into the newspapers.

It crowded from the front pages the matter of the man who had died mysteriously in a solitary cell in the Utah State Penitentiary.

Chapter XII

DEATH IN THE SOLITARY BLOCK

The warden of the penitentiary took his job seriously, so he had insisted on the institution's board of inquiry going into session over the mystery of the murder in the solitary-cell block.

The inquiry board had nine long-jawed members who, had they lived three centuries ago, would doubtless have been in the front row at all witch burnings. They sat in all particularly serious cases concerning prisoners. They were sitting now, listening with pinched-lip attention as the warden explained the circumstances leading up to the murder in the solitary-cell block.

"Prisoner No. 09983, known outside as Big Eva, unexpectedly claimed to be another person named Doc Savage, of whom you have doubtless heard," the warden was saying. "Several days prior to that, his cellmate, Hondo Weatherbee, had told a similar story, claiming to be a man named Tom Idle. As a result of this story, I confined Big Eva to the solitary-cell block. And on the night of the murder —"

One of the inquiry board interrupted, "Why was prisoner No. 09983 called Big Eva?"

The warden considered the point irrelevant, but he explained patiently. "The man's real name happened to be Everett Houndchased, so the nickname was inevitable." He took a deep breath and tried to go back to his story. "On the night of the murder—"

"Pardon me," interposed another board member, "but was the Doc Savage whom Big Eva claimed himself to be the famous scientist?"

"The point is irrelevant," said the warden. "On the night of the murder—"

"I don't consider it irrelevant!" said the board member. "In fact, I consider it mighty blasted important. I happen to know the real Doc Savage personally. Met him once in New York."

The warden thought that over. His board had been aggravating him by asking such questions as how Big Eva got his nickname, queries which the warden thought amounted to straying after mice when they should be chasing the rat. But if one of them knew Doc Savage by sight, that was different.

"Yes," he said. "Big Eva claimed to be that Doc Savage."

"That Doc Savage," said the board member in a tight-lipped way, "happens to be a very noted man. If the man you refused to believe was really Doc Savage,

you're going to be out of a job so fast your head will swim, Mr. Warden!"

The warden folded his lips in and looked at the other. The board member was a squat brown man with a hooked nose. He somewhat resembled one of the owls that live in prairie dog holes. The warden had never particularly liked him.

One of the other board members hastily poured oil on the troubled waters.

"We are investigating a murder," he said.

The warden nodded.

"Yeah," he growled. "A murder committed by Big Eva. The murder of the penitentiary fingerprint expert."

The warden was wearing his high-heeled riding boots, and also spurs today. He shoved his legs out before him and contemplated the spur rowels with wintry eyes.

Suddenly, he stood up.

"I'm going to let you hear the murder story from Big Eva"—the warden frowned at the prairie-owl board member—"or Doc Savage, if you're gullible enough to think that's who he is."

"I resent your tone!" snapped the "owl."

The warden turned around angrily and yelled at a flunky, "Bring in the murderer."

His yell frightened a coyote investigating an old jackrabbit squatting place half a mile distant, and it carried plainly to Doc Savage, who was waiting in a windowless, stone anteroom. Doc was handcuffed. Two guards with large pistols kept their eyes on him.

He looked around calmly when he was in the presence of the board. He had removed the trick color-changing caps from his eyes, and the unusual character of his flake gold eyes had an effect.

"Listen!" growled a board member. "Big Eva never had eyes like that!"

The warden ran fingers through his hair. He felt like pulling it all out by the roots, because this whole thing was beginning to get his goat.

"Tell your story!" he ordered Doc Savage.

The bronze man's voice was pitched low and had an utterly convincing quality.

"There was a sound outside the door of the solitary-cell," he explained. "It was furtive enough to make me suspicious. Someone was opening the little lid which covered the barred grating in the door to make it dark in the cell."

The bronze man paused. He knew the need of timing to make an explanation convincing, the necessity for a pause now and then to let facts soak in.

"When the lid opened," he continued, "my hand clutched the fingers of a man

who was outside. The fingers were against the bars. The man was startled. He dropped a bottle he was carrying. It broke. The sound of glass shattering aroused my suspicions further, and I was able to get the lid closed. That was fortunate, and it was also lucky that the cell door was airtight, having been made so to keep out sound and assure that absolute quiet which is one of the disagreeable things about solitary confinement.”

The bronze man hesitated briefly.

“There was poison gas in the bottle which the man dropped,” he said. “It killed the fellow.”

Doc Savage’s attitude showed that this concluded his statement.

The warden was hard, but he was also fair. He cleared his throat.

“You might tell the rest of it,” he said gruffly. “Tell how you opened the lid a crack and endangered your own life to yell a warning for the guards not to come near.”

Doc said, “That has nothing to do with whether or not I committed a murder.”

The warden snorted. “The hell it hasn’t. You saved the lives of the guards.” The warden faced the board members. “This man also shouted what type of gas it was, and told what kind of chemicals to use to make the stuff harmless. Whether or not he murdered the fingerprint expert, it is a sure thing he saved the lives of some of my guards. My own, as well. I was one of the first men on the spot.”

“I don’t believe this man is Big Eva!” a board member snapped.

The board member who resembled an owl stood erect.

“I will talk to the man in private,” he said importantly. “I can soon settle the whole question of whether or not he is Doc Savage.”

The warden eyed him narrowly. “Why the privacy?”

The other bit his lips. “I’m sure I can better persuade him to tell the truth,” he said, “if we talk it over in private.”

The warden gave in. “O. K.”

Doc Savage was escorted to a neighboring room. This chamber was small, and windowless like the others.

The door was of steel, heavy. The owlish man closed it.

“Now,” he said, “we settle this damn quick!”

The owlish man took a revolver out of his clothing and pointed it at Doc Savage.

“You’re gonna die sudden,” he advised. “And they’re gonna think you are Big Eva, you jumped me, and I shot you in self-defense!”

Doc Savage kept his control level, although it got a bad jerking. He saw that the

man intended to shoot.

“If it’s money,” the bronze man said, “maybe there is more in it for you if you do it another way.”

The guess was good. Money was magic that loosened the man’s finger on the trigger.

“Eh?” he said.

“You know I’m Doc Savage. You never saw me before, but you know who I am.”

“Sure. So what?”

“So we understand each other. You have been hired to dispose of me. You might do the job, and you may get paid for it, although that last is doubtful.”

The other man showed a set of gopher’s teeth. “I’ll get paid!”

“How much?”

“Fifty thousand dollars,” the man said impressively.

Doc, watching him, figured it was considerably less than that.

“Got a fountain pen and paper?” the bronze man asked.

The other, keeping his gun alert, produced a pen and a blank sheet which he tore from a notebook. He passed these over.

The room contained a small table, and Doc went to that, seated himself, and made some marks on the paper. The marks were meaningless.

He said, “You can get a check for a hundred thousand cashed before I ever get out of here, you know.”

The other man had a money mania. The sum mentioned set his mouth to working as though he were tasting something good.

Doc said, “Here.”

The man reached for the paper.

He didn’t get it; but Doc got his gun. Then they got down on the floor. Doc, a hand over the man’s mouth, kept the fellow from crying out. They struggled silently, but after the first few moments the animation consisted mostly of the bronze man’s corded fingers inflicting agony. The other man burst out sweating in an incredibly short time.

“Don’t yell!” the bronze man warned.

After Doc released him, the other lay quiet, except for such fright twitchings as he could not help.

Doc said, “The only chance you have of walking out of here is to talk fast.”

The man went through enough of a convulsion to show that he had never heard of the fact that Doc Savage and his aids had made it a policy never to take a human

life themselves. When enemies had died, it had been through unavoidable accident. The owl of a man thought he was to be killed on the spot. He ogled his gun, which Doc now held.

He began to get words out as if he had a mouthful of them, and they were red-hot rivets.

The man's explanation was clear, brief and earnest enough that Doc Savage knew it was the truth.

"A man named Jan Hile called on me today and offered me twenty thousand dollars to kill you," he said wildly. "He paid ten thousand down. We made a deal. I was to get the rest later."

For a moment there was in existence the low, exotic trilling, the note that was as fantastic as the song of some strange bird in a tropical forest, the sound which Doc Savage made in moments of mental stress.

"Where were you to collect the rest of the money?"

"This guy—Jan Hile—was to deliver it."

"Had you known Hile previously?"

"No."

Doc Savage described the Dr. Joiner who had seized Nona Idle in Ohio.

"That's the man," the owl of a fellow gasped. "That's Jan Hile."

Doc Savage's metallic features were grim. "You didn't know that Jan Hile is an infamous criminal lawyer around Chicago?"

"No."

That seemed to be the substance of what the man knew.

Doc said, "Now we'll go into the other room, and you can repeat this."

Doc shoved him. The man's shoulders fell, and he shuffled into the adjoining room which held the prison warden, the other members of the board and the guards.

The moment he was inside, the owl of a man leaped and snatched a revolver from the nearest guard.

"Watch out!" he screeched. "The man is Big Eva! He's got my gun!"

The gun was there in Doc Savage's hand for all of them to see.

The owl of a man lifted the guard's weapon and fired at Doc Savage.

Chapter XIII

MELEE IN A PENITENTIARY

Inertia is the unwillingness of things to move. The scientific explanation is more technical, but no more descriptive. Inertia is the natural law that makes a wagon want to stand still when you give it the first shove. Inertia seems to apply generally to other things. Everything seems to need a little time to start moving, men's minds being no exception.

The minds of the men in the room did not start acting instantly.

The exception was Doc Savage, who was on edge and half expecting what had happened. He went to one side. He was all set to do that. And the bullet missed him.

The gun in his hand coughed lead and noise. He never carried a gun, but he could use one. He had spent hundreds of hours in intensive practice—and not with the special target weapons used in matches, for his shooting was never the match kind. He practiced snap work, firing from difficult positions.

The owl of a man howled. His gun was gone, and his hand was mangled. When he screeched, and threw up both arms, his hand showered scarlet over the ceiling.

Doc kept going. His objective was the door.

There were a dozen men in the room, all of them probably armed. It was no place for a pitched battle, particularly when the bronze man had none of the gadgets on which he depended to make his fights effective and bloodless.

He gained the door, pitched through. Then he slammed the door. All the doors in this part of the penitentiary were sheathed with steel and equipped to be locked from either side. Doc locked this one.

Bullets began slamming the other side of the panel as the warden and his men endeavored to shoot out the lock.

Doc went down a passage. He passed a number of doors, gained the one he wanted. He knew the penitentiary layout. This door led up to one of the watch towers, where a guard was stationed with a submachine gun.

The stairs were a gloomy corkscrew. The door at the top was kept always locked. Only the warden could order it opened. But there was a peephole, and the guard was pressing an eye to this.

Doc imitated the warden's voice.

"There's a man escaping!" he shouted. "Watch the outside."

The guard's eye went away from the slit.

Doc reached the tower door. Shooting downstairs had stopped. It was very still.

The bronze man slipped the empty cartridge out of the revolver, tapped and scraped it on the floor to make sound of the warden's spurs.

He imitated the warden's voice again.

"Let me in!" he ordered.

The deceived and unsuspecting guard unlocked the door and opened it.

Doc took him by the neck. The man held his machine gun. He tried to retain his grip on the weapon, to use it, which was a mistake.

The neck pressure which the bronze man used to make him senseless was harmless, but would be effective several hours.

Doc donned the guard's cap and coat. He leaned from the tower window with the submachine gun, aimed at a harmless clump of sagebrush, and opened fire. The sub gun made enough sound for a battle all by itself.

"There he goes!" Doc yelled between bursts. "That way! South!"

Later, after he had watched armed guards scattering through the sagebrush, the bronze man finished changing clothes with the guard.

Penitentiary procedure in event of an escape does not vary greatly. If it occurs during daytime, all normal activity in the shops and garment factories at once ceases and the prisoners are marched slowly and under close guard to their cells, where they are locked in, the purpose being to prevent a general break, and to obtain a check on the inmates to ascertain how many have made the break. The only reliable check-up is the one made when the convicts are locked in their cells.

It required no more than twenty minutes, in the present instance, to get all prisoners in their cells. The check-up showed, in addition to Big Eva, one other man missing; but this latter convict was soon routed out of the laundry basket into which he had crawled under cover of the excitement, hoping that he might get his chance at a break.

It was near dark. So the prisoners were kept locked up; and for the psychological effect, denied of their evening meal. The warden was fair, but if he was bitten, he bit back in a large, general way.

There was some grumbling and an outbreak of beating of cell doors with shoes, but two guards made a trip down the cell-house corridor with a fire hose and put a stop to that. No man wants to go to bed hungry, and on a water-soaked cot as well.

The night settled down darkly, and the prison was quiet. In the distance, motor cars could be heard carrying searchers, and occasionally a bloodhound broke loose in baying.

Tom Idle was lying on his bunk feeling extremely low, when a key rattled in his

cell lock. He sat up, saw two husky guards.

“Warden wants to talk to you,” one of the guards growled.

“What . . . what about?” Tom Idle asked uncertainly.

“You’re Big Eva’s cellmate, aren’t you? And he escaped, didn’t he?”

That seemed to answer the question, and Tom Idle followed the guards. They reached the warden’s office and stopped outside.

“You go in,” one guard growled. “I think the warden is ready to lay eggs, the way he snarled at us and told us not to come in, but to fetch you.”

Tom Idle entered the warden’s office.

Doc Savage said, “Give me a natural greeting.”

Tom Idle demonstrated that he was not without wits.

“Good evening, warden,” he said in a loud voice. “What did you want with me?”

His tone was not exactly natural, but then a convict called before the warden might not be expected to speak calmly.

Doc Savage went over, said in a voice that was so like the warden’s that Tom Idle jumped, “You two guards can go on about your duties. I’ll take care of this man.”

There was faint sound of the guards moving away.

Tom Idle breathed, “I thought you escaped!”

“Not completely,” Doc admitted.

“But what are you doing here?”

“Two things,” the bronze man said, and explained what they were: “First, everyone was looking for a prisoner outside the penitentiary, not in it. Second, I wanted to free Tom Idle.”

“But why take so much trouble about me?” Tom Idle demanded.

“Suppose something happened to me?” Doc suggested. “No one else has any evidence of the rather incredible chain of circumstances that got you in here. My five assistants do not even know. Something seems to have happened to them, because they have made no attempt to get in touch with me.”

Tom Idle subsided.

“How do we get out of here?” he wanted to know.

Doc said, “The warden is out directing the search, and some of the guards do not know it. We’ll see if he took his private car.”

A bit of graft connected with the wardenship of the State penitentiary was the fine limousine supplied for the warden’s personal use. This warden, however, preferred an ancient jalopy of his own, a car of uncertain vintage with high wheels

adapted to hurdling the local sagebrush. He often boasted that his car could go anywhere that a jackrabbit could travel. He was using the jalopy now, and the fine limousine stood in the garage.

The garage, opening off the warden's office, was unguarded. There was a chauffeur's cap and a dark raincoat, evidently used by the trusty who did the warden's driving, hanging on a hook.

"Put these on," Doc directed.

Tom Idle attired himself in the cap and coat, and got behind the car wheel.

"What if this don't fool 'em?" he asked anxiously.

"By thinking things won't work," Doc said, "you just give yourself an unnecessary advance scare."

This bit of philosophy, as a matter of fact, was opposite that which the bronze man practiced. He always acted on the mental theory that everything conceivable would go wrong with anything he attempted, a conviction that impelled him to prepare against all possibilities. It probably accounted for his high average success in attempting the apparently impossible.

The warden's limousine rolled to the gate. From the gloom of the rear seat, Doc imitated the warden's voice once more and said, "Open the gate, please."

The guard saluted and began opening the gate. The gate was a sliding steel affair which operated by turning a wheel. Having opened it, the guard stepped back and saluted.

Then another guard walked out of the shadows, said, "Who's in that car?"

"The warden."

"Like hell!" barked the second guard. "The warden's out with the searchers!"

The man carried a sawed-off shotgun, probably one of the most mangling short-range weapons ever devised by man. He lifted the gun.

Chapter XIV

SAGEBRUSH TRAIL

Doc Savage had rolled down both rear windows against such an emergency. He was all set with a monkey wrench he had taken from a rack in the garage.

The wrench, thrown hard, took the shotgun-wielder just above the belt buckle. The wrench was heavy. The man doubled, dropped his gun.

“Drive!” Doc rapped.

Tom Idle shaved the edge of the gate, barely missed the warden’s private horse-hitching rack in the graveled parking area outside, and got on the road beyond. The road was a full eighteen-foot concrete slab, but Tom Idle had trouble keeping on it.

“Something wrong with the steering gear?” Doc asked.

“It’s me. I’m a better hand with a team of mules.”

Doc climbed over into the front seat and took the wheel.

Back at the prison gate, the sawed-off shotgun began banging, and shot spanked the rear of the car. But the distance was great enough that the missiles had lost their force by the time they arrived.

“Sorry about my driving,” Tom Idle said. “But you see, I’m poor folks and never had a car.”

The limousine had a big, well-tuned engine, and it settled down to running with the whine of a high-speed electric motor. The road changed from concrete to blacktop, and there was nothing alongside but telephone poles, and these began going past considerably faster than heartbeats.

Tom Idle settled back. He shuddered.

“The last time I had a fast car ride,” he said, “things went black right in the middle of it, and I woke up in that penitentiary.”

“You were probably struck over the head when you were not looking.”

“I know. I thought a bullet had hit me. The driver, that devil in the black gloves, had said cops were after us. I guess that was to get me to turn around so he could hit me.”

“The man in the black gloves,” Doc said, “seems to be a criminal lawyer named Jan Hile. The man is abnormally clever, and has no scruples.”

“What is he up to? What is back of all this?”

Doc Savage did not seem to hear. Tom Idle, being unfamiliar with the bronze man’s habit of apparently going deaf at questions which he did not wish to answer, repeated his inquiry. Again getting no response, he clenched his teeth.

“What happened to my sister?” he asked hoarsely.

“Jan Hile has her,” Doc said.

Tom Idle made a hoarse sound. “Maybe that devil’s killed her!”

“No.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“He was undoubtedly keeping the sister alive to use the threat of harming her to keep you from talking. Now that you are out of the penitentiary, he has more need than ever for a club to hold over you.”

The bronze man lifted an arm, pointed ahead.

“They have this road barricaded,” he said. “And there seems to be a military machine gun planted alongside the road.”

Tom Idle turned his head. He groaned.

“There’s a whole string of cars chasing us!” he croaked.

Doc slowed the limousine. The barricade ahead was looming up, and appeared to be a gate they had taken from some ranch. It was painted green, propped up with two-by-fours.

The road was ditched deeply on either side, but the car possibly might hurdle those. The machine was equipped with a spotlight controlled by an inside handle, and Doc raked its beam over the adjacent terrain. It picked up rocky hills, a dozen washes that would hold small houses.

“No use!” Tom Idle gulped. “Road’s the only way out! And they’ve got it blocked.”

Doc said, “How high can you pitch your voice?”

“Eh?”

“Like this.” The bronze man brought his voice up and emitted a shrill, girlish scream.

Tom Idle said, “How’s this?” and did very well.

Doc headed the limousine for the barricade. He rolled down the driver’s window, shoved his head out, blinked the car lights to compel attention, then lifted his natural voice to crashing volume that made the words easily understood by the men manning the barricade.

“Don’t shoot!” he roared. “You want to kill the warden’s wife?”

He jerked his head back.

“Don’t!” screeched Tom Idle in a high voice. “Don’t shoot! You’ll hit us!”

He had the idea. Doc Savage added his own high voice, screaming, then changed to his normal tone and shouted threats.

The car bumped the barricade, upset it. The boards broke under the wheels.

The men manning the barricade yelled profanely, but did not fire for fear of injuring the women they thought were in the car.

Part of the barricade was dragging under the limousine with a loud grinding. Doc swayed the car from side to side, and lost the impediment. He put weight on the accelerator.

The car picked up speed, went away from the barricade.

Tom Idle said, "Danged if I ever thought that'd work!"

Doc Savage drove with grim, furious silence, and when he had gained a little on the machine ahead, suddenly braked to a stop; and with the gun he had taken from the owl-like inquiry-board member, he shot twice at the insulator on a telephone pole, lined brightly in the illumination of the car spotlight. The insulator shattered; the telephone wire fell in two parts. There was only the one wire.

"Keep them from telephoning to head us off," he said.

He drove on.

The clouds parted and let moonlight through; the whole western rangeland and desert and mountain became bathed in soft silver, with Great Salt Lake, finally coming into view, a pale mirror with its far edge buried in the haze of what seemed infinite distance.

Tom Idle spoke in a puzzled voice. "What gets me is this: How did they get you and me into the penitentiary, and get Big Eva and Hondo Weatherbee out?"

"Jan Hile had a number of men around the penitentiary bought off," Doc reminded. "Probably others besides the fingerprint man who got killed in his own trap, and the crooked board member. They probably worked out a plan. It is possible."

"After seeing the way we got out tonight," Tom Idle grunted, "I'd say anything was possible."

There was traffic around them now, and they joined it, traveled the way most of the cars seemed to be traveling. Later, they turned into the wide parking area at the swimming pavilion and amusement park on the shore of Great Salt Lake.

Tom Idle said, "The last thing I need right now is a swim."

Doc Savage indicated their garb—his own prison-guard uniform, Tom Idle's convict dungarees.

"Clothes," he said, "are more necessary."

"Huh?"

"People usually drive out to lakes wearing bathing suits under their clothing," Doc reminded. "They leave their clothing on the beach. We might do some

borrowing.”

“That’s stealing.”

“Technically. Not if we later pay the owners well for the stuff.”

They left the car and began haunting shadows.

Doc Savage and his five assistants had operated together long enough that they had worked out definite methods of procedure. They had agreed upon a hotel, for instance, in each large city, which they would use for headquarters, where they would leave messages in case they became separated.

The Salt Lake City rendezvous hotel was the Lake Palace, a hostelry of good reputation; and to this Monk and the others had forwarded baggage from Columbus, Ohio, the baggage containing such stuff as they would not need in their immediate job of following the three burning-coalmine killers westward. The Lake Palace clerk was a pleasant young man.

“Why, yes,” he said. “We have been holding some baggage for Andrew Blodgett Mayfair and party for several days, but they have not appeared.”

Doc Savage’s metallic features did not change expression.

“You have had no word from them?”

“None,” the clerk assured him.

“Their baggage is still here?”

“Oh, yes. In Suite 13.”

Doc said. “We’ll take rooms, if you please.”

The bronze man’s personality was impelling enough that the clerk overlooked the formality of having guests without baggage pay in advance. This in spite of the ill fit of the suit which Doc had purloined on the beach. The suit was much too tight. A notebook in the pocket had contained the owner’s name, so there would be no difficulty about remunerating him later for the suit.

They were shown to a room.

As soon as they were alone, Doc stood on the radiator, which was under the window, removed the window shade, and dissecting it, secured a length off the stiff spring which the roller mechanism contained.

They went to Suite 13, made sure the corridor was deserted. Doc began operating on the lock.

“Sure appropriate,” Tom Idle muttered, eying the number on the door.

Doc got the door open shortly, and they went inside. The baggage was there, just as it had arrived from the East. The bronze man removed a portable radio transmitter-receiver from a case, switched it on, and spent some time vainly trying to

raise his aids.

He took the radio and two other cases to his room. There was also money in the baggage, and he took part of that. Back in his room, he folded a hundred dollar bill in each of two envelopes and addressed these to the owners of the suits which he and Tom Idle had filched.

Tom Idle said, "I wonder what the newspapers are printing about the penitentiary break?"

"You might have a paper sent up and see."

When Tom Idle got the newspaper and opened it, he emitted a grunt.

"Heck!" he said. "I guess it just seemed important because we were mixed up in it ourselves. They only gave the prison break a couple of paragraphs. The rest of the front page is about the vanished train."

Doc looked interested. "What vanished train?"

He took the newspaper and read. He noted the date of the train disappearance and consulted the tags on the luggage which his men had shipped. The duffel had arrived in Salt Lake City the same night the freight train disappeared.

But there was nothing else that seemed to connect the vanished train with the mystery of why Hondo Weatherbee and Big Eva had been spirited out of the penitentiary.

"What do we do now?" Tom Idle asked.

"We have one clue," Doc told him, "but we'll have to wait until the general-delivery window opens to get it."

Chapter XV

TROUBLE, GENERAL DELIVERY

The post office general-delivery window regularly opened at eight o'clock in the morning.

It was fifteen minutes until eight when Tom Idle put on his hat in the hotel room which he and Doc Savage occupied.

"I'll get the package," Tom Idle said. He looked disgusted. "You say it's one you mailed to yourself when you first got to Salt Lake City?"

"Yes."

"And you say it's got some weeds in it?"

"Right."

"What I want to know is how the blazes weeds are going to help us find my sister and your five helpers."

"You get the package," Doc Savage said patiently, "and we will see what happens."

It was one minute until eight when Tom Idle entered the post office, put his elbows on the general-delivery window ledge, and waited. The window slid open on time.

"Clark Savage," Tom Idle said, as Doc had directed him. "You should be holding at least one package."

The package was passed out to Tom Idle. The young man tucked it under his arm, walked out of the post office. He was in a cheerful frame of mind, and he almost whistled. Personally, he didn't see how a package full of weeds would solve anything, but he had confidence in Doc Savage.

When the squat, bowlegged man stepped up to Tom Idle, it was entirely unexpected.

The man held a lumpishly folded newspaper under Tom Idle's nose.

"Can you recognize a guy inside a newspaper?" he asked.

Tom Idle swallowed. "I . . . uh—"

"In case you can't"—the man showed the muzzle of the gun in the paper briefly—"this ought to satisfy you."

Tom Idle got hold of his wits. "There must be some mistake!"

"If there is, it ain't mine," the bowlegged man said. He had chewing tobacco stain on his lips, and blue-leashed ferocity in his eyes. "Where's the bronze guy?"

"Huh?"

“You heard me! Where’s Doc Savage?”

Tom Idle countered, “Who are you, anyway?”

“A Fed.”

“You mean—agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation?”

“That’s right. But if you want to talk suppose we go out in the car and do it.”

The words were no suggestion, but command. Slight motion of the paper containing the gun made that evident.

The car was a touring model, but the curtains were up and inclosed the rear. The machine was dust-coated, and there was a fan-shaped rust stain on the hood where water had been boiled out of the radiator by hard mountain driving.

Three men sat in the car. Tom Idle did not like their looks.

“Listen,” he said suddenly, “if you’re genuine Feds, you can tell me who is head of the Bureau of Investigation for the Missouri district.”

Tom Idle happened to know the answer to that question.

They laughed at him.

“Jan Hile is the head of the only bureau you’re interested in,” one said.

Realizing he had been tricked, Tom Idle made a sudden effort to fling the post-office package into a nearby store. The bowlegged man stopped that, seized the package, then crowded Tom Idle into the car.

“Careful, stupid!” one man gritted. “We don’t need you so much that you can afford to get funny!”

The car began moving, working its way through traffic. Tom Idle sat rigid, feeling about as useful as a rock.

“Let’s take him to the mountains to work him over,” one man suggested.

“Maybe he’ll tell us where Doc Savage is, without a lot of trouble,” said another.

“Not him.” The man scowled at Tom Idle. “He’s a heroic sap. You can see it in his face.”

Tom Idle said, “I don’t know about that, but if you think I’m going to tell you anything, you’re crazy.”

The car left the city and began to climb a mountain road. The same road, Tom Idle realized with a start, up which Jan Hile had driven furiously on that strange morning weeks ago.

“How’d you know I’d turn up at the post office?” Tom Idle asked.

“Didn’t. Thought it would be Doc Savage.” The man chuckled grimly. “Hell, if that bronze guy is so smart, I’d think he would’ve realized that we’d check on all the time he spent in Salt Lake City. We did, and found out he’d mailed a package to

himself at the post office. He bought the stamps and envelope off the hotel clerk, and the clerk saw him address it. Twenty dollars got that out of the clerk.”

Tom Idle said nothing more.

The men knew this mountain road, and the reason for that was evident when they turned off on a narrow trail which looked impassable, but afforded smooth although steep going, until they eventually stopped before a cabin.

The cabin was old, and so long unused that a small pine tree had grown up through the porch. But the thing had been built substantially, with huge logs, stout rafters, and a roof of slabs that had withstood the test of time. The windows were thin and narrow, and spaced around the building in a manner that puzzled Tom Idle until he realized that they were intended as loopholes. The door was at least four inches thick, and also equipped with a loophole.

They shoved Tom Idle inside.

“Remember it?” one asked.

Tom Idle looked startled. “Why, I’ve never been here before!”

“The hell you haven’t!” the man told him. “You were brought here after Jan Hile cracked you over the head, and it was here that you were doped up and your appearance changed so you looked more like Hondo.”

Tom Idle thought back. “That time in the park—I must have been drugged while I slept, and my clothes changed.”

“Remember the ham and eggs Skookum gave you?”

“But that was the morning before.”

“Slow-acting drug. Made you sleep sound enough that we could give you an anæsthetic the next night.”

One of the men looked around the cabin, then went over to one corner, struck a match for light, and examined what proved to be an ancient bullet hole.

“Haw, haw!” he said. “Here’s where Jan Hile told Hondo to shoot at that Piute fifteen years ago, and Hondo missed him! Boy, don’t this bring back the old outlaw times?”

Tom Idle gathered that they had once belonged to a gang of bandits to which Jan Hile and Hondo Weatherbee had also belonged.

He asked, “Why did you use such an elaborate scheme to get Hondo Weatherbee out of the pen? Why not just stage a break? It would have been simpler.”

The man who had been doing all the informing leered at him.

“Hondo’s gonna get a few million dollars,” he said. “Hondo wanted to enjoy it. He couldn’t with the cops hunting him. As long as cops figured he was still in the

pen, they wouldn't hunt. See? Simple, eh? In a few months, we'd have slipped you a shot of strychnine, and the law would've thought they'd buried old Hondo. He'd have been safe, see."

"You were going to poison me, too!" Tom Idle gasped in horror.

Another man interrupted, "That ain't nothin' to what we're gonna do to you now if you don't tell us where Doc Savage is."

The next development had about the same effect as the Empire State Building would create if it upset.

Doc Savage, from the door, said, "You should have looked backward more often as you drove up here."

These men had been taken by surprise before. They lost no time in going into action. Weapons came out with the adeptness of old-time gun fighters. They scattered instinctively, no two men close together, so as to make too general a target for effective shooting. One upended a heavy table. A second slid into the disused fireplace. The two others took opposite corners.

The cabin quaked with gun roars.

But Doc Savage had jumped back outside, yanked the door shut.

The man in the fireplace swore and came out, showering ashes, and dashed for the door, aiming at the lock as he came. He got perhaps half across the room before he seemed to lose interest in trying to point his gun at the lock. Then he dropped the gun, pounded the palms of both hands against his forehead as if to jar out a dizziness. Finally, he lay down on the floor, limp.

Tom Idle stared in astonishment, and looking around, saw that the other men were likewise lying down. He had been holding his breath. He drew in a gasp of relief.

When he took in the breath, the effect was almost instant. His head swam, his breathing apparatus seemed afflicted with sleepy numbness, and the sensation spread through his body with lazy languor. He felt like yawning, always thought he did yawn while he was falling to the floor.

It must have been much later when he awakened. The sun was higher. He turned over, saw the four men who had seized him at the post office.

The quartet were bound hand and foot now. But they appeared still asleep.

"You have a strong constitution to come out of it so quickly."

Tom Idle turned his head at Doc Savage's voice. The bronze man stood at the table, which he had set on its legs again, and was doing something. Tom Idle lifted his head, felt like lying down again, but forced himself to get up.

He saw that Doc Savage had recovered the package of weeds and was examining the contents with what was evidently a powerful magnifying glass.

“What—” He held his head. “What happened?”

“I broke several small glass anaesthetic bombs in the cabin just before appearing in the door,” the bronze man explained.

Tom Idle pointed confusedly at the weeds. “I mean—what earthly help are those things going to be?”

Before Doc Savage could answer, one of the bound men began swearing. He had revived.

An hour later, Doc Savage stepped back from the four bound men and put on his coat. His face was grim.

“You do not often find four men in a group who cannot be scared into talking,” he said quietly.

“They haven’t told us a thing!” Tom Idle said desperately.

“No. And unfortunately I have no truth serum.”

Tom Idle’s hair was disheveled, and there was a wild expression on his face. He had been thinking about his sister, and the more his mind dwelled on the fact that it was men like these holding her prisoner the more desperate he became.

“Damn ’em!” he yelled furiously. “I’ll make ’em talk!”

He lunged and seized one of the revolvers which they had taken from the captives.

Doc Savage got in his path, the two men struggled for a moment, and Doc took the gun.

“Killing men keeps you awake at night,” the bronze man said. “Even men like these.”

“And what do you believe thinking about my sister will do?” Tom Idle screamed.

Doc Savage made a quieting gesture.

“We have another clue.”

“You mean those weeds?”

“Yes.”

Tom Idle shuddered, backed outside and sank on the doorstep. “I hate to think you’re crazy,” he said angrily. “But if your weeds don’t pan out, I’m going to beat all four of those men to death if they won’t talk.”

“We can get truth serum from New York in two days, and try it as a last resort.”

“Two days!”

Tom Idle shuddered.

He watched the bronze man lift the prisoners and place them in their own car. The machine in which Doc Savage had followed the trail to this spot, a rented coupé, was down the mountain trail a short distance where it had been parked.

“You drive the other car,” Doc directed.

Tom Idle followed in the coupé, and two miles outside of Salt Lake City he overhauled Doc, who had stopped the bandit car. To Tom Idle’s astonishment, Doc left the other car and got in the coupé.

“You’re not turning those four devils loose!” Tom Idle yelled.

“They are drugged now,” Doc explained patiently. “They cannot possibly be revived for a day. They will be found and taken to a hospital. When we want them, we can go get them. In the meantime, they are off our hands.”

Tom Idle did not favor the procedure.

“What do we do in the meantime?” he asked anxiously.

“See what we can develop from the weeds.”

They drove on into the city, the bronze man driving boldly, stopping with the traffic lights, sometimes almost within arm’s reach of the policemen who were supposed to be on the lookout for them. Tom Idle felt as if he were sitting with his feet in a pail of ice water each time this happened. He could not quite accommodate his mind to the fact that, since Doc Savage had resorted to their natural appearance, they did not so nearly resemble Big Eva and Hondo Weatherbee.

Tom Idle’s cheeks and lips were still thick. Doc had explained that Jan Hile had effected this by injecting paraffin, and that the stuff had best be removed later with a slight surgical operation.

Tom Idle waited without much patience for their destination.

Chapter XVI

WEED CLUE

It is a popular supposition that the antarctic regions and the great desert of Rub-Al-Khali in Arabia are the only unexplored sections left on the face of the earth.

That probably depends on the point of view. There is exploring, and exploring. One kind of explorer takes a trek across a stretch of unknown territory and calls it exploring.

There is another kind of explorer, the scientific type, who spends as much as several months on a few square miles of territory; and when he has finished, there is not much left to be known about the district. The species of plants, the chemical make-up of the soil, the exact type of rock, and probably the type of rock at any given depth up to thousands of feet are all known, and made a matter of record which go into files. By this last standard, there are many unexplored areas in the United States. But there are many sections that have been explored, and the data made a matter of record in the States and in Washington.

Doc Savage finished four consecutive hours at the long-distance telephone, and hung up.

“That does it,” he said.

Tom Idle rubbed his forehead. “I don’t get this.”

“Those weeds,” Doc Savage explained, “were caught in the wheels of Jan Hile’s airplane, and torn out by the roots.”

“Sure. And Hile hired a mechanic in Ohio to clean them out of the wheels. You told me that.”

“When you pull up a weed, dirt clings to the roots.”

“Sure.”

“In this case, roots were jammed in the wheels, dirt and all, so that the soil was still on the roots when they were dug out in Ohio.”

“Um-m-m.”

“Sagebrush was mixed with the weeds,” Doc said. “That indicated the plane had been landing in one of the western States, where sagebrush grows. Furthermore, it was a type of sagebrush which only grows in one section.”

Tom Idle nodded.

“I can understand it that far,” he admitted.

“The earth on the roots was filled with sand and rock particles which must have been eroded from surrounding rock formation.” The bronze man indicated the

telephone. "The checking by telephone was to compare the sand with data from geological and engineering surveys in the government files. The sand checked with the sagebrush source exactly."

"Eh?"

"Both came from the vicinity of the arm of Stone Mountain reservoir that extends around Mad Mesa."

Tom Idle gave a jerk of astonishment.

"Stone Mountain Dam," he exploded, "is where that freight train disappeared!"

Doc Savage had originally flown to Salt Lake City in his own plane, and the craft had been hangared outside the city. It was still there, fully fueled, ready to take the air as soon as it was wheeled out of the hangar.

Doc Savage finished looking over the vicinity of the hangar.

"Either Jan Hile's men did not locate the ship," he told Tom Idle, "or they do not have anyone watching it. There seems to be nobody suspicious around."

"Let's get going!" Tom Idle said impatiently.

The bronze man did not take the ship off the ground at once, but went over it with what seemed to his companion to be aggravating slowness, examining and tapping the metal fittings with a hammer and chisel. Tom Idle finished loading two equipment cases in the craft, then paced impatiently. He was almost insane with anxiety over his sister, so much so that Doc Savage had flatly forbidden him to carry a gun, lest the young man start shooting the moment he saw any of the Hile crew.

"Clever," Doc Savage said unexpectedly.

"Eh?" Tom Idle came over to stare.

"Hile's men found this plane, all right."

The bronze man put the cold chisel against one of the metal attachments which held the left wing to the fuselage, and tapped with the hammer.

"Well, the chisel made a nick," Tom Idle said.

"Exactly. And that fitting is supposed to be the toughest steel. Nothing short of a diamond should scratch it."

Tom Idle looked, startled and puzzled.

"They took the fitting off, drew the temper, then replaced it," Doc explained. "It would have sheared off, and we would have lost a wing the first time we hit hard going."

Tom Idle made no more comments about their progress being slow. He was beginning to understand how this strange bronze man had managed to live a long time while following a highly dangerous avocation.

When Doc had retempered the fitting, and they were finally in the air, progress was fast enough to satisfy even Tom Idle. Doc flew low, and the incredible fanged buttes and knife-slash canyons which ruttled the landscape around Stone Mountain Dam seemed to lunge past the plane with flashing speed.

The plane, like all the craft used by Doc Savage and his associates, could operate from land or water, and if necessary, snow. This one, when landing gear was retracted, became a seaplane.

Doc set down on Stone Mountain reservoir late in the afternoon.

They had come onto the reservoir through one of its canyon arms at a height which Tom Idle had mistaken for only a few hundred feet, which, he realized now, must have been an altitude of at least three thousand feet. Nothing else would have made the canyons look so small. They were incredible. The walls of stone shot up so sheer they appeared to overhang.

The water, in the evening shadows, was as black as ink. The lake was no more than half a mile wide, but it had at this point close to the dam, a depth approaching a thousand feet. It extended back for seventy-five miles as the crow flew, but there were hundreds of miles of shore line; for the shape of the lake, as photographed from the air, made it resemble a great gnarled tree of naked branches.

“Is that Mad Mesa?” Tom Idle asked, and pointed.

“Mad Mesa is fifty miles from here.”

“Then what—”

“Yonder,” Doc said, “is where the railroad parallels the lake. We’re interested in that point.”

After Doc Savage taxied the plane close to the steep cliff, in the perpendicular stone of which was the chiseled groove in which the railroad ran, Tom Idle failed to climb to the railway itself. He was disgusted with himself, and dumfounded as he watched his companion make the ascent where there seemed no possible handhold.

Doc gave attention to the rails, to the ties, to the gravel roadbed. He made note of a number of things, among which was a scar in the stone roof of the groove, as if it had been struck a hard blow by some very large piece of machinery. At one spot, he found a bit of steel which had been snapped off the underside of a box car; and in various places he found wood splinters and scattered rust.

He climbed back down to the plane. The wind was pushing the craft toward the cliff, and Tom Idle had only to fend off to keep it in place.

“Find anything?”

Doc Savage appeared not to hear the question.

He examined the lake water line below the railroad. He seemed much interested in several long, fuzzy strings which he found clinging to the rough stone. These were brown.

Tom Idle said, "But the train couldn't have disappeared here. It was reported as passing the station at the dam, beyond this point."

Doc taxied the ship down the lake to the dam and tied up at a motorboat dock. He left Tom Idle to stare in awe at the giant spillway and speculate on their chances if the plane motor should stop while they were taxiing, and they were swept over.

The railroad crossed the river on the dam.

The young telegrapher at the "OS" station below the dam obviously considered his job as serious as being president. He was copying a train order when Doc arrived, and he broke the dispatcher with repeat requests often enough to show that this was probably his first assignment.

"This is only my second day here," he said. "I really don't know anything about the missing freight, except what I've heard."

"What happened to the other operator?" Doc asked.

"He was drowned," the brass-pounder explained. "Nobody knows how the accident happened. They found his body inside one of the power turbines at the dam. He was a mess, I guess."

Doc returned to the plane.

"It is getting lighter," he said.

Tom Idle looked around in the increasing dusk. "Looks like it's getting darker to me."

"I was not referring to the weather."

Mad Mesa was no-telling-how-many-million-years old. The scientists had never been able to get on the top to find out; they could only use their telescopes and make guesses. The name—Mad Mesa—was less than two years old, the name being the result of the efforts of a half-cracked explorer to climb the butte and find out what was on top.

He had spent all his money, and finally gone crazy without succeeding. There was some opinion that he had been insane to begin with, because there was probably not five dollars' worth of scientific information to be had on top of the butte.

Mad Mesa was four thousand feet high, most of it straight up. It was not flat on top, although it appeared so from a distance. Nor was it a symmetrically shaped butte; its sides were as grooved with canyons as if a titanic bear had clawed them. In

the smaller of these canyons the *Queen Mary* could have been hidden, and the larger ones were a mile deep.

Mad Mesa was an island; the building of Stone Mountain Dam had backed water up around it and made it so.

It was three o'clock in the morning when Doc Savage gave his paddle a flip and brought the folding canvas boat around a headland with sufficient speed and silence that it was not likely to be seen.

The boat had been in the plane. The plane itself was some four miles away, fastened by springlines to the sides of a narrow canyon.

Having eased the boat into the intense black shadows close to the cliffs, Doc breathed, "You might paddle now."

Tom Idle's boating experience had been limited to pond paddling in Missouri, so he took over cautiously. He knew the need for silence.

He was puzzled. This was the fourth or fifth canyon in the side of Mad Mesa that they had investigated. And Doc Savage had not been going more than a few hundred feet into the harborlike canyons.

How the bronze man could ascertain anything in the pitch blackness was a mystery.

It was so black that Tom Idle could not see Doc Savage place before his eyes a strange pair of spectacles which had can-shaped contrivances for lenses. This device was almost as bulky as binoculars. Doc also lifted a contraption which resembled a large, old-fashioned magic lantern, and pointed it at the surroundings. He was using it like a searchlight, but it was apparently giving out no light.

Had Tom Idle been able to see what Doc was doing, he wouldn't have been greatly enlightened. He was no specialist in electricity.

He would have known that there are wave lengths of light which the human eye does not perceive. X-rays being an example, as well as wave lengths of ultraviolet light and infrared.

With a little explanation, he might have been made to understand how wave lengths of infralight could be sent out by a portable projector resembling an old-time magic lantern, and he probably could have conceived how the infralight was made visible, just as X-rays are made visible by a fluoroscopic screen, by a device not as large as a pair of binoculars, complicated though the contrivance might be. After all, watches are made, and keep good time, and are hardly larger than pencil erasers.

They did not find anything that night.

They camped under a ledge in a canyon that day, and did not show themselves.

At two o'clock the following morning, they heard three shots in quick

succession.

Chapter XVII

MADNESS ON THE MESA

The shots were not close. A mile distant, possibly. But it was hard to judge, particularly after the echoes began jumping among the canyons, thumping and grumbling and going off in the distance, then coming back as if they were answers being returned.

“What’ll we do?” Tom Idle gulped.

“Keep quiet and investigate.”

Doc paddled toward the spot where the shots had sounded. The folding boat was constructed of water-proofed silk over a duralumin framework, and had the lines of an Eskimo kayak, a type of craft which looks absolutely unsafe to the uninitiated, but in which the Eskimos frequently paddle fifty miles offshore in some of the most stormy waters in the world.

The craft was fast, and Doc, using a double paddle, sent it at its best speed. Now and then he paused to use the infralight-scanner device which enabled him to “see” in the intense darkness.

Then Doc saw the swimming man.

The man, at first, resembled a beaver. The water had slicked down his hair until his head resembled a beaver’s bow-works, and he was swimming with a careful mud crawl, only his head out, making practically no splash.

The man was going along the sheer stone face of Mad Mesa.

He disappeared so suddenly that it seemed he must have sunk.

Doc Savage paddled silently to the spot, and found a mouth that was like a knife slash. It was hardly fifty feet wide, but the canyon spread out inside.

Before Doc could overhaul the swimming man, the fellow climbed out of the water. He was mysteriously silent about it.

He had a long knife in his teeth.

The man disappeared over a ledge.

“Hondo!” a voice exploded in frightened astonishment.

“Yeah! Stand still, damn you!”

This second voice was breathless, so it was evidently the swimmer speaking.

“Listen, Hondo, I’m all for you.” The first man was terrified. “I’ll take your orders.”

“I know!” gritted the voice that must belong to Hondo Weatherbee. “You’ll take ’em till my back is turned!”

“Hondo, you got me wrong!”

“Yeah?”

“Honest, Hondo.”

“Suppose you tell me what Jan Hile is figuring on, then.”

It was not hard for Doc Savage and Tom Idle, crouched in the folding boat below the ledge, to visualize Hondo Weatherbee standing above, holding the point of his knife against the other man’s ribs. The second man, judging from his post here at the mouth of the canyon, must be a lookout. The sentry paused long enough to show that he was reluctant to answer Hondo Weatherbee’s question.

“C’mon!” Hondo snarled. “What’s Hile up to?”

The lookout spoke in a voice hoarse with fright.

“Hondo, they’re gonna double-cross you for your share,” he explained. “They’re going out tonight with diving suits and check to make sure. If it’s there, like you said, they’re going to get rid of you.”

“It’s all Jan Hile’s idea?”

“Uh-huh. Him an’ Big Eva.”

“I shoulda put a knife in that Big Eva while I was his cellmate!” Hondo Weatherbee gritted. He was silent a moment. “After they gun me, what’re they gonna do?”

“Go ahead as planned,” the other explained.

“Use the stuff in the box cars?”

“Sure.”

“That’s liable to kill six or seven hundred people,” Hondo Weatherbee growled. The other man’s teeth rattled.

“Hondo, that Jan Hile only needs horns and a tail to be the devil,” he croaked.

Hondo Weatherbee made a growling.

“Then somebody oughta go ahead an’ tell ’em down in hell what a great guy is gonna join ’em!” he snarled.

There were several sickening sounds above, then the body of the lookout, the knife sticking in his chest, toppled over the ledge, barely missing the boat in which Doc and Tom Idle sat.

The most intense shocks are the unexpected ones, and somehow neither Doc Savage nor Tom Idle had expected Hondo Weatherbee to murder the lookout. They sat petrified with grisly astonishment, while their little boat rocked on the waves thrown by the body of the dead man. Doc Savage, recovering, reached back and gripped Tom Idle’s face to prevent the young man, in the amazement of the moment,

from making a sound.

They waited to see if Hondo Weatherbee would climb down to investigate his handiwork. He did not. They could hear him climbing cautiously along the ledge.

“Going to follow him?” Tom Idle breathed.

“No.”

“But—”

“We would only be helping Hile,” Doc pointed out.

The bronze man stroked with the double paddle and sent the boat back out of the canyon. A few moments later they were lying against the stone cliff, waiting.

Tom Idle said, “I don’t understand this at all.”

“Jan Hile is double-crossing Hondo Weatherbee for his share of the loot,” Doc reminded, “and Hondo has found out.”

“Share of what loot?”

Instead of answering that, Doc stated, “There was something said about Jan Hile going out with diving suits tonight to make sure. We’ll wait for that. We might as well get this all cleared up.”

When the huge tunnels, the tunnels which had diverted the river while Stone Mountain Dam was being constructed, had been closed, and the giant dam had backed the spring floods up to make this strange lake, and the water had surrounded and isolated Mad Mesa, a number of coyotes must have been trapped. Their forlorn, hungry howling was audible at intervals, an eerie and shrill bedlam that might have been silly girls giggling.

The motor that silenced the coyotes was a huge one. The exhaust must have been cut out of the mufflers, because there was profanity, then the motor sound became muffled. But it was still a powerful throbbing, a slow, mighty pulse.

“Look!” Tom Idle gasped.

A flashlight had blinked briefly, and because of the intense darkness, seemed to throw out an astonishing amount of light. The glow revealed a strange horned monster crawling on the water.

A strange horned monster was what it appeared to be in that brief instant. More than a hundred feet long. Blunt and wide. Black. The horns were four, in two pairs, and they stuck up at either end; of each pair one was larger and standing straight, the other smaller and coupled to the straight one at the base.

The black monster crawled out onto the lake.

Doc Savage said, “You know what it is?”

“How’d they get it here?” his companion breathed. “They must have trucked it in by pieces and assembled it secretly.” Tom Idle made a low mutter of astonishment.

“Say, they’ve been preparing for this thing for months.”

“Then you know what it is?”

“A big barge with cranes on it.”

Doc suggested, “And now you know what happened to the freight train. The freight had only a dozen cars, remember?”

Tom Idle thought for a moment, getting his mind to accept what he realized must have happened.

“They laid the barge alongside the tracks and lifted the train off with the cranes, one car at a time,” he surmised. “I remember them strings you found hanging to the rocks. They must have been off the fenders they put between the barge and the cliff, so there wouldn’t be any marks. That nick above the track must’ve been made by one of the cranes. And the pieces of metal you found were broken off the cars by the lifting chains.”

“Something like that,” Doc admitted.

“But the missing freight was reported as going past the railway station at the dam!”

“The operator was bribed,” Doc decided. “Later, they murdered him so that he would never be able to tell. Made it look like a drowning.”

The two were grimly silent as they paddled in the wake of the huge barge, which was making its way beneath the towering stone sides of Mad Mesa.

The barge went through an interesting procession of maneuvers to find its destination. It started off by cruising first one way, then the other, moving slower and slower.

“Look,” Tom Idle breathed. “I can see four lights at four different places. They seem to be on surrounding buttes.”

“Bearing points.”

“Huh?”

“Jan Hile is on the deck of the barge,” explained Doc Savage, who had been using the infralight scanner. “He has a surveyor’s transit, and is locating a spot on the lake by taking bearings on the lights, which are being held by some of his men who must have been dispatched earlier to the bearing points.”

“Oh.”

Later, a hoarse grumbling of chain indicated the barge was being anchored. The amount of chain that went out showed the water was deep.

Preparations to dive began.

They used modern suits, all-metal, not unlike armor. Suits so heavy that the

divers, two of them, had to be put over the side with the crane. A motor-operated pump supplied air.

The diving continued for an hour. The men on the barge put up canvas screens to hide the lights by which they worked, and the effort to maintain silence was continuous.

Twice, the divers were hauled up in haste, following which there were explosions under the surface, great shocking blasts followed by an uprush of water, bubbles and smoke. After the blasts, the divers went down immediately.

“They’re hauling something up in buckets,” Tom Idle breathed.

Doc Savage had handed him the infralight scanner so he could get an idea of what was going on. They were holding their small boat at a considerable distance from the point where the diving operations were going on.

Tom Idle scratched his head and mumbled his bewilderment.

“They’re after something down there,” he decided. “But what on earth could it be? There couldn’t be any sunken pirate treasure ships or nothin’ like that.”

Doc picked up the paddle and sent the light boat back toward the canyon from which the big derrick barge had come. The barge had hauled anchor. The distance bearing lights on the buttes had gone out. The night’s diving seemed to be over.

Waiting just outside the canyon mouth, Doc watched the barge approach. When it was abreast, he began paddling, and entered the canyon mouth silently, and almost alongside the huge, panting barge.

“There is just a chance they might have a black-light burglar-alarm beam across the mouth of the canyon,” he explained in a whisper.

The intense darkness made their furtive entrance possible. The barge was showing no lights, but steering was being done by two range lights on shore. These ranges appeared to be flashlights with red and green paper held over the lenses.

They got into the canyon harbor without incident.

Chapter XVIII

THE DOUBLE-CROSSED MAN

Doc Savage worked quickly, so as to get ashore under cover of the excitement. He found a spot which was not too steep for landing, put Tom Idle on the beach, then quickly hauled the boat out and collapsed it so that it became a package not quite as large as a golf bag. He gave this to Tom Idle to carry. Doc himself handled the two equipment cases, both of which were heavy.

He found a niche in the stone, and posted Tom Idle there.

“You understand how to unfold that boat?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“As soon as it gets near daylight, put the boat in the water, clear out and notify the police—in case I do not return,” Doc advised.

The bronze man left Tom Idle, somewhat disgruntled, hiding in the niche.

Tom Idle had been under mental strain for so long that he was beginning to feel that he had to have action to keep things from snapping inside him. They had found nothing to indicate that his sister might be here on the island, but the possibility was enough to get him worked up.

Waiting in the rock crack, he found that time dragged incredibly. He felt of the rough stone, tried to visualize what it would look like from its broken-glass feel to his fingers. He fingered around in the sand. He untied his shoes and tied them tighter. He stood up and sat down half a dozen times.

Finally, he boiled over.

It wouldn't hurt to do a bit of cautious exploring on his own. After all, he had a lot at stake. His sister.

Doc Savage had told him to wait here. Well, he'd come back.

He took off the shoes, which he had earlier tied so tight. The rock was sharp, cut his feet through his socks. He managed, with a pocketknife which had been in the suit he purloined on the beach of Great Salt Lake, to cut the sleeves from his coat, and put one of those on either foot and tied it. This made the going more comfortable.

Shortly, he discovered a light. It was in a tent, he saw, when he had crawled nearer. Men seemed to be in the tent, and he could hear a voice mutter.

He could not resist the impulse to crawl close enough to listen.

Jan Hile was thumbing through a sheaf of papers, and stopping now and then to set down some figures. Finally he totaled what he had written.

He took the papers.

“These,” he said, “are copies of the Federal engineers’ report of the cubic-foot water capacity of Stone Mountain Dam.”

He waved the papers again.

“Also here,” he added, “I have the reports of chemists on the amount of the chemical it takes to cause illness and eventual death. Also the chemists have certified that the poison cannot be removed from water by any processes of filtering that could be applied to a city water system without prohibitive expense.”

He looked around at his men. Several of them were there, among these being Big Eva, Skookum and the trio who had failed to commit a murder at the burning coalfield in Ohio.

Jan Hile took a drink of water, then grinned thinly and said, “That ain’t lake water.”

“You’re going right ahead with it?” a man asked uneasily.

“Why not?”

“There’s a hell of a smell about that disappeared train.”

“Let it smell.”

“What about Doc Savage? He’s charging around somewhere.”

Jan Hile scowled. “I’ve got Doc Savage’s men right here, and if he gets too close, we can keep him off by threatening to kill them. The same thing goes for that Idle kid and his sister.”

Skookum said, “Hondo heap no like see them guys get out of pen. Cops look for Hondo now.”

Jan Hile looked around cautiously.

“Hondo,” he said, “doesn’t figure in this any longer.” He frowned at Big Eva. “How about you? The scheme to leave a stooge in your place in the penitentiary has flopped. You got any kick?”

Big Eva shook his head hastily. “I’m outa the big house. Hell, that satisfies me. Anyway, maybe we can catch the stooge later and turn him back over to the law.”

Jan Hile nodded. “That’s sensible.”

The head schemer now folded the papers, touched a match to them, and watched them burn. Tom Idle flatted close to the ground, fearful lest the additional light would show his presence. But his suspense subsided when Jan Hile ground his heel on the ashes.

Hile eyed his men. “Now, I’m going over this once again.”

“Hell, we’ve got it all clear,” one muttered.

“You never get a plan too clear,” Hile snapped. “We’ll hash it over again. First, we’ve got six carloads of poisonous chemical, and nobody knows that we’ve got it. The stuff was loaded into the box cars marked as common flour, and nobody is going to kick about losing the flour. Because we were shipping it to ourselves in Frisco.”

“What about the stink over the missing train?” asked the man who was worried about the train. “Seems like we could have worked a better gag than stealing a whole train.”

Hile shook his head. “That was the easy way. We lift the train off the track and drop the engine and all the cars in deep water. Nobody knows. Nobody, that is, who’s gonna tell anything.”

He laughed grimly.

“The box-car doors are open and the sacks of poison are ripped, and they’re bein’ dissolved by the lake water,” he continued. “In two weeks more, the lake water will be poison enough that people in the city drinkin’ it will begin to get sick.”

He shrugged. “What’ll naturally be next?”

“A chemical analysis by experts,” a man said dutifully.

“Sure,” Hile agreed. “And it will show poison. But what kind of poison?”

“One that the lake water could have absorbed by dissolving a natural vein of the stuff somewhere that the water has covered since the dam raised it,” said the dutiful man.

“Exactly. Then they’ll drain the dam. The water won’t be fit to use.”

A man started to say something, and Hile lifted a hand and stopped him.

“I know. We’ll have our own geologist turn up and locate the vein that is doing the poisoning. I’ve got the geologist all arranged for. He says we can doctor the vein so samples will show the poison.”

The worried-about-the-train man changed his worrying to the dam.

“I been thinking,” he said. “Suppose they don’t destroy the dam and drain the lake? After all, it’s a power dam as well as a water supply.”

“The main purpose of the dam is water supply,” Jan Hile said. “If they don’t drain the lake, we’ll dynamite the dam and make it look like a nut did it to get even about the poisoned water. Sure thing they wouldn’t rebuild it for only power purposes. You know how much political fuss was raised about the building of such a dam in the first place. No, it won’t be rebuilt.”

Tom Idle had lain in something close to a physical trance as he listened to the scheme being unfolded. His first impression was that the thing was too fantastic to be

true. But he had seen enough evidence of the vicious cleverness of Jan Hile's mind to realize that the man would attempt something this incredible.

But what was the whole thing about? That mystery plagued him.

Jan Hile answered the question a few moments later. He gestured with both black-gloved hands, gave an order, and some of the men dumped buckets of material on the tent table.

It was the stuff that had been hauled up from the lake bottom by the divers. Shattered rock fragments.

Jan Hile examined the rock samples with a magnifying glass, then took a hammer and chisel, worked on one of the rocks, and finally burst out in a wildly triumphant laugh.

"Look!" he chortled. "There's wire gold in this stuff as thick as shingle nails. The stuff will run twenty thousand dollars a ton! After they drain the lake, all we gotta do is buy the land, then start mining!"

One of the men said, "Hondo sure made a strike eleven years ago, didn't he?"

Jan Hile laughed. "He sure did. You begin to see why he killed his partner to keep the partner from sharing in it."

"Hondo went to the pen for that, didn't he?" asked a man who evidently had not belonged to the old-time outlaw gang.

Jan Hile nodded. "Yes. Hondo was smart enough, though, not to tell why he'd murdered the partner. He thought they'd pardon him in a few years, but he got into so much trouble in prison that he saw he would never get out. So he got in touch with me, and we cooked up this whole thing."

Jan Hile looked around at the men.

"I was to get Hondo Weatherbee out of prison," he said. "And Hondo was to show me the exact location of the gold lode. Hondo knew they'd built this dam in the meantime. That was a bad break. We had to go to all this trouble to get the dam drained."

"Where's Hondo now?"

"I don't know. He may know I plan to shut him out. If he does we'll have to gun him."

The discussion now turned into one of methods of getting rid of Hondo Weatherbee. Apparently they had not yet discovered that Hondo had murdered the lookout.

It dawned on Tom Idle that he had been away from his hiding place a long time. Moreover, he realized suddenly that there were traces of dawn in the east.

He crept away from the tent hurriedly and crawled into the stony crack where

Doc Savage had hidden him.

He had been there no more than two minutes when, without the slightest warning, a gun muzzle pressed against his face.

“All right,” growled Hondo Weatherbee’s harsh voice. “You’re dealing with an old Indian fighter now. I been watchin’ you layin’ by that tent and listenin’!”

Tom Idle blurted something which he would not have said had he taken time to think.

“Where’s Doc Savage?” he gasped.

The instant the words were out, he knew that he had betrayed the fact that Doc Savage was on Mad Mesa. He started to groan, but even that died unpleasantly at the other’s next words.

“I happened onto Savage a little earlier!” And the man chuckled.

Chapter XIX

MELEE ON MAD MESA

A fog had lifted from the lake during the night, and now that there was a faint red flush of dawn on the topmost pinnacle of Mad Mesa, the fog either had thickened, or the presence of the slight light made it more noticeable. Visibility had not improved.

Jan Hile was in his tent, and he had extinguished the lantern which had furnished light. His men were stationed at strategic points in the neighborhood. Hile was afraid of Hondo Weatherbee, for he knew the man was a hardened killer. If Hondo suspected he was being double-crossed, Hile realized the outlaw would be a bad customer. Hile knew very well that it would take only one small lead slug from a gun to decide whether Hondo Weatherbee or himself secured the major share of that lake-bed gold, which they were doing such elaborate scheming to get.

So Jan Hile nearly jerked his hands out of his black gloves when one of his sentries cracked a harsh challenge in the murk.

“What is it?” he yelled nervously.

“Hondo,” the sentry called. “And he’s got the Idle kid.”

“*What?*” Hile screamed.

Hile was a nervous man. He naturally associated the presence of Tom Idle with the nearness of Doc Savage, because the two had escaped the penitentiary together, and he was suddenly frantic with anxiety. He had spent a great deal of his own money in assembling the barge, buying the huge cargo of poison, and in paying the numerous itching palms that had to be paid. There was a great deal at stake. Millions. And there were few men who ever craved money more than Jan Hile, or would go to such lengths to get it.

He had intended to shoot Hondo Weatherbee, or have him shot, on sight. He changed his mind.

“Bring them here,” he ordered.

He sat down behind the table, took a small black derringer out of his pocket, and held it cupped in his black-gloved hands, where it was not very noticeable.

A man came in carrying another man.

Jan Hile had seen Hondo Weatherbee and Tom Idle together once before, on the night that he had personally engineered the substitution of Idle for the convict in the penitentiary; but there had been hurry and tension that night, so that he had not noticed what he saw now—the startling physical resemblance of the two men.

Skookum had selected Tom Idle as a man who looked like Hondo. Skookum had done an excellent job. No movie stand-in ever resembled his star more closely.

Had one of the men not been unconscious, and the other attired in the clothing which Hondo Weatherbee had worn that night—and draped with Hondo Weatherbee's gun belts—Hile knew he would have had difficulty telling which was which.

Hile tried to keep his eyes from Hondo's guns, but they had a grim fascination.

"Where did you find him, Hondo?" Hile asked, and had trouble keeping his voice from shaking.

The other man did not answer. He dropped the unconscious form he had been dragging, made his stance a little more wide-legged, and frowned.

"I'm not some kinds of a fool, Hile," he said.

Jan Hile decided Hondo Weatherbee's voice was changed, and he grew more uneasy. He kept thinking of the two or three times in the past when he had seen Hondo kill a man, and how Hondo had always seemed to change, to assume a calm that was deadly, just before he committed the deeds.

"What do you mean, Hondo?"

"You been planning to get rid of me for my share." When Jan Hile would have spoken, the other man lifted his hand to command silence. "Oh, don't bother to lie about it. I know."

Jan Hile thought how young Hondo Weatherbee was, really, to have lived the life he had led. The man seemed hardly to his thirties, in spite of the eleven years he had spent in the penitentiary. He was older, of course, but he seemed younger. If a life of crime, and prison, is supposed to age a man, Hondo Weatherbee was an exception.

Then Jan Hile jerked his thoughts to the present, for the other man was speaking.

"I'll make you a proposition, Hile."

"What kind, Hondo?"

"I take a fourth of the gold, instead of a half. I know how rich that lode is. A fourth will do me."

"And in return?" Jan Hile asked from a dry throat.

"Wait, I ain't finished. I take a fourth. I turn this Idle fellow over to you, and we hand him back to the law. And I also turn over Doc Savage."

"*What?*"

Hile was dumfounded. He knew that this would be his biggest surprise, no

matter how long he lived.

“*What?*” he repeated incredulously.

“In return,” the other man said, “you let up on me, Hile. And to make sure you let up on me, you write out a confession to this whole mess. I’ll put the confession where it will go into the hands of the law if anything happens to me.”

Jan Hile wet his lips. “And if I don’t?”

“I’m going to kill you!” The other man’s voice was suddenly guttural with emotion. “And if I don’t kill you, Doc Savage is layin’ out there in the rocks unconscious. He’s where you won’t find him. But he’ll regain consciousness, and go on, and he’ll get you as sure as I don’t. Because I’ve told him everything.”

There was enough conviction in the other man’s voice that Hile knew he was not bluffing. The man meant it. And he didn’t care much whether Hile accepted, or refused and elected to shoot it out. This also showed in his voice. His hate for Hile was utter and complete.

Hile was weighted with the conviction that he was whipped. He had to give in. If not because of fear of Hondo, because seeing Doc Savage out of the way was worth whatever sacrifices he must make.

“All right,” he said.

“Before you say it’s all right,” the other answered grimly, “you better know I put a knife in the lookout at the canyon mouth. He was one of your best pups. And I was starting out to clean house.”

Jan Hile felt cold pin pricks on his skin. He was glad he had capitulated.

“If you can smooth it over with his friends,” Hile said, “I’ll forget about the man.”

The other slapped his gun. “This will smooth it over.” He scowled at Jan Hile. “Go ahead and write out that confession. Sign it and fingerprint it, and we’ll have the men sign it and print it as witnesses.”

As Jan Hile had known, Hondo Weatherbee was no fool in many ways. He had, for instance, an animal kind of cunning, as shown by the men he picked to witness the confession which Jan Hile composed. The men were those without police records, the men whose testimony would best stand up in a court.

Another move of typical Hondo slyness was the man’s act in dispatching one of the men to mail the envelope containing the confession. The messenger did not know the envelope contents, and there was no doubt that he would mail it, thus putting Jan Hile’s confession where he could not recover it.

“We understand each other now, eh?”

“Yes,” Hile admitted. “We do. Where is Doc Savage?”

Hile was led into the brush and boulders in a nearby gully and confronted with

the prone, motionless form of the giant bronze man.

Hile snarled and drew his gun. It was in his mind to end the Savage menace there.

“Hold it,” interrupted Hondo Weatherbee’s voice.

Hile frowned at the other man in the dull gloom. The smoky dawn-lights and twilights at the base of Mad Mesa had the peculiarity of seeming to last for hours because of the number of peaks and buttes around about. It was like dawn coming in a forest.

“He’s got to be killed, Hondo!” Hile snapped.

The other nodded. “Who said different? What I mean is that I’m doing you a favor.”

“Favor?”

“Take Savage and the Idle guy to the rest of the prisoners,” the other said fiercely. “And I’ll put them all out of the way.”

“Oh!” Hile said.

He was satisfied. Pleased. In his old outlaw days, he had been a blood-thirsty man, but his interval as a lawyer had been one of comparative peace, and these late killings had given him some twinges. He was willing for Hondo to do the murdering. He even felt himself warming toward Hondo. The man, after all, was a valuable associate.

“Right,” Hile said.

Doc Savage was lifted and carried, along with Tom Idle, to a shallow, natural cavern in the cliffs. The big bronze figure of Doc Savage was completely limp. There was no visible wound, so Hile presumed the bronze man had been struck on the head and his hair hid the spot.

The other prisoners were stiff and weak. Monk and Renny not as much as the others, although they showed the effects; for they had been tied tightly since their capture, and fed only twice. They stared in hollow-eyed horror as Doc Savage and Tom Idle were dumped among them. Doc Savage’s five men had not before seen Tom Idle and did not know him. But Idle’s sister emitted a low cry.

There were several other prisoners—the crew of the railroad train and the Salt Lake City taxi driver. They stared listlessly. They had given up.

Hile’s men withdrew hastily. Mass murder was too much for their stomachs. Only Hile remained.

“You want to watch it?”

Hile nodded. He didn’t want to. But he did not wish, either, for Hondo Weatherbee to get the idea he had a weak stomach. Men such as these would only

follow a leader who they thought was unafraid of anything.

"I'll stay," Hile said.

"Too bad," the other growled. "I hoped you wouldn't."

He drew both his guns and pointed them at Hile.

Hile blanched. "Hondo—"

"Don't move!" the other gritted.

"Hondo!" Hile croaked. "You're not double-crossing—"

The man with the guns showed his teeth fiercely.

"You don't get it!" he snarled. "I'm not Hondo! Damn you, if you've harmed my sister—"

Doc Savage got up off the cave floor.

"Careful, Idle!" he warned. "You can see your sister is all right!"

Impact had followed impact for Jan Hile, until he held his self-control barely pinched between his fingertips. And now he lost it.

The man he had thought was Hondo Weatherbee was Tom Idle. The semidarkness accounted for his being fooled, that and the way the man had talked.

Jan Hile became entirely rattled. He spun, pitched backward. There was a ledge below the cave, and he went over that, almost headfirst.

Tom Idle would have killed him, had Doc Savage not lunged and knocked the gun up. With his aim distracted, Idle had presence of mind to hold his bullet, and there was no shot sound to spread alarm.

Hile landed, with crashing of boughs, in small pine trees directly below the ledge. The crash was long, small boughs breaking first, then larger ones. Then silence. The fall had stunned the man.

One of Hile's men shouted an inquiry.

"Hey! What happened?" he wanted to know.

Doc Savage had flung to the prisoners. "No noise!" he warned.

He began freeing them, slashing the knots and saying, "Get up and move around, to limber your muscles!"

He freed his own men first, and as best they could with their stiffened muscles, they helped loosen the others. The cave became crowded with grim-faced men trying to get their arms and legs in condition to move dependably.

Tom Idle clasped his sister in his arms and listened to her incoherent assurance that she had not been harmed.

Monk jumped up and down apishly and swung his arms.

"I got a whole book of scores to settle with these yahoos!" he gritted.

Long, bony Johnny was also trying to unlimber.

“I’ll be superamalgamated!” he muttered.

Renny said, “Holy cow, Doc! How’d you manage that trick?”

The bronze man either did not hear, or was too busy to answer.

Tom Idle replied.

“Mr. Savage found Hondo Weatherbee and overpowered him,” he explained.

“In the meantime, I had been left hiding, but had crawled away to listen to Hile’s men. When I came back, Mr. Savage took a very effective means of fixing in my mind what Hondo Weatherbee’s voice sounded like.”

“Whatcha mean—effective?” Renny asked.

“Mr. Savage imitated Hondo Weatherbee’s voice as he would sound if he had captured us,” Idle explained. “It was kind of a trick, and it scared ten years off my growth. But it fixed Hondo Weatherbee’s voice in my mind. I’ll never forget it. In fact, I don’t think I could have carried out that imitation without the scare.”

Tom Idle shivered, remembering the frightening moment when he had returned to his niche in the rocks, and thought that he had been captured by Hondo Weatherbee, who had also taken Doc Savage.

Doc said, “This may be tough.”

Below the cave mouth, Jan Hile regained his senses and began screaming an alarm.

“That won’t help any!” decided Long Tom disgustedly.

Chapter XX

DAM DEATH

Tom Idle had Hondo Weatherbee's two six-guns. At Doc's suggestion, he gave one of them to Ham, who was unlikely to do any unnecessary shooting, in contrast to Monk and Renny, who had been known to let their enthusiasm get the better of them.

They crouched at the cave mouth. It was still too dark for accurate shooting, because of the fog. They fired a few times to make the enemy cautious.

Doc Savage left the cave. He moved rapidly, scaling the sheer wall of stone, then turned to the right. He had concealed the two equipment cases which he had brought ashore; hidden them on a ridge where they were not hard to find.

One case contained the machine pistols which Doc Savage had developed for the use of his men. These unusual weapons, which were like oversized automatics, fired various types of missiles.

The case held an assortment of ammunition—mercy bullets causing unconsciousness, smoke slugs, and little explosive bullets which looked harmless, but any one of which could tear a small-size house to pieces.

There was shooting now, back at the cave. The bronze man hurried, came in sight of the spot, stopped and used one of the machine pistols loaded with a drum of explosives.

The gun made a deep bullfiddle sound, so rapidly did it discharge. He fanned the muzzle, spreading the slugs.

The bullets hit, exploded. The roar was deafening. The ground trembled. Rock fragments swirled high in the air. Loosened boulders tumbled down the canyon sides.

After that unexpected bedlam, there was an abysmal silence. A single sixgun whanged. The bullet smacked a rock near Doc, climbed away with a bullfiddle moan. He fired another explosive. The gunman yelled, could be heard running.

Doc hailed the cave, using the ancient Mayan tongue, an almost unknown language which he and his men spoke and used to communicate without being understood by others.

He warned them that he was coming back to the cave. He did not want to get shot by accident.

He gained the cave without trouble.

While distributing the machine pistols, he said, "Spread and keep them down

from the canyon sides. Try to herd them together.”

Numerically, they were still outmatched. But the machine pistols gave them infinite superiority. The little guns, the ripping, demolishing blasts of the explosive bullets, struck terror. The firing was sporadic, now and then a six-shooter, more often bursts from the rapid-firers.

It got a little lighter.

Jan Hile could be heard shouting. Then the big motor of the crane-barge started. “Blast it!” Monk howled. “They’re pulling out that barge!”

A few minutes later, the unwieldy barge nosed out of the narrow canyon mouth. “We might sink it!” Ham suggested.

Doc Savage had what he considered a better plan. He called Monk and Renny, the two physically strongest, to assist.

They unfolded the collapsible boat and put it in the water.

“Have they got a rowboat here?” Doc asked.

“I think so,” Long Tom said.

“See if they smashed it.”

They had not. It was a slow, clumsy punt of a craft. The oars were gone.

Doc indicated planks which had formed a floor in one of the tents.

“Use those for paddles.” He described the location of the spot where he and Tom Idle had hidden the plane. “Get to the plane. It has a radio. Have plenty of State police waiting at the dock above the dam. We’ll try to herd Hile and his men down there.”

The slowness of the crane barge made the bronze man’s plan feasible. It was no more than three quarters of a mile distant when Doc Savage, Monk and Renny put off in the folding boat. There was an extra paddle, and Monk and Renny furnished propelling power.

Doc sat in the bow. When the barge headed for shore, he elevated the muzzle of a machine pistol, using the weapon like a field piece, and dropped explosive slugs ahead of the larger craft. It changed its course almost at once.

A few high-powered rifle slugs came skipping over the water. They were low, kept the kayaklike folding boat head-on to offer as small a target as possible.

The sun came from behind the buttes suddenly, and was hot. A few birds sailed above the lake, dodging wildly whenever there was shooting, but for some reason not going away.

Back in the distance they could see the punt. Ham, Long Tom, Johnny and Tom Idle were in the craft, propelling it clumsily with boards. It took them fully two hours

to disappear behind a headland. Later the plane flew into view.

The plane circled very high, out of rifle shot, and sent explosive slugs to aid harassing operations of the men in the folding boat.

It was almost noon when the big barge chugged up to the boat landing not more than a hundred yards above the great dam with its booming spillways.

Renny groaned.

“Holy cow!” he croaked. “There’s not a cop around the place!”

Jan Hile, Skookum and the others must have thought the same thing. They slammed the heavy barge against the boat dock, crumbling some of the piling. The men, carrying guns, piled onto the dock.

The police appeared then. There were plenty of them. More than enough. They had placed machine guns. These cackled a warning burst.

Doc and his two men, waiting offshore, could hear the command that was sent to Hile.

“Lay ’em down, you guys! You haven’t got a chance!”

Hile must have figured they didn’t have a chance if they did surrender. He screamed at his men. They would run the barge back on the lake, try to hold out until nightfall, or reach the shore at some other point.

The men fell back onto the barge, shooting. Three of them went down, were dragged aboard by the others.

The barge backed away from the half-demolished dock. It backed for all of two hundred feet.

Then Doc Savage, who had been watching intently, was startled by the abrupt, thundering moan of a machine pistol behind his head. He whirled.

Monk said, “Well, blast it! We couldn’t let ’em get away!”

To the homely chemist’s credit, he had endeavored only to disable the barge. His slugs had ripped open the side of the heavy craft near the stem, where he reasoned the engine would be. And he had stopped the motor.

But he had not stopped to think what would happen if the barge motor ceased turning. His horrified gasp proved that he hadn’t.

“I never thought of that!” he croaked hollowly.

The barge turned around four times slowly in the interval that it took to reach the spillway. For there was current here, more current than was apparent. The barge, by the time it reached the spillway, must have been going several miles an hour. And it weighed hundreds of tons.

The spillway was one of the breath-taking sights of the dam. It was not the

tunnel spill—there were four of those; but this was the high-water season, and water, hundreds of thousands of tons of it an hour, was going over the dam itself in a Niagara roar that could be heard for miles.

There were steel gates that could be lowered to cut the volume of the flood. If they had held, the men on the barge would still have lived.

The spillway crushed when the barge hit it. The barge nosed over. It hung, like a boat on a reef, for moments.

Some of the men, who had jumped earlier and tried to swim for it, were swept over while the barge hung there—in the hugeness of the flood, like half-drowned flies.

With a long, shuddering grunt, the barge took the plunge, took with it to demolition and death all the men who were aboard.

Late that evening, Doc Savage himself supervised the blasting open of the huge drainage tunnels through which the river had been diverted while the dam was constructed, and which later had been sealed with concrete.

It took three weeks to drain the dam.

Another two weeks were required to locate the freight train and raise it, remove the poison—such as had not been dissolved.

Jan Hile had been clever, and had dropped the cars in the channel of the old river, where, even after the dam was drained, they were still submerged.

Johnny, the geologist, checked on Hondo Weatherbee's gold lode.

"They did not underestimate its value," he said, for once using small words.

Renny, the engineer, having conferred with Doc Savage, busied himself making surveys.

Hondo Weatherbee, the one man who had survived the affair, was back in the penitentiary.

Renny reported results of his survey. "That gold," he said, "isn't so deep. With a little reconstruction, the water level of that dam can be kept down when it is refilled, so the gold vein will not be covered. It can be worked. The dam will still furnish enough power and water. It was too high in the first place, as a matter of fact."

That arrangement was agreed upon. There were no objections from politicians, the politicians having gotten their fill of that dam much earlier. Ham took care of the legal details.

Nona Idle seemed to be seeing a good deal of Ham, which disturbed Monk, who was busy with the muddy job of getting a freight train out of a river.

"I can't savvy what you see in that guy!" Monk told the young lady.

“Mr. Brooks,” the young lady responded, “is a very clever man.”

Monk was disgusted.

“Ham is a big bluff!” he said. “Nothin’ to ’im. You open his front door, and you’re in his back yard!”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *Mad Mesa: A Doc Savage Adventure* by Kenneth Robeson]