

The Land of Terror

A Doc Savage Adventure

#8

Kenneth Robeson

[Lester Dent]

1933

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DOC SAVAGE'S AMAZING CREW

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

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

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

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

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

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

Books by Kenneth Robeson

THE THOUSAND-HEADED MAN

THE MAN OF BRONZE

METEOR MENACE

THE POLAR TREASURE

THE LOST OASIS

BRAND OF THE WEREWOLF

THE LAND OF TERROR

A DOC SAVAGE ADVENTURE

BY KENNETH ROBESON

THE LAND OF TERROR

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Chapter 1

THE SMOKING DEATH

There were no chemists working for the Mammoth Manufacturing Company who could foretell future events. So, as they watched white-haired, distinguished Jerome Coffern don hat and topcoat after the usual Friday conference, none knew they were never to see the famous chemist alive again.

Not one dreamed a gruesome right hand and a right forearm was all of Jerome Coffern's body that would ever be found.

Jerome Coffern was chief chemist for the Mammoth concern. He was also considered one of the most learned industrial scientists in the world.

The Mammoth Manufacturing Company paid Jerome Coffern a larger salary than was received by the president of the corporation. It was Jerome Coffern's great brain which gave the Mammoth concern the jump on all its competitors.

Jerome Coffern plucked back a sleeve to eye a watch on his right wrist. This watch was later to identify the grisly right hand and forearm as Coffern's.

"I wonder how many of you gentlemen have heard of Clark Savage?" he inquired.

Surprise kept the other chemists silent a moment. Then one spoke up.

"I recall that a man by the name of Clark Savage recently did some remarkable work along lines of ultimate organic analysis," he said. "His findings were so advanced in part as to be somewhat bewildering. Some points about chemistry generally accepted as facts were proven wrong by Clark Savage."

Jerome Coffern nodded delightedly, rubbing his rather bony hands.

"That is correct," he declared. "I am proud to point to myself as one of the few chemists to realize Doc Savage's findings are possibly the most important of our generation."

At this juncture, another chemist gave an appreciable start.

"Doc Savage!" he ejaculated. "Say, isn't that the man who some weeks ago turned over to the surgical profession a new and vastly improved method of performing delicate brain operations?"

"That is the same Doc Savage." Jerome Coffern's none-too-ample chest seemed about to burst with pride.

"Whew!" exploded another man. "It is highly unusual for one man to be among the world's greatest experts in two lines so widely different as chemistry and surgery."

Jerome Coffern chuckled. "You would be more astounded were you to know Doc Savage fully. The man is a mental marvel. He has contributed new discoveries to more than surgery and chemistry. Electricity, archaeology, geology and other lines have received the benefit of his marvelous brain. He has a most amazing method of working."

Pausing, Jerome Coffern gazed steadily at the assembled men. He wanted them to understand he was not exaggerating.

“As I say, Doc Savage has a most amazing method of working,” he continued. “At intervals, Savage vanishes. No one knows where he goes. He simply disappears as completely as though he had left the earth. And when he returns, he nearly always has one or more new and incredible scientific discoveries to give to the world.

“It is obvious Doc Savage has a wonderful laboratory at some secret spot where he can work in solitude. Nobody can even guess where it is. But any scientific man would give half a lifetime to inspect that laboratory, so remarkable must it be.”

The eminent chemist smiled from ear to ear. “And I will add more you will perhaps find it hard to believe. I have said Doc Savage is a mental marvel. Well, he is also a muscular marvel as well. He has a body as amazing as his brain.

“His strength and agility are incredible. Why, for Doc Savage it is child’s play to twist horseshoes, bend silver half-dollars between thumb and forefinger and tear a New York telephone directory in half.

“Were Doc Savage to become a professional athlete, there is no doubt in my mind but that he would be the wonder of all time. But he will not employ his astounding strength to earn money, because he is one of those very rare persons—a genuinely modest man. Publicity and world-wide fame do not interest him at all.”

Jerome Coffern halted abruptly, realizing his enthusiasm was getting away with his dignity. He reddened.

“I could not resist the temptation to tell you of this remarkable man,” he said proudly. “Doc Savage studied under me many years ago. He quickly learned all I knew. Now his knowledge is vastly beyond mine.”

He tugged back his right sleeve to display the watch.

“This timepiece was presented to me by Doc Savage at that time, as a token of gratitude,” he smiled. “I am proud to say he is still my friend.”

Jerome Coffern gave his topcoat a final straightening tug.

“I am on my way now to have dinner with Doc Savage,” he smiled. “He is to meet me in front of the plant immediately. So I shall now bid you gentlemen good afternoon.”

The eminent chemist quitted the conference room.

It was the last time his colleagues saw him alive.

The plant of the Mammoth Manufacturing Company was located in New Jersey, only a short distance from the great new George Washington Bridge across the Hudson River into New York City.

The brick buildings of the plant were modern and neat. Spacious grounds surrounded them. Shrubbery grew in profusion and was kept neatly trimmed. The walks were of concrete.

Standing on the high steps in front of the building where the conference of chemists had been held, Jerome Coffern glanced about eagerly. He was anxious to get a glimpse of the man he considered the most remarkable in the world—his friend, Doc Savage.

It was perhaps a hundred yards across a vista of landscaped shrubbery to the main highway.

A car stood on the highway. It was a roadster, very large and powerful and efficient. The color was a reserved gray.

Seated in the car was a figure an onlooker would have sworn was a statue sculptured from solid bronze!

The effect of the metallic figure was amazing. The remarkably high forehead, the muscular and strong mouth, the lean, corded cheeks denoted a rare power of character. The bronze hair was a shade darker than the bronze skin. It lay straight and smooth.

The large size of the roadster kept the bronze man from seeming the giant he was. Too, he was marvelously proportioned. The bulk of his great frame was lost in its perfect symmetry.

Although he was a hundred yards from the bronze man, Jerome Coffern could almost make out the most striking feature of all about Doc Savage.

For the bronze man was Doc Savage. And the most striking thing about him was his eyes. They were like pools of fine flake gold glistening in the sun. Their gaze possessed an almost hypnotic quality, a strange ability to literally give orders with their glance.

Undeniably, here was a leader of men, as well as a leader in all he undertook. He was a man whose very being bespoke a knowledge of all things, and the capacity to dominate all obstacles.

Jerome Coffern waved an arm at the bronze man.

Doc Savage saw him and waved back.

Jerome Coffern hurried forward. He walked with a boyish eagerness. The path he traversed took him through high, dense shrubbery. The bronze figure of Doc Savage was lost to sight.

Suddenly two ratty men lunged from the shrubs.

Before Jerome Coffern could cry an alarm, he was knocked unconscious.

The blow which reduced the white-haired chemist to senselessness was delivered with a bludgeon of iron pipe about a foot long. The smash probably fractured distinguished Jerome Coffern's skull. He fell heavily to the concrete walk, right arm outflung to one side.

"Put the pipe on top of the body!" hissed one ratty man.

"O. K., Squint!" muttered the other man.

He placed the iron-pipe bludgeon on the chest of prone Jerome Coffern, thrusting one end inside the famous chemist's waistcoat so it would stay there.

The two rodentlike men now retreated a pace. They were excited. A trembling racked their bony, starved hands. Nervous swallowing chased the Adam's apples up and down their stringy necks. The rough, unwashed skin of those necks gave them a turtle aspect.

Squint dived an emaciated claw inside his shirt. The hand clutched convulsively and drew out a strange pistol. This was larger even than a big army automatic. It had two barrels, one the size of a pencil, the other a steel cylinder more than an inch in diameter. The barrels were placed one above the other.

At prone Jerome Coffern's chest, Squint aimed the weapon.

“H-hurry up!” stuttered his companion. The man twitched uneasy glances over the adjacent shrubbery. No one was in sight.

Squint pulled the trigger of the strange pistol. It made a report exactly like a sharp human cough.

An air pistol!

That accounted for the two barrels, one of which, the larger, was in reality the chamber which held the compressed air that fired the gun.

The missile from the air pistol struck the center of Jerome Coffern’s chest.

Instantly a puff of grayish vapor arose. It was as though a small cloud of cigarette smoke had escaped from the chemist’s body at that point.

No sound of an explosion accompanied the phenomena, however. There was only the dull impact of the air gun missile striking.

The grayish vapor increased in volume. It had a vile, oily quality. Close to Jerome Coffern’s body, it was shot through and through with tiny, weird flashes. These were apparently of an electrical nature.

It was as though a small, foul gray thundercloud were forming about the distinguished chemist’s dead body.

About two minutes passed. The repulsive gray fog increased rapidly. It was now like a ball of ash-colored cotton twelve feet thick. From the ground upward about half way, the green and blue and white of the electric sparks played in fantastic fashion.

The whole thing was eerie. It would have baffled a scientific brain.

The balmy spring breeze, whipping along the narrow concrete path, wafted the vile gray cloud to one side.

Both ratty men stared at the source of the cloud.

“It’s w-w-workin’!” whined Squint. Stark awe had gripped him. He hardly had the courage to look a second time at the source of the gray vapor.

For Jerome Coffern’s body was dissolving!

The ghastly melting-away effect had started where the mysterious missile from the air pistol had struck.

In all directions from the point of impact, the form of the great chemist was literally turning into the vile grayish vapor. Clothing, skin, flesh and bones—everything was going.

Nor did the dissolution stop with the human body. The concrete walk immediately below was becoming ashen vapor as well. The trowel-smoothed upper surface of the walk was already gone, revealing the coarse gravel below. As by magic, that, too, was wafted away. Rich black earth could be seen.

In the midst of the weird phenomenon glistened a bit of shiny metal. This resembled the crumpled tinfoil wrapper from a candy bar. It alone was not dissolving.

“Let’s get outa here, Squint!” whined one of the ratty men. It was obvious from the man’s manner that he was getting his first glimpse of the terrible weapon in their possession.

A substance with the power to dissolve all ordinary matter as readily as a red-hot rivet turns a drop of water into steam!

“Aw, whatcha scared of?” sneered Squint. He pointed a skinny talon at the spot where the iron-pipe bludgeon had reposed on Jerome Coffern’s chest. “Only thing around here that had our finger prints on it was that pipe. And it’s gone up in smoke.”

“I ain’t s-scared!” disclaimed the other, trying to snarl bravely. “Only we’re two saps to hang around here!”

“Maybe you’re right at that,” Squint agreed.

With this, the two men fled. The alacrity with which Squint dived into the shrubbery showed he was every bit as anxious as his companion to quit the spot.

Hardly had they gone when the vaporizing of Jerome Coffern’s body abruptly ceased. It was apparent that the hideous power of the weird dissolver substance had been exhausted. Only a small quantity could have been contained in the air pistol cartridge. Yet its effect had been incredible.

Of Jerome Coffern’s form, a right hand and forearm remained intact. This right arm had been outflung when the chemist fell after being knocked unconscious. The potency of the dissolver had been exhausted before it reached the hand and forearm. The two ratty men had fled before they noticed this.

On that grisly right wrist was the expensive watch Doc Savage had given Jerome Coffern as a token of gratitude.

The grayish vapor climbed upward in the air like smoke. And like smoke it slowly dispersed.

Chapter 2

BRONZE VENGEANCE

Doc Savage, seated in his large and powerful roadster, saw the cloud of grayish vapor lift above the landscaped shrubbery.

Although it was sixty yards distant, his sharp eyes instantly noted an unusual quality about the vapor. It did not resemble smoke, except in a general way.

But at the moment Doc was doing a problem of mathematics in his head, an intricate calculation concerning an advanced electrical research he was making.

The problem would have taxed the ability of a trained accountant supplied with the latest adding machines, but Doc was able, because of the remarkable efficiency of his trained mind, to handle the numerous figures entirely within his head. He habitually performed amazing feats of calculus in this fashion.

Hence it was that Doc did not investigate the cloud of ash-hued fog at once. He finished his mental problem. Then he stood erect in the roadster.

His keen eyes had discerned the play of tiny electric sparks in the lower part of the cloud! That jerked his attention off everything else. Such a thing was astounding.

The rumble of machinery in the nearby manufacturing plant of the Mammoth concern blotted out whatever conversation or sounds which might have arisen in the neighborhood of the weird fog.

Doc hesitated. He expected his old friend, Jerome Coffern, to appear momentarily. There was no sign of the eminent chemist, however.

Doc quitted the roadster. His movements had a flowing smoothness, like great springs uncoiling in oil.

The grounds of the manufacturing plant were surrounded by a stout woven wire fence. This was more than eight feet high and topped off with several rows of needle-sharp barbs. Its purpose was to keep out intruders. A gate near by was shut, secured by a chain and padlock. No doubt Jerome Coffern had carried a key to this.

Doc Savage approached the fence, running lightly.

Then a startling thing happened.

It was a thing that gave instant insight into Doc Savage's physical powers. It showed the incredible strength and agility of the bronze giant.

For Doc Savage had simply jumped the fence. The height exceeded by more than two feet the world record for the high jump. Yet Doc went over it with far more ease than an average man would take a knee-high obstacle. The very facility with which he did it showed he was capable of a far higher jump than that.

His landing beyond the fence was light as that of a cat. His straight, fine bronze hair was not even disturbed.

He went toward the strange gray cloud. Coming to a row of high shrubs, his bronze form seemed literally to flow through the leaves and branches. Not a leaf fluttered; not a branch shook.

It was a wonderful quality of woodcraft, and Doc did it instinctively, as naturally as a great jungle cat. It came easier to him than shoving through the bushes noisily, this trick he had acquired from the very jungle itself.

Suddenly he stopped.

Before him a pit gaped in the concrete walk. The black, rich earth below the walk was visible.

On this black earth reposed a crumpled bit of metal that resembled wadded tinfoil.

Beside the pit lay a grisly hand and forearm. About the gruesome wrist was an expensive watch.

Doc studied the watch. Strange lights came into his amazing golden eyes.

Of a sudden, a weird sound permeated the surrounding air. It was a trilling, mellow, subdued sound, reminiscent of the song of some strange jungle bird, or the dulcet note of a wind filtering through a leafless forest. Having no tune, it was nevertheless melodious. Not awesome, it still had a quality to excite, to inspire.

This sound was part of Doc—a small, unconscious thing which accompanied his moments of utter concentration. It would come from his lips when a plan of action was being evolved, or in the midst of some struggle, or when some beleaguered friend of Doc's, alone and attacked, had almost given up hope of life. And with the filtering through of that sound would come renewed hope.

The strange trilling had the weird essence of seeming to emanate from everywhere instead of from a particular spot. Even one looking directly at Doc's lips would not realize from whence it arose.

The weird sound was coming now because Doc recognized the watch on that pitiful fragment of an arm.

It was the token he had presented to Jerome Coffern. The eminent scientist had always worn it. He knew this grisly relic was a part of Jerome Coffern's body!

Doc's unique brain moved with flashing speed. Some fantastic substance had dissolved the body of the famous chemist!

The bit of crumpled metal that resembled tinfoil had obviously escaped the ghastly effects of the dissolver material.

Doc picked this up. He saw instantly it was a capsulelike container which had split open, apparently from the shock of striking Jerome Coffern's body.

It was the air gun missile which had carried the dissolving substance. The metal was of some type so rare that Doc Savage did not recognize it offhand. He dropped it in a pocket to be analyzed later.

Doc's great bronze form pivoted quickly. His golden eyes seemed to give the surrounding shrubbery the briefest of inspections, but not even the misplaced position of a grass blade escaped their notice.

He saw a caterpillar which had been knocked from a leaf so recently it still squirmed to get off its back, on which it had landed. He saw grass which had been stepped on, slowly straightening. The direction in which this grass was bent showed him the course pursued by the feet which had borne it down.

Doc followed the trail. His going was as silent as a breeze-swept puff of bronze smoke. A running man could hardly have moved as swiftly as Doc covered this minute trail.

Things that showed him the trail were microscopic. One with faculties less developed than Doc's would have been hopelessly baffled. The slight deposit of dust atop leaves, scraped off by the fleeing Squint and his companion, would have escaped an ordinary eye. But such marks were all the clues Doc needed.

Squint and his aide had escaped from the factory grounds through a hole they had clipped in the high woven wire fence. Bushes concealed the spot. Doc Savage eased through.

The quarry was not far ahead. Neither of the two fleeing men had taken a bath recently. The unwashed odor of their bodies hung in the air. A set of ordinary nostrils would have failed to detect it, but here again, Doc Savage had powers exceeding those of more prosaic mortals.

Doc glided through high weeds. He reached a road, a little-used thoroughfare.

A score of yards distant, five men had just seated themselves in a touring car. The car engine started.

"How'd it go, Squint?" asked one of the five in the machine.

The man's words, lifted loudly because of the noisy car engine, reached Doc Savage's keen ears. And he heard the reply they received.

"Slick!" replied Squint. "Old Jerome Coffern is where he won't never give us nothin' to worry about!"

The touring car lunged away from the spot, gears squawling.

Before the car had rolled two dozen yards, the ratty Squint looked back. He wanted to see if they were followed.

What he saw made his hair stand on end.

A bronze giant of a man was overhauling the car. The machine had gathered a great deal of speed. Squint would have bet his last dollar no race horse could maintain the pace it was setting. Yet a bronze, flashing human form was not only maintaining the pace, but gaining!

The bronze man was close enough that Squint could see his eyes. They were strange eyes, like pools of flake gold. They had a weird quality of seeming to convey thoughts as well as words could have.

What those gleaming golden eyes told Squint made him cringe with fear. One of his companions clutched Squint's coat and kept him from toppling out of the car. Squint squealed as though caught in a steel trap.

At Squint's shriek, all eyes but the driver's went backward. The trio who had waited outside the factory grounds while Squint and his companion murdered Jerome Coffern were as terrified as Squint. Their hands dived down to the floorboards of the car. They brought up stubby machine guns.

As one crazed man, they turned the machine gun muzzles on the great bronze Nemesis overtaking them. The guns released a loud roar of powder noise. Lead

shrieked. It dug up the road to the rear. It caromed away with angry squawls.

But not one of the deadly slugs was in time to lodge in the bronze frame of Doc Savage. As the first gun snout came into view, he saw the danger. His giant figure streaked to the left. With the first braying burst of shots, tall weeds already had absorbed him.

Squint and his companions promptly fired into the weeds. Doc, however, was dozens of yards from where they thought. Even his overhauling of the car had not made them realize the incredible speed of which he was capable.

“Git outa here!” Squint shrieked at the car driver.

Terror had seized upon Squint’s rodent soul. He showed it plainly, in spite of a desire to have his companions think him a man of iron nerve. But they were as scared as Squint, and did not notice.

“W-who w-was it?” croaked one of the five.

“How do I know?” Squint snarled. Then, to the driver, “Won’t this heap go any faster?”

The touring car was already doing its limit. Rounding a curve at the end of the factory grounds, it nearly went into the ditch. It turned again, onto the main highway. It headed toward New York, passing in front of the factory buildings.

The speeding machine flashed past a large, powerful roadster. Squint and his companions attached no significance to this car.

But they would have, had they seen the giant bronze man who cleared the factory fence with an incredible leap and sprang into the car. Doc Savage had simply cut back through the factory yard after escaping the machine guns.

Like a thing well trained, Doc’s roadster shot ahead. The exhaust explosions came so fast they arose to a shrill wail. The speedometer needle passed sixty, seventy and eighty.

Doc caught sight of Squint and his four unsavory companions. Their touring car was turning into an approach to George Washington Bridge.

The uniformed toll collector at the New Jersey end of the bridge stepped out to collect his fee. Directly in the path of Squint’s racing car, he stood. He expected the car to halt. When it didn’t, the toll collector gave a wild leap and barely got in the clear.

An instant later, Doc’s roadster also rocketed past.

The toll collector must have telephoned ahead to the other end of the bridge. A cop was out to stop the car.

His shouts and gestures had as much effect as the antics of a cricket before a charging bull. Squint’s car dived into New York City and whirled south.

Doc followed. He slouched low back of the wheel. He had taken a tweed cap from a door pocket and drawn it over his bronze hair. And so expertly did he handle the roadster, keeping behind other machines, that Squint and his companions did not yet know they were being followed. The killers had slowed up, thinking themselves lost in the city.

Behind them, a police siren wailed about like a stricken soul. No doubt it was a motorcycle cop summoned by the bridge watchman. But the officer did not find the trail.

Southward along Riverside Drive, the wide thoroughfare that follows the high bank of the Hudson River, the pursuit led.

Squint's touring car veered into a deserted side street. Old brick houses lined the thoroughfare. Their fronts made a wall the same height the entire length of the block. The entrance of each was exactly like all the others—a flight of steps with ornamental iron railings.

Swerving over to the curb before the tenth house from the corner, the touring car stopped. The occupants looked around. No one was in sight.

The floorboards in the rear of the touring car were lifted. Below was a secret compartment large enough to hold the machine guns. Into this went the weapons.

“Toss your roscoes in there, too!” Squint directed. “We ain't takin' no chances, see! A cop might pick us up, and we'd draw a stretch in stir if we was totin' guns.”

“But what about that—that bronze ghost of a guy?” one muttered uneasily. “Gosh! He looked big as a mountain, and twice as hard!”

“Forget that bird!” Squint had recovered his nerve. He managed a sneering laugh. “He couldn't follow us here, anyway!”

At that instant, a large roadster turned into the street. Of the driver, nothing but a low-pulled tweed cap could be seen.

Squint and his four companions got out of their touring car. To cover shaky knees, they swaggered and spoke in tough voices from the corners of their mouths.

With a low whistle of sliding tires, the big roadster stopped beside the touring car. The whistle drew the eyes of Squint and his rats.

They saw a great form flash from the roadster; a man-figure that was like an animated, marvelously made statue of metal!

Squint wailed, “Hell! The bronze guy——”

“The rods!” squawled another man. They leaped for their guns in the secret recess below the touring car floorboards. But the bronze giant had moved with unbelievable speed. He was between them and their weapons.

Squint and his men gave vent to squeaks of rage and terror. That showed what spineless little bloodsuckers they were. They outnumbered Doc Savage five to one, yet, without their guns, they were like the rats they resembled before the big bronze man.

They wheeled toward the tenth house in the row of dwellings that were amazingly alike. It was as though they felt safety lay there. But Doc Savage, with two flashing sidewise steps, cut them off.

One man tried to dive past. Doc's left arm made a blurred movement. His open hand—a hand on which great bronze tendons stood out as if stripped of skin and softer flesh—slapped against the man's face.

It was as though a steel sledge had hit the fellow. His nose was broken. His upper and lower front teeth were caved inward. The man flew backward, head over heels, limp as so much clothes stuffed with straw.

But he didn't lose consciousness. Perhaps the utter pain of that terrible blow kept him awake.

Doc Savage advanced on the others. He did not hurry. There was confidence in his movements—a confidence that for Squint and his rats was a horrible thing. They felt like they were watching death stalk toward them.

No flicker of mercy warmed the flaky glitter of Doc's golden eyes. Two of these villainous little men had murdered his friend, Jerome Coffern. More than that, they had robbed the world of one of its greatest chemists. For this heinous offense, they must pay.

The three who had not committed the crime directly would suffer Doc's wrath, too. They were hardly less guilty. They would be fortunate men if they escaped with their lives.

It was a hard code, that one of Doc's. It would have curled the hair of weak sisters who want criminals mollicoddled. For Doc handed out justice where it was deserved.

Doc's justice was a brand all his own. It had amazing results. Criminals who went against Doc seldom wound up in prison. They either learned a lesson that made them law-abiding men the rest of their lives—or they became dead criminals. Doc never did the job halfway.

With a frightened, desperate squeak, one man leaped for the car. He tore at the floorboards under which the guns were hidden.

He was the fellow who had helped Squint murder Jerome Coffern.

Doc knew this. Bits of soft earth clinging to the shoes of that man and Squint had told him the ugly fact. The soft earth came from the grounds of the Mammoth factory.

With a quick leap, Doc was upon the killer. His great, bronze hands and corded arms picked the fellow out of the touring car as though he were a murderous little rodent.

The man had secured a pistol. But the awful agony of those metallic fingers crushing his flesh against his bones kept him from using it.

Squint and the others, cowards that they were, sought to reach the tenth house in the row along the street. Lunging and swinging his victim like a club, Doc knocked them back. He was like a huge cat among them.

Squint spun and sped wildly. The other three followed him. They pounded down the street, toward Riverside Drive.

The man Doc held got control over his pain-paralyzed muscles. He fired his gun. The bullet spat the walk at Doc's feet.

Doc slid a bronze hand upward. The victim screamed as steel fingers closed on his gun fist. He kicked—tore at Doc's chest. One of his hands ripped open the pocket where Doc had placed the capsule of metal that had held the substance which dissolved the body of Jerome Coffern.

The capsule of strange metal flipped across the walk. It fell between the iron-barred cracks of a basement ventilator.

Chapter 3

SHIP JUSTICE

Doc Savage saw the metal capsule vanish. He wrenched at the hand of his victim. The pistol the man held was squeezed from the clawlike fist. The fellow had desperate nerve of a sort, now that he was in deadly terror of death. He seized the weapon with his other talon. He jammed the muzzle against Doc's side.

The life of a less agile man than Doc would have come to an end there. But Doc's bronze hand flashed up. It grasped the man's face. It twisted. There was a dull crack and the murderer fell to the walk. A broken neck had ended his career.

Doc could have finished him earlier. He had refrained from doing so for a purpose. Whatever weird substance had dissolved Jerome Coffern's body, a great, if demented scientific brain had developed it. None of these men had such a brain. They were hired killer caliber.

Doc had wanted to question the slayer and learn who employed him. No chance of that now! And Squint and the three others had nearly reached Riverside Drive.

To the iron-barred basement ventilator, Doc sprang. He could see the capsule of strange metal. His great hands grasped the ventilator bars. The metal grille was locked below.

Doc's remarkable legs braced on either side of the ventilator. They became rigid, hard as steel columns. His wonderful arms became tense also. Intermingled with Doc's amazing strength was the fine science of lifting great weights with the human body.

With a loud rusty tearing, the grille was uprooted. Loosened concrete scattered widely.

The feat of strength had taken but a moment. Doc dropped into the ventilator pit. He retrieved the crumpled metal capsule and pocketed it.

Squint and his trio had fled straight across Riverside Drive, dodging traffic. They vaulted the ornamental stone wall that ran along the lip of the high river bank.

Running easily, but making deceptive speed, Doc pursued. He reached the showy stone parapet.

Below him sloped the nearly clifflike river bank. It was so steep that grass and shrubs barely managed to cling. Some hundreds of yards down it and across a railroad track lay the Hudson River.

Squint and his three men were leaping and tumbling headlong in their mad haste.

At this point on the Hudson bank stood a couple of rickety piers. To one of these was anchored an ancient sailing ship. The vessel was quite large, a three-master. It was painted a villainous black color. The hull was perforated with numerous gun ports. From some of these, rusty old muzzle-loading cannon projected blunt snouts.

The old ship had a truculent, sinister appearance. Atop the deck house, a large sign stood. It read:

THE JOLLY ROGER
Former Pirate Ship.
(Admission Fifty Cents)

Doc Savage vaulted the low stone wall. With prodigious leaps, he descended the precipitous slope.

Squint and his trio were racing for the old pirate vessel.

Doc knew from a Sunday newspaper-feature story that the ancient craft had anchored at this spot recently. Curious persons strolling on Riverside Drive, young swains with their girls for the most part, were wont to pay half a dollar to go aboard the unusual ship.

The fiendish instruments of torture the old-time pirates had used on their captives was a chief attraction. The buccaneer craft was supposed to be replete with death traps. Among these was a trapdoor which let an unwary stroller down a certain passage fall upon a bed of upturned swords. It was inoperative now, of course.

Squint and his men gained the pirate ship a dozen yards ahead of Doc. The last man aboard hauled in the rickety timber that served as a gangplank.

But that inconvenienced Doc hardly at all. A great leap carried him up twice the height of a tall man to the rail. He poised there a moment, like a bronze monster.

Squint and the others were diving into the deck house.

Doc dropped aboard.

A revolver cracked from the deck house door. Squint and his men had found weapons inside!

Doc had seen the revolver muzzle appear. Twisting aside and down, he evaded the whizzing bullet. A capstan, of hardwood and iron and thick as a small barrel, sheltered him momentarily. From that, a quick leap sent his bronze form down a gaping deck hatch.

He landed ten feet down, lightly as a settling eagle. Rough, aged planks were underfoot. Doc went aft.

The hold was a gruesome place. It had been fitted up as an exhibit of pirate butchery. Papier-mâché statues of whiskered buccaneers stood about, holding swords. Figures depicting victims sprawled or kneeled on the planking.

Some were beheaded, with puddles of red wax representing gore. Some were minus ears and arms. A likeness of a beautiful woman hung by chains from the ceiling.

Doc traversed a passage. Cutlasses and pikes reposed on pegs on the walls.

Seized with an idea, Doc grasped a pike and a cutlass. There was nothing fake about the weapons. They were genuine heavy steel. The cutlass was razor keen.

Doc retraced his route. He was in time to see one of his ratty quarry peering into the hatch. The villainous fellow got a glimpse of Doc's bronze form. He fired his revolver.

But Doc had moved. The bullet upset an image of a whiskered pirate. An instant later, the pike whizzed from Doc's long arm.

The steel-shod shaft found accurate lodgment in the gun fiend's brain. The man toppled headlong into the hold. His body, crashing to the floor, sent a gruesome papier-mâché head bouncing across the planks.

While the grisly head still rolled, Doc bounded to a spot below the hatch. Faint noises on the deck had reached his keen ears. One or more of the others were near the hatch.

Suddenly a thin claw shoved a revolver over the hatch lip. The gun exploded repeatedly, driving random bullets to various parts of the hold.

Doc's powerful form floated up from the floor. The razor-edged cutlass swished. The hand that held the revolver seemed to jump off the arm to which it belonged. It was completely amputated.

The maimed wretch shrieked. He fell to the deck.

With a second leap, Doc caught the hatch rim with his left hand. The by no means easy feat of flipping his heavy form outside with one hand, he accomplished easily. The handless man groveled on the deck.

The third of Squint's aides was running for the deck house entrance.

Squint himself was just diving into the temporary safety of the deck structure.

The running rat twisted his head and saw Doc. He brought his gun around. But the weapon was far from being in a position to fire when the sharp, heavy cutlass struck him. Doc had thrown it.

The blade ran the gangster through like a steel thorn. He convulsed his parasite life out on the deck.

Squint fired from within the superstructure. He was hasty and missed. As Doc's bronze form bore down upon him, he fled.

Across the first cabin in the deck house was a solid bulkhead and a door. Squint got through the door ahead of Doc. He closed the panel and barred it.

Doc hit the door once. The thick planks were too much for even his terrific strength. A great battle-ax reposed among the array of weapons in the first cabin. Doc could have chopped at the door with it. He didn't. He went back to the ratty fellow who had lost a hand.

The man still groveled on the deck. Doc's golden eyes gave the fellow one appraising glance. Then the big bronze head shook regretfully.

Doc, above all his other accomplishments, was a great doctor and surgeon. He had studied under the masters of medicine and surgery in the greatest clinics until he had learned all they could teach. Then, by his own intense efforts, he had extended his knowledge to a fabulous degree.

Doc's father had trained him from the cradle for a certain goal in life. That goal was a life of service. To go from one end of the world to the other, looking for excitement and adventure, but always helping those who need help, punishing those who deserve it—that was Doc Savage's noble purpose in life. All his marvelous training was for that end. And the training had started with medicine and surgery. At that, of all things, Doc was most expert.

So Doc knew instantly the ratty man was dying. The fellow was a dope addict. The shock of losing the hand was ending a career that would have come to its vile termination within a year or two anyway.

Doc sank beside the man. When the fellow saw he was not to be harmed more, he quieted a little.

“You were hired to kill Jerome Coffern?” Doc asked in a calm, compelling voice.

“No! No!” wailed the dying man. But the expression on his pinched and paling face showed he was lying.

For a moment, Doc said nothing. He exerted the full, strange quality of his golden eyes. Those eyes were warm and comforting now. Doc was making them exert a command for the truth.

It was amazing, the things Doc could do with his eyes. He had studied with the great masters of hypnotism, just as he had studied with famous surgeons. He had even gone to India and the Orient to gain knowledge from the mystic cults of the Far East.

By the time Doc asked his next question, he had exerted such a hypnotic influence upon the dying man that the fellow replied with the truth.

“What is the strange substance that dissolved the body of Jerome Coffern?” Doc prompted.

“It is called the Smoke of Eternity,” whimpered the dying man.

“Of what is it made?”

“I don’t know. None of us know. None of us little guys, that is. The Smoke of Eternity is just given us to use. We never get more than one cartridge at a time. And—we get—get orders of who to use it on.”

The man was about gone. Swiftly, Doc questioned, “Who gives it to you?”

The thin lips parted. The man gulped. He seemed to be trying to speak a name that started with the letter “K.”

But he died before he could voice that name.

Of the five who had gone to New Jersey to slay Jerome Coffern, only Squint was now alive.

A bronze giant of vengeance, Doc made for the stern of the strange old buccaneer ship. Squint was back there somewhere.

A time or two, Doc paused to press an ear to the deck planking. To his supersensitive ears, many sounds came. Wavelets lapped the hull. Rats scurried in the hold. Animal rats, these were.

Finally, Doc heard Squint skulking.

Doc reached a companionway. He eased down it, a noiseless metal shadow that faded into darker shadows below. He came upon a long, heavy timber. It was round, a length of an old spar. It weighed nearly two hundred pounds and was a dozen feet in length, thick as a keg. He carried it along easily.

The spar promptly saved him death or serious injury. He was thinking of what he had read in the Sunday paper. He never forgot things he read.

The article had said there was a trapdoor in a passage which let the unwary upon a bed of upturned swords. He figured Squint might put that death trap in operation again.

Squint had.

So, when a passage floor suddenly opened under his weight, it was not an accident that the twelve-foot spar kept Doc from dropping upon needle-pointed blades below. Probably some old pirate had constructed this trap to bring death to one of his fellows he didn't like.

With a deft swing, Doc got atop the spar. He ran along it to solid footing. Then he picked up the heavy spar again.

Squint had been waiting behind a door at the end of the passage. At the crash of the sprung trapdoor, he let out a loud bark of glee. He thought Doc was finished. Doc heard the bark.

To accommodate him, Doc emitted a realistic moan. It was the kind of a moan a man dying on those upturned swords might have given. It fooled Squint.

He opened the passage door.

Before the door could swing the whole way, Doc hurled the spar. He purposefully missed Squint. The spar burst the door planks with a resounding smash.

Squint spun and fled. He was so terrified he didn't even stop to use his gun.

He must have been surprised when Doc's powerful hands did not fall upon his neck. Probably he considered himself quite a master of strategy when he reached deck without seeing another sign of Doc.

He did not have the sense to know Doc had purposefully let him escape.

Almost at once, Squint quitted the pirate ship. He left furtively. He looked behind often. But not once did he catch sight of the terrible Nemesis of bronze.

"Gave him the slip!" Squint chortled, almost sobbing in his relief.

As he crept away, he continued to look behind. His elation grew. There was no sign of Doc.

Actually, Doc was *ahead* of Squint. Doc had reached the deck and gone ashore in advance of Squint. When the ratty man appeared, the bronze giant kept always ahead or to one side.

Doc hoped Squint would lead him to the sinister master mind who had ordered Jerome Coffern slain.

Chapter 4

THE NEST OF EVIL

Squint climbed up to Riverside Drive. He dodged limousines and taxicabs across the Drive. Turning south a few blocks, he strode rapidly east until he reached Broadway, the sole street which runs the full length of Manhattan Island. A subway lies beneath Broadway nearly the whole distance.

Into this subway, Squint scuttled. He cocked a nickel into the entrance turnstile and waited on the white-tiled station platform. The light was dim. At either end, dark gullets of the tunnel gaped.

Squint felt safe. He had been listening to the entrance turnstile. The turnstiles always gave a loud clank when a customer came through. There had not been a single clank since Squint entered.

A subway train came howling down the tunnel, headlights like bleary red eyes. The roar it made, to which New Yorkers are accustomed, was deafening. At the height of the noise, the entrance turnstile clanked behind Doc Savage's giant, bronze form. Nobody saw him.

Doc saw Squint wait in a car door until the other doors in the train, operated automatically, had all closed. Squint held his own door open against the gentle pull of the automatic mechanism. When he was satisfied no bronze giant had boarded the train, he let the door close. The train moved.

Running lightly, Doc reached an open car window. He dived through it. The train plunged into the tunnel with a great moan.

Squint alighted at Times Square, which might easily be dubbed the crossroads of New York City. He mingled with the dense crowd. He went in one door of a skyscraper and out another. He changed taxis twice going back uptown.

Unseen, his presence even unsuspected by Squint, a great bronze shadow clung to Squint's trail.

Squint wound up on the street which had the long row of houses exactly alike.

Before the tenth house from the corner, a considerable crowd milled. Long since, an ambulance had taken away the body of the ratty man whose neck Doc had been forced to break. However, the police had found the cache of machine guns beneath the floorboards of the touring car. Curious persons were inspecting the vicious weapons.

A cop was getting the motor number of the car.

Squint chuckled. The officers would never trace that machine to him. It had been stolen in a Middle Western State.

"Let 'em try to figure it out!" Squint sneered.

Then his gaze rested on Doc Savage's big, efficient roadster, and his ugly glee oozed. He could see the license number of the car. This was a single figure. Only personages of great importance in New York had such low license numbers.

Squint shivered, thinking of the fearsome giant of bronze. He wondered who that awesome personage could be.

Squint had never heard of Doc Savage, largely because he never read anything but the newspapers, and Doc Savage never appeared in brazen newspaper yarns. In truth, Squint's intelligence was not enough to rate a knowledge of Doc.

But some of the brainiest, most upright citizens of New York could have told Squint amazing things about the big bronze man. More than one of these owed Doc a debt of deepest gratitude for past services.

The leading political boss, the most influential man in the city government, owed his life to Doc's magical skill at surgery. An extremely delicate operation upon the very walls of his heart had taken him from the door of death.

Squint did not enter the tenth house from the corner. He sidled into another several doors distant. He felt his way up a gloomy succession of stairs. A trapdoor gave to the roof. He eased out. Quietly, he closed the trapdoor behind him.

He did not notice it open a fraction of an inch a moment later. He did not dream a pair of flaky gold eyes were photographing his every move.

Squint scuttled across rooftops to the tenth house from the corner. He entered through another hatch on that roof.

He had hardly disappeared when Doc's bronze form was floating over the roofs in pursuit. Doc pressed an ear to the hatch. His aural organs, imbued with a sensitiveness near superhuman, told him Squint had walked down a top-floor passage to the back.

A moment later, a window at the rear opened. Doc was poised above it in an instant. Squint's relieved whisper reached him.

"No chance of anybody listenin' from here!" Squint had breathed.

The window grated down.

With silent speed, Doc was over the roof edge. Even a bat, master of clinging to smooth surfaces, would have had trouble with the wall. Grooves between the bricks furnished the only handholds. Doc's steel-strong bronze fingers found the largest of these.

At the window, there was no perch. But Doc hung by little more than his finger tips. His tireless sinews could support him thus for hours.

A shade had been drawn on the other side of the window. But it was old and cracked. One of these cracks let Doc look into the room.

The window sash fitted poorly. It gaped open at the bottom. Through this space, conversation seeped.

More than a dozen men were assembled in the shabby room. Some were thick-necked and burly. More were thin, with the look of drug addicts in their vicious eyes. And every one had the furtive manner of the confirmed criminal.

They were as choice a devil's dozen as ever held unholy conclave.

Squint stood before them. He was swaggering and punctuating his talk with curses to cover his nervousness.

"Now you mugs pipe down while I call the big shot!" he snarled.

He strode to one wall. The old plaster was a network of jagged cracks. He pressed a certain spot. A secret panel, the edges cleverly disguised by the cracks, opened. Squint took out a telephone instrument.

The phone obviously was not a part of the regular city system, since Squint did not give a number, but began speaking at once.

“Kar?” he asked. “This is Squint.”

Outside the window, Doc Savage’s strong bronze lips formed the word “Kar.” The dying man on the pirate ship, in trying to name the master mind who had given them the mysterious dissolving substance called the “Smoke of Eternity,” had started a name that began with a “K.”

Kar was that name!

“Yeah,” Squint was saying over the secret phone line. “We put old Jerome Coffern out of the way like you ordered.” Squint paused to wet his dry lips nervously, then added, “We—we had a little tough luck.”

Squint was surprisingly modest. His four companions had died violently and he had barely escaped with his life—and he passed it off as a little tough luck!

Replying to a sharp query from Kar, Squint reluctantly explained the nature of the insignificant misfortune.

The outburst the information got from Kar was so violent the rattling of the receiver diaphragm reached even Doc Savage’s ears.

There followed what was evidently a long procession of orders. These were spoken in a low voice by Kar. Doc’s ears, sensitive to the extreme, could not hear a single word.

Squint hung up at last and replaced the phone. He closed the secret panel. Lighting a cigarette, he drew deeply from it, as though seeking courage. Then he faced the assembled thugs.

“Kar says I’m to tell you guys the whole thing,” he said, making his voice harsh. “He says you will work together better if you know what it’s all about. He says it’ll show you birds where your bread is buttered. I guess he’s right, at that.”

Squint paused to blow a plume of smoke at the ceiling. But the smoke apparently reminded him of the weird dissolving of Jerome Coffern’s body. He made a face and flung the cigarette on the floor.

“This is the first time you guys have been here!” he told the men. “Each one of you got the word from me to come to this room. I sent for you. I know every one of you. You’re regular guys. That’s why I’m ringing you in on the best thing you ever saw.”

“Aw, cut out the mush an’ get down to talkin’ turkey!” a thick-necked bruiser growled.

Squint ignored the contemptuous tone of the interruption.

“Sure, I’ll talk turkey!” he sneered. “You just heard me jawin’ to the big shot. His name is Kar. That phone leads to his secret hangout. I don’t know where it is. I don’t even know Kar.”

“You dunno who the chief is?” muttered the thick-necked man.

“Nope.”

“Then how’d you——”

“How’d I get hooked up with him?” Squint chuckled. “I got a telephone call from him. He said he’d heard I was a square shooter, and did I want to get in on the best thing in the world? I did. And I’m tellin’ you it’s good. This proposition is the best ever.”

“What is it?” queried he of the beefy neck.

“How does a million bucks to each of you within a year sound?” Squint demanded dramatically.

Jaws fell. Eyes popped.

“A million——”

“That much anyway!” Squint declared. “Maybe more! The million is guaranteed. You draw fifty thousand of it to-morrow. Fifty grand for each guy! But before I say more, I gotta know if you’re comin’ in.

“I know you mugs can’t afford to run to the police and talk. You’re sure to be rubbed out if you do. And if you come in, you gotta take orders from me. And I get my orders from Kar. I’m sort of a straw boss, see!”

“Count me in!” ejaculated the thug with the ample neck.

Like flies to sugar, the others offered eager allegiance.

“Here’s the lay!” announced Squint. “This fellow Kar has got something he calls the Smoke of Eternity. It’s something nobody ever heard of before. A few drops of it will dissolve a man’s body—make it turn into an ugly gray smoke. The stuff will dissolve brick, metal and wood—almost anything.”

For some seconds the villainous assemblage digested this. It was too much for them to swallow. The big-necked fellow voiced the thoughts of the rest.

“You’re crazy!” he said.

Reddening, Squint swore and shook his fist.

“I ain’t nuts!” he ranted. “The Smoke of Eternity works like that! I dunno what the stuff is. I only know it will dissolve a man. It will wipe the front right off the biggest bank vault there is. Enough of it, about a suitcase full, could turn the Empire State Building into that queer smoke.”

The others were still skeptical.

“Don’tcha see what havin’ such a thing as this Smoke of Eternity means?” Squint snarled. “It means we can walk right into any bank vault in town and take what we want. And listen, you apes! I ain’t crazy—and I ain’t lyin’!”

At this point, a newsboy’s shout penetrated faintly to the room. The news hawker was crying his papers to the crowd of curious in front of the house.

“Body of famous chemist vanishes!” he was screaming. “Mystery baffles police!”

Squint laughed nastily. He leveled an arm at one of his listeners.

“Go buy a paper from that kid!”

The man left obediently. In a moment he was back with a pink tabloid newspaper.

Emblazoned in black scare-type was the story of the finding of Jerome Coffern's right hand and forearm on the grounds of the Mammoth Manufacturing Company plant in New Jersey.

"I guess you'll believe me now!" Squint sneered. "I used some of the Smoke of Eternity on old Jerome Coffern. It dissolved all of his body but the hand. Probably the hand didn't go because there wasn't quite enough of the stuff."

The expression on the evil faces surrounding Squint showed the thugs had changed their minds. They no longer thought Squint was lying or crazy.

"Why'd you rub out this Jerome Coffern?" one villain asked.

"Kar ordered it," said Squint. "Kar told me why, too. Kar believes in lettin' his men know why everything is done. The only thing Kar don't tell is who he is. Nobody knows that. Kar had Jerome Coffern killed because Coffern was the only man alive who might tell the police who Kar is."

"Jerome Coffern knew Kar, huh?" muttered a man.

"He must have." Squint fired another cigarette. "Now, I already got orders for you mugs. A shipment of gold money is goin' to Chicago to-morrow. Some banks out in Chi are hard up and need the jack. There's about two million dollars' worth goin'. A hundred miles out of New York, we jerk up the tracks. We use this Smoke of Eternity to wipe out the bullion guards and get into the armored express car. And out of that two million, each of you guys gets paid your fifty thousand. The rest of the gold coin goes into Kar's workin' fund."

A gasp of evil pleasure swept the group. Mean eyes glittered greedily.

Although Squint had proclaimed that Kar was letting them in on a great deal, they actually knew nothing but the existence of the Smoke of Eternity and the fact they were to rob a gold train.

Who Kar was—they had no idea. Should these men fall into the clutches of the law, they could help the police little even if they told all they knew. True, the gold robbery would be thwarted. But the master villain would still be free.

A faint buzz came from the secret phone. Squint hurried to the instrument. He received more orders from Kar. His thin, repulsive face was worried as he hung up and closed the hidden panel.

"Damn!" he groaned. "Kar has another job for us to do before the gold train thing!"

The others stared at Squint. They could see he was frightened.

"That big bronze devil who gimme such a lot of trouble!" Squint muttered. "Kar says we gotta get him like we did Jerome Coffern! The bronze devil's name is Doc Savage. Kar is plenty mad because I let Doc Savage get on my trail. He says it's the worst thing that coulda happened."

"One guy can't give us much trouble!" sneered the thick-necked thug.

"You wouldn't be so cocky if you'd seen this bronze man work!" Squint whined. "He ain't human! He moves quicker'n a tiger! He popped off my four pals just like you was snappin' your fingers."

“Baloney!” snorted the burly one. “Lead me to ’im! I ain’t never seen the man I couldn’t lick.”

Squint passed a hand over his forehead.

“Beat it, all of you,” he directed. “Go to wherever you live an’ stay there. Kar knows where to get hold of each of you. I told him. Wait for orders from him, or from me.”

As they started leaving, Squint added an afterthought.

“Remember, Kar has got guys besides you an’ me workin’ for him. I dunno myself who they are. But he’s got more. And if one of you squawks to the cops, he’s sure to be bumped off.”

Then the villainous assemblage melted away. None of them would squeal.

Squint remained behind. When left alone, he went to the secret phone.

“I carried out your orders, boss,” he told Kar.

Suddenly there impinged upon the ears of Squint a weird, soft, trilling sound, like the song of a mysterious jungle bird. It was a note without equal anywhere else in the universe, melodious, but possessing no definite tune. It had a unique quality of emanating from everywhere, as though the very air in the shabby room was giving birth to it.

The trilling sound struck terror into Squint’s evil soul. He whirled, not knowing what he would see.

An awful scream tore through his teeth.

For the rickety window had lifted noiselessly. Equally without sound, the shabby curtain had moved aside.

There, poised like some huge bronze bird of vengeance upon the window sill, was Squint’s doom.

“Doc Savage!” the rodent of a man wailed.

Convulsively, Squint clutched for the revolver he had secured aboard the pirate ship.

Doc’s powerful bronze hands seized a table. The table drove across the room as though impelled from a cannon mouth.

Striking Squint squarely, it smashed his worthless life out against the wall. The man’s body fell to the floor amid the table wreckage.

Doc Savage glided to the secret phone. The receiver came to his ear. He listened.

From his lips wafted the weird trilling sound that was part of Doc—the tiny, unconscious thing which he did in moments of absolute concentration. The strange note seemed to saturate and set singing all the air in the room.

Over that secret phone line cracked what sounded like a gulp of terror and rage. Then the receiver hanged up at the other end.

It would probably be a long time before the evil Kar forgot that eerie, trilling sound! It was a thing to haunt the slumber hours!

Chapter 5

JEROME COFFERN'S FRIEND

Doc Savage replaced the receiver of the secret phone. He closed the hidden panel. Silently, he quitted the room as he had entered—through the window. He made his way to the street.

The crowd had thinned. Squint's scream had not been heard. Doc did not go near his roadster, although his sharp eyes detected no sign of Kar's men watching the machine.

Doc strode eastward. He reached the edge of Central Park—that rectangle of beautiful lawns and shrubbery two and a half miles long and half a mile wide which is New York's breathing place. Neat apartment buildings towered along the park.

An old woman held out, hopefully, a bundle of the late newspapers. She was almost blind. Her clothing was shabby. She looked hungry. Doc stopped and took one of the papers.

He looked at the old woman's eyes. His expert diagnosis told him their ailment could be cured by a few great specialists. He wrote a name and address on a corner of the paper, added his own name, and tore this off and gave it to the crone. The name was that of a specialist who could cure her ailment, but whose fee was a small fortune. But at sight of Doc's name scrawled on the note, the specialist would gladly cure the woman for nothing.

Doc added a bill he took from a pocket. For a long time after he had gone, the old, nearly blind woman stared at the bill, holding it almost against her eyes. Then she burst into tears. It was more money than she had ever expected to see.

The little incident had no bearing on Doc's troubles with Kar, except that Doc wanted the paper to see what had been published concerning Jerome Coffern's weird death—which proved to be nothing he did not already know.

It was such a thing as Doc did often. It was part of his creed, the thing to which his life was devoted—remedying the misfortunes of others.

It was a strange thing for a man to do who had just dealt cold and terrible justice to five murderers. But Doc Savage was a strange man, judged by the look-out-for-yourself-and-nobody-else code of a greedy civilization.

Doc turned into one of the largest apartment houses on that side of Central Park. He rode an elevator to the twentieth floor.

Here Jerome Coffern had lived alone in a modest three-room apartment which was filled almost entirely with scientific books.

The locked door quickly yielded to Doc's expert wielding of a small hook which he made by bending the tongue of his belt buckle. He entered. He paused just inside the door, bronze face grim.

His golden eyes noted a number of things.

Jerome Coffern thought a great deal of his books, and he had a habit of arranging them just a certain distance from the rear wall of the bookcase. Yet they had a different arrangement now.

He kept chemicals on his library table, also arranged in a certain fashion. Doc knew the arrangement well. To one who didn't know Coffern, they might look orderly now. But they were not in the right order!

The apartment had been searched!

Swiftly, Doc made a circuit of the place. His nimble fingers, his all-seeing eyes, missed little.

He found the evidence on the typewriter! Jerome Coffern had installed a new ribbon on the machine before starting an extensive document. The machine had written the complete length of the ribbon, then back a considerable distance. But where it had not overwritten, the lettered imprint of the keys was discernible.

Doc read:

STATEMENT TO THE POLICE.

In view of a recent incident when a bullet came near me, I have come to the conclusion an attempt is being made to murder me. Furthermore, I suspect my alleged assailant of being guilty of at least one other murder. I realize I should have gone to the authorities earlier, but the very fantastic, horrible, and ghastly nature of the thing led me to doubt my own suspicions.

Herewith is my story:

Nearly a year ago, I went on a scientific expedition to New Zealand with Oliver Wording Bittman, the taxidermist, and Gabe Yuder. From New Zealand, a trip to Thunder Island was——

And there, to Doc's disgust, it ended. The rest was illegible. But Jerome Coffern had obviously written it.

Doc continued his search. Jerome Coffern had been a man of few intimate friends. In his personal papers was no reference to any one called Kar.

Oliver Wording Bittman, Doc recalled, was a taxidermist who made a specialty of preparing rare animals for museums. But the name of Gabe Yuder was unfamiliar.

Doc knew the address of Oliver Wording Bittman. It was an apartment house two blocks southward along Central Park.

Doc Savage, unable to find anything else of interest, hurried to interview Oliver Wording Bittman. There was a chance Bittman might have heard of Kar, through Jerome Coffern.

As Doc rode up in an elevator of Bittman's apartment building, he mentally assembled what he knew of the taxidermist.

The material his memory yielded was all favorable to Oliver Wording Bittman. The man's name was not unknown. He had a sizable display of rare animal life in the Smithsonian Institution. Walls of several famous clubs and hostelryes were adorned with trophies he had mounted.

Best of all, Doc recalled his father had once spoken favorably of Bittman.

The taxidermist himself opened the door.

Oliver Wording Bittman was a man nearly as tall as Doc. But he was thin—so very thin that he looked like a skeleton and a few hard muscles. If a prominent jaw denotes character, Bittman had plenty. His jaw was strikingly large.

Bittman had dark, determined eyes. His hair was dark. His skin had been burned by the wind and sun of many climes. He wore a brown, well-cut business suit. Lounging mules were on his bony, efficient feet.

The only jewelry he wore was a watch-chain across his waistcoat front. One end of this secured a timepiece. To the other end was fastened a small implement which at first glance looked like a penknife. Actually, it was a razor-edged taxidermist scalpel for skinning specimens.

Bittman twirled this scalpel about a forefinger.

“You are Doc Savage!” he greeted Doc instantly. “I am indeed honored.”

Doc admitted his identity, but wondered how Bittman knew him. Bittman must have guessed the question.

“You may wonder how I knew you,” the taxidermist smiled. “Come into the library and I will show you the answer.”

They moved through the apartment.

Oliver Wording Bittman certainly considered his own work decorative. And in truth, the fellow was an expert in his line. Many scores of rare animal trophies adorned the walls. A great Alaskan Kadiak bear stood in a corner, astoundingly lifelike. Skin rugs made an overlapping carpet underfoot. The workmanship on all these was fine.

They came to a large picture framed on the wall. In the lower left corner of the picture reposed a portion of a letter.

The picture was of Doc Savage’s father. The resemblance between parent and son was marked.

Doc stepped nearer to read the letter.

It was a missive from his own father to Oliver Wording Bittman. It read:

To you, my dear Oliver, I can never express my thanks sufficiently for the recent occasion upon which you quite certainly saved my life. Were it not for your unerring eye and swift marksmanship, I should not be penning this.

Before me as I write, I have the skin of the lion which would surely have downed me but for your quick shooting, and which you so kindly consented to mount. It just arrived. The workmanship is one of the best samples of the taxidermist art I ever beheld. I shall treasure it.

I shall treasure also my association with you on our recent African expedition together. And may the best of the world be yours.

Sincerely,

CLARK SAVAGE, SR.

The note moved Doc Savage deeply. The death of his father was still a fresh hurt. This had occurred only recently. The elder Savage had been murdered.

It had done little to assuage the pain when Doc himself took up the trail of the murderer, a trail that led to Central America, and ended in a stroke of cold justice for the killer, as well as perilous adventures for Doc and five friends who had accompanied him.

Doc offered his hand to Bittman.

“Whatever debt of gratitude my father owed you,” he said feelingly, “you can consider that I also owe you.”

Bittman smiled and took the hand in a firm clasp.

In a very few minutes the conversation got around to Oliver Wording Bittman’s acquaintance with Jerome Coffern.

“I knew Coffern, yes,” said Bittman. “We went on that New Zealand expedition together. You say he is dead? What a shock! His murderers should be made to suffer!”

“Five of them have already done that,” Doc replied grimly. “But the master mind who ordered Coffern’s murder is still at large. He must pay the penalty!”

“He is a man I know only as Kar. I was hoping you might yield some information. Or if not, perhaps you can inform me where Gabe Yuder, the other member of the expedition, can be found.”

Oliver Wording Bittman toyed with the scalpel on his watch chain. His eyes were veiled in deep thought.

“Gabe Yuder!” he muttered. “I wonder—could he be the man? He was an unsavory chap. I have no idea what became of him after our return. He remained in New Zealand—intending to return here later.”

“Will you describe Gabe Yuder?”

Around and around Bittman’s finger flew the scalpel. He spoke in clipped sentences, giving an excellent description.

“Gabe Yuder was a young man, under thirty. He was robust, an athletic type. He had a red face. His mouth was big. The lower lip was cleft by a knife scar. His eyes were always bloodshot. They were a pale gray. They reminded you of a snake’s undersides. His hair was sandy, a sort of mongrel color.

“Yuder had a loud, coarse voice. He had an overbearing manner. His knuckles were scarred from knocking people about. He would strike a native at the slightest provocation. And he was a combination of chemist and electrical engineer by trade. He went along with us to prospect for petroleum.”

“He does sound rather villainous,” Doc admitted. “Can you tell me anything about this Smoke of Eternity?”

“The Smoke of Eternity? What is that?” queried Bittman, looking puzzled.

Doc debated. There was no reason why he should not tell Bittman of the terrible dissolving compound that had destroyed Jerome Coffern. Besides, Bittman had been friend to Doc’s father.

So Doc explained what the Smoke of Eternity was.

“Good heavens!” Bittman groaned. “Such a thing is incredible! No! I can’t tell you the slightest thing about it.”

“Did you note anything suspicious about Gabe Yuder’s actions on the New Zealand expedition?”

Oliver Wording Bittman thought deeply, then nodded.

“Yes, now that I think of it. Here is what happened: Our expedition split in two parts when we reached New Zealand. I remained in New Zealand to gather and mount samples of the island bird life for a New York museum. Yuder and Jerome Coffern chartered a schooner and sailed with Yuder’s plane to an island some distance away.”

“A plane?” Doc interposed.

“I neglected to tell you,” Bittman said hastily. “Yuder is also a flyer. He took a plane along on the expedition. Some American oil company was financing him.”

“What was the name of the island to which Yuder and Jerome Coffern went?” Doc asked.

“Thunder Island.”

Thunder Island!

Doc’s bronze brow wrinkled as he groped in his memory. There were few spots in the world, however outlying, upon which he did not possess at least general information.

“As I recall,” Doc continued, “Thunder Island is nothing but the cone of an active volcano projecting from the sea. The sides of the cone are so barren they support no vegetation whatever. And great quantities of steam come continually from the active crater.”

“Exactly,” corroborated Bittman. “Jerome Coffern told me he flew over the crater once with Yuder. The crater was a number of miles across, but the whole thing seemed filled with steam and fumes. They brought back specimens from the cone, however. Jerome Coffern turned them over to the largest college of geology in New York City.”

“We’re getting off the trail,” Doc declared. “You said you noted something suspicious about Yuder’s actions. What was it?”

“After he and Jerome Coffern returned from Thunder Island, Yuder was surly and furtive. He acted like he had a secret, now that I think back. But at the time, I thought he was in an ill temper because he had found no oil, although he scouted Thunder Island the whole time Jerome Coffern was there gathering specimens.”

“Hm-m-m,” Doc murmured.

“I’m afraid that does not help much,” Bittman apologized.

“It’s too soon to say.”

Doc thought briefly. Then he nodded at the telephone.

“May I make a call from here?”

“Of course!”

Arising hastily, Bittman left the room. This politeness was to show he had no desire to listen in on Doc’s phone talk.

Doc called a number.

“Monk?” he asked.

A mild, pleasant voice replied, “Sure thing, Doc.”

That mild voice was a deceptive thing. A listener would not have dreamed it could come from the kind of a man who was at the other end of the wire. For the speaker was Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair.

He was a two-hundred-and-sixty-pound human gorilla. He was one of the roughest and toughest and most likable and homely men ever to live. Monk was also one of the few chemists in the world who could be considered a greater expert in that line than poor, unfortunate Jerome Coffern.

Monk was one of five men who accompanied Doc Savage on his amazing jaunts in pursuit of adventure. These five, like Doc, were giving their lives to traveling about the world and righting wrongs and handing out their own brand of justice. Whatever excitement turned up in the course of that pursuit—and there was always plenty—they gobbled up and liked it. How they liked it!

“Monk,” Doc suggested, “could you take on a little trouble right now?”

“I’m on my way!” chuckled Monk. “Where do I find this trouble?”

“Call Renny, Long Tom, Johnny and Ham,” Doc directed. “All of you show up at my place right away. I think I’m mixed up in something that will make us all hump.”

“I’ll get hold of them,” Monk promised.

Doc stood by the phone a moment after hanging up. He was thinking of his five friends, “Monk,” “Renny,” “Long Tom,” “Johnny,” and “Ham.” They were probably the most efficient five men ever to assemble for a definite purpose. Each was a world-famed specialist in a particular line.

Renny was a great engineer, Long Tom an electrical wizard, Johnny an archaeologist and geologist, and Ham one of the cleverest lawyers Harvard ever turned out. The gorillalike Monk, with his magical knowledge of chemistry, completed the group.

They had first assembled during the Great War, these adventurers. The love of excitement held them together. Not a one of the five men but owed his very life to the unique brain and skill of Doc.

With Doc Savage, scrapper above all others, adventurer supreme, they formed a combination which could accomplish marvels.

Doc went in search of Oliver Wording Bittman. He found the famous taxidermist in an adjoining room and thanked him for use of the phone.

“I must take my departure now,” he finished. “I should like greatly, though, to discuss at some time your association with my father. And any service I can perform for you, a friend of my father’s, a man who saved his life, I shall gladly do.”

Oliver Wording Bittman shrugged. “My saving of your father’s life was really no feat at all. I was simply there and shot a lion as it charged. But I would be delighted to talk at length with you. I admire you greatly. Where could I get in touch with you?”

Doc gave the address of a downtown New York skyscraper which towered nearly a hundred stories—a skyscraper known all over the world because of its great height.

“I occupy the offices formerly used by my father on the eighty-sixth floor,” Doc explained.

“I have been there,” Bittman smiled. “I shall look you up.” He gestured at an extension telephone. “May I not call you a taxi?”

Doc shook his head. “I’ll walk. I want to do some thinking.”

Down on the street once more, Doc strode across traffic-laden Central Park West and entered the Park itself. He followed the pedestrian walk, angling southeast. He did not try to make haste.

His remarkable brain was working at top speed. Already, it had evolved a detailed plan which he would put in operation as soon as he met his five friends at the skyscraper office.

High overhead, a plane was droning. Doc looked up as a matter of course, for few things happened around him that he did not notice.

The craft was a cabin seaplane, a monoplane, single-motored. And it was painted green. It circled, seemingly bound nowhere.

Doc dismissed it from his thoughts. Planes circling over New York City were a more common sight than the discovery of an ordinary horsefly.

The walk he traversed descended steeply. It crossed a long, narrow bridge over a Park lagoon. The bridge was of rustic log construction.

Doc reached the bridge middle.

Unexpected things then happened.

With a loud bawl of exhaust stacks, the seaplane above dived. Straight down it came. There was murderous purpose in its plunge.

Doc Savage did not have time to race to the end of the bridge. Had he done so successfully, there was no shelter to be had.

A bronze flash, Doc whipped over the rustic railing. He slid under the bridge.

An object dropped from the plane. It was hardly larger than a baseball.

This thing struck the bridge squarely above where Doc had gone over.

A gush of vile grayish smoke arose. With incredible speed, the bridge began dissolving!

Chapter 6

THE MISSING MAN

The weird phenomenon, as the rustic bridge was wiped out by the fantastic Smoke of Eternity, was even more striking than had been the dissolution of Jerome Coffern's body.

The metallic capsule bearing the Smoke of Eternity had splashed the strange stuff some distance in bursting. A great section of the bridge seemed to burn instantly. But there was no flame, no heat.

The play of electrical sparks was very marked, however. In such volume did they flicker that their noise was like the sound of a rapidly running brook.

The Smoke of Eternity, after passing through and destroying the bridge, next dissolved the water below. So rapidly did the eerie substance work that a great pit appeared in the surface of the lagoon.

Water rushing to fill this pit, formed a current like a strong river.

It was that current which offered Doc Savage his only real threat. For Doc had not lingered under the bridge. With scarcely a splash, he had cleaved beneath the surface. Guessing what was to come, he swam rapidly away.

Doc's lungs were tremendous. He could readily stay under water twice as long as a South Sea pearl diver, and such men have been known to remain under several minutes. He swam rapidly down the lagoon, keeping close to the bottom and stroking powerfully to vanquish the current.

Overhead, the seaplane circled again and again. The only occupant, the pilot, peered out anxiously.

"Got him!" the vicious fellow chortled. "Easy money, the twenty grand Kar is payin' me for this!"

The murderous pilot did not dream Doc Savage could have escaped. He had no comprehension of Doc's physical powers.

But he had been warned to make absolutely certain. He circled continuously above the lagoon, eyes roving like a vulture's.

Under an overhanging bush, a full hundred yards from the bridge, Doc's bronze head broke water. He came up so smoothly that there was no splash.

The killer pilot of the seaplane did not see Doc glide into the shrubbery, although he was staring mightily.

An onlooker would have remarked a striking thing about Doc as he came out of the water. Doc's straight bronze hair showed no traces of moisture. It was disarrayed. It seemed to shed water like the proverbial duck's back. Nor did moisture cling to Doc's fine-textured bronze skin.

This was but another of the strange things about this unusual metallic giant of a man.

Near by stood a Park policeman. The officer was goggling at the spiraling plane. He had seen the baseball-sized bomb drop. He had witnessed the upheaval of queer gray smoke.

The cop was trying to think what to do about it! Nothing like this had ever happened before.

The officer fingered the grip of his revolver. Then the revolver was spirited from under his fingers. He had heard no one come near. Wildly, he turned.

Even as he spun, the revolver banged itself empty of cartridges. The shots came so rapidly as to be a single thunderous *whurr-r-ram!*

The circling seaplane gave a wild lurch. A wing sank. It nearly crashed. The pilot was wounded. But he fought the ship to an even keel. The plane scudded away like a shot-splattered duck.

The policeman suddenly found his warm, smoking gun back in his hand. He had a dizzy vision of a great bronze form in dripping clothes. He even noted the bronze man's face and hair seemed perfectly dry, although his clothing was saturated.

Then the giant was gone into the shrubbery. And there was no sound to show from whence he had come, or where he had betaken himself.

The cop looked into the bushes and saw nobody. He gulped a time or two and wiped sweat off his brow.

“Goshamighty!” he managed to croak at last.

At the Fifth Avenue side of Central Park, Doc Savage got into a taxicab. It hurried him southward. Before a towering, gleaming spike of brick and steel, the machine let him out. Streets here were walled by buildings so tall the sunlight only reached the sidewalks at high noon.

An elevator raced Doc up to the eighty-sixth floor. He entered a sumptuously furnished reception room. No one was there. He went to the next room. This was a library, a chamber which contained thousands of the finest technical tomes.

Into another and much larger room, Doc went. This was the laboratory. Marble and glass-topped work tables were everywhere. Scores of huge steel-and-glass cases held chemicals, rare metals, test tubes, siphons, mortars, retorts, tubing and apparatus of which only Doc knew the use. No one was there.

This laboratory was exceeded for completeness by only one on earth—the one which Jerome Coffern had told his fellow chemists that Doc must visit to conduct his great experiments uninterrupted. Jerome Coffern's guess had been right.

Doc had another laboratory, vaster even than this. It was at the spot he called his “Fortress of Solitude.” This was built upon a rocky island far within the arctic circle. No one but Doc knew its location. And when he was there, no word from the outside world could ever reach him. It was to his Fortress of Solitude that Doc retired periodically to study and experiment and increase his fabulous store of knowledge.

Convinced none of his five friends had as yet arrived, Doc returned to the reception room. He stripped and donned dry clothes which he got from a cleverly concealed locker.

Doc's frame, stripped, was an amazing thing. He had the muscles of an Atlas. They were not knotty, but more like bundled piano wire lacquered a deep bronze color. The strength and symmetry of that great form was such as to stun an onlooker.

Suddenly there came an interruption.

Wham!

The report was loud. With a rending of wood, the thick panel of the outer door caved inward, propelled by an enormous fist. That fist was composed of an ample gallon of knuckles. They looked like solid, rusty iron. And it would have taken a very big and violent mule to do as much damage to that door as they had done.

The fist withdrew.

A man now opened what was left of the door and came in. He was at least six feet four in height, and would weigh two fifty. The man resembled an elephant, with his sloping, gristle-heaped shoulders.

He had a severe, puritanical face. His eyes were dark, somber and forbidding. His mouth was thin and grim and pinched together as though he disapproved of something.

This was Colonel John Renwick. Every one called him "Renny." He was honored throughout the world for his accomplishments as a civil engineer.

Renny looked like he was coming to a funeral. Actually, he was literally rolling in joy. His popping out the panel of the door showed that. It was a trick Renny did when he felt good. And the better he felt, the more sour he looked.

"Where's this trouble you was tellin' Monk about?" he asked Doc.

Doc Savage chuckled. "It'll keep until the others get here. I'll tell you all together."

Soon two men could be heard haranguing each other loudly in the corridor.

"You can't tell me nothing about electronic refraction, you skinny galoot!" shouted a belligerent voice. "Electricity is my business!"

"I don't give a snap if it is!" retorted another voice. "I'm telling you what I read about electronic refraction. I know what I read, and it was in an article you wrote. You made a mistake——"

There was a loud slamming noise. A man came flying into the room, propelled by a vigorous toe.

This man was tall and gaunt, with a half-starved look. His shoulders were like a clothes hanger under his coat.

He was William Harper Littlejohn. The year before, he had won a coveted international medal for his work in archæology.

"What's the trouble now, Johnny?" Doc inquired.

Johnny got up from the floor, laughing.

"Long Tom wrote an article for a technical magazine and he made a mistake any ten-year-old kid could catch," Johnny chuckled. "He hasn't seen the article since it got in print, and he won't believe me."

Snorting loudly, an undersized, slender man came in from the corridor. He had a complexion that was none too healthy. His hair was pale, his eyes a faded blue. He

looked like a physical weakling. He wasn't, though. It had taken a lusty kick to propel Johnny inside.

The undersized man was Major Thomas J. Roberts on the official records, but Long Tom to everybody else. He had done electrical experiments with Steinmetz and Edison. He was a wizard with the juice.

"Where's Ham and Monk?" Long Tom asked. "And where's this trouble? I'm gonna tear an arm off Johnny if I don't get some excitement pretty quick."

"Here comes Ham," Doc offered.

Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks now appeared. He was a waspish, swift-moving, slender man. Of all the lawyers Harvard had sent forth from its legal department, it was most proud of Ham. He was an amazingly quick-witted man.

Ham's dress was the ultra in sartorial perfection. Not that he was flashily clad, for he had too good taste for that. But he had certainly given his attire a lot of attention.

Ham carried a black, severe-looking cane with a gold band. This was in reality a sword cane, a blade of keenest Damascus steel sheathed within the black metal tube.

Ham also was eager for action.

They waited for Monk to appear.

Monk was the fifth of Doc's friends. He had a penthouse chemical laboratory and living quarters downtown, near Wall Street. He should have arrived by now.

They were remarkable men, these adventurers. A lesser man than Doc Savage could never have held their allegiance. But to Doc, they gave their absolute loyalty. For Doc was a greater engineer than Renny, a more learned archæologist than Johnny, an electrical wizard exceeding even Long Tom, a more astute man of law than Ham, and he could teach Monk things about chemistry. Too, each of the five owed his life to Doc, thanks to some feat of the bronze man on the field of battle, or the magic of Doc's surgery.

As time passed, they began to exchange uneasy glances.

"Now I wonder what has happened to that ugly ape, Monk?" Ham muttered.

Doc called Monk's downtown penthouse place. Monk's secretary—she was one of the prettiest secretaries in New York City—informed him that Monk had left some time ago.

Doc hung up.

"I'm afraid, brothers, that Kar has got his hands on Monk," he said slowly.

Chapter 7

THE UNDERWATER LAIR

Doc was right.

Monk wasted little time after receiving Doc's call. He shucked off his rubber work apron. He had a chest fully as thick as it was wide. He put on a coat especially tailored with extra long sleeves. Monk's arms, thick as kegs, were six inches longer than his legs. Only five feet and a half in height, Monk weighed two hundred and sixty pounds.

His little eyes twinkled like stars in their pits of gristle as he gave his secretary a few orders about his correspondence. Monk knew he might be away six months—or only an hour.

An elevator hurried him down from his penthouse establishment. The elevator operator and the clerk at the cigar stand both grinned widely at the homely Monk. They admired and liked him.

Each carried a pocket piece presented by Monk. These were silver half-dollars which Monk had folded in the middle with his huge, hairy, bare hands.

Monk purchased a can of smoking tobacco and a book of cigarette papers. He rolled his own. Then he left the building.

He headed for a nearby subway. The subways offer the quickest, most traffic free transportation in New York City.

A slender, sallow-skinned weasel of a man fell in behind Monk. The fellow was foppishly clad. He kept a hand in a coat pocket.

Monk's forehead was so low as to be practically nonexistent. This characteristic is popularly supposed to denote stupidity. It didn't in Monk. He was a highly intelligent man.

Monk's sharp eyes noted the foppish man trailing him. He saw the weasel-like fellow's reflection in a plate-glass window of a store.

Monk stopped sharply. His monster hand whipped back. It grasped the knot which the weasel man's claw made in his coat pocket. Monk twisted. The weasel man's coat tore half off. Skin was crushed from his hand. And Monk got the long-barreled revolver which the fellow had been holding in the pocket.

The foppish man staggered into a deserted entryway, propelled by a hirsute paw. Monk crowded against him and held him there.

Both Monk's great hands gripped the revolver barrel. They exerted terrific force. Slowly, the barrel bent until it was like a hairpin.

Monk gave the weasel man back his gun.

"Now you can shoot!" he rumbled pleasantly. "Maybe the bullet will turn around and hit the guy it oughta hit!"

Monk was something of a practical jokester.

The weasel man threw down his useless weapon. He tried to escape. He was helpless in the clutch of this human gorilla.

“Guess I’ll take you along and let Doc Savage talk to you,” Monk said amiably.

Monk hauled his prisoner out onto the walk.

“Hold it, you missin’ link!” snarled a coarse voice.

Monk started and stared at the curb.

A sedan had pulled up there. Four villainous looking men occupied it. They had automatic pistols and submachine guns pointed at Monk.

“Get in here!” rasped one of them.

Monk could do two things. He could put up a fight—and certainly get shot. Or he could enter the car.

He got in the sedan.

The instant Monk was seated in the machine, manacles were clicked upon his arms and legs. Not one pair—but three! His captors were prepared to cope with Monk’s vast strength.

Monk began to wish he had taken his chances in a fight.

The sedan wended through traffic. It passed a couple of cops. Monk kept silent. To shout an alarm would have meant the death of those policemen, as well as his own finish. Monk knew men. This was a crew of killers which had him.

The weasel man whose gun Monk had bent was in the car. He cursed the big prisoner and kicked him. Monk said nothing. He did not resist. But he marked the weasel man for a neck-wringing if the opportunity presented.

Rolling on a less used street, the sedan reached the water front. The district was one of rotting piers and disused warehouses on the East River.

The motor of an airplane could be heard out on the river.

The sedan halted. Monk was yanked out.

He saw the plane now. A seaplane, it was painted green.

The seaplane pilot tossed a line. His craft was hauled carefully to one of the old piers.

They dumped Monk in the plane cabin.

The pilot, Monk saw now, had a crimson-soaked bandage about his forehead, and another around his left arm. He was a squat fellow, much too fat. He had mean eyes.

Monk’s captors looked curiously at the pilot’s wounds.

“How’d you get plinked?” one asked.

The pilot vented a snarl of rage. He pointed at several bullet holes in the control compartment.

“Doc Savage!” he gritted. “The bronze devil popped up after I thought I’d finished him! He nearly got me!”

Monk grinned at this. He had iron nerves. If Doc Savage was after this gang, the villainous fellows were in for a brisk time indeed. Monk tested his strength against his manacles. They were too much for him.

“Take the big guy to—you know where!” directed one of the men who had occupied the car.

The pilot indicated a radio receiving set in the plane.

“Sure,” he said. “I know where he’s goin’. Kar gimme my orders over the short-wave radio set.”

He opened the throttle. With a moan from the exhaust pipes, the seaplane taxied about. It raced across the river surface and took the air.

Monk was prepared for an extensive air journey. He was fooled. The seaplane circled over Brooklyn, then across the harbor. It went nearly as far south as the Statue of Liberty. Banking north, it flew up the Hudson River.

The craft descended to the water near the beginning of Riverside Drive. It taxied slowly along the surface, close inshore.

Rearing up in the cabin, Monk was able to peer through the windows.

Near by and directly ahead stood a couple of rickety piers. To one of these was anchored a large, ancient three-masted sailing ship. The black, somber hull of this strange craft was pierced with cannon ports.

On top of the superstructure reared a big sign, reading:

THE JOLLY ROGER
Former Pirate Ship.
(Admission Fifty Cents)

It was the same craft upon which Doc Savage had cornered Squint and his companions. Monk, however, had no way of knowing this.

From the smokestack of the cookhouse, or galley, poured dense black smoke. This smudge was rapidly settling to the water about the old corsair craft.

Soon the vessel was completely hidden. The darksome pall spread to cover the river out a considerable distance from the ship.

Directly into this unusual smoke screen taxied the seaplane.

The floats of the craft were suddenly seized and held. Monk perceived several men had grasped the plane. These men were standing upon something. Monk craned his neck to see what it was.

His little eyes popped in astonishment.

Under the concealment of the smoke screen, a great steel tank of a thing had come up from the deep river bed. This was in the nature of a submarine, but without conning tower or engines and propellers.

A steel hatch gaped open in the middle of the tank. Into this hatch Monk was hauled.

The seaplane taxied away. The hatch closed. The tank of a submarine sank beneath the surface, submerging after the fashion of a genuine U-boat.

The whole operation had been blanketed by the smoke screen. An observer would not have dreamed a man had been shifted from the plane to a strange underwater craft

which now rested on the river bed.

Kar's men dragged Monk into a tiny steel chamber.

For a minute or two, the loud, sobbing gurgling of water entering the ballast tanks persisted. The submersible rolled a little, then settled solidly on the river bottom. One of the gang now spun metal wheels. These, no doubt, controlled valves.

The interior of the strange craft became quiet as a tomb, except for a monotonous *drip-drip-drip* of a leak somewhere.

The men were taking no chance on Monk's escape. Three of them stood apart and kept pistols pointed at him.

One fellow picked up an ordinary telephone. This obviously was connected to a wire that led ashore, probably along the cable which must anchor this unusual vessel.

"Kar," he said into the mouthpiece. "We got the big guy here now."

So quiet was the interior of the steel cell that the metallic voice from the receiver diaphragm was plainly audible to every one.

"Let me talk to him," Kar commanded.

The receiver was jammed against Monk's scarred ear, but tilted so the others could hear. They held the mouthpiece a few inches from his lips.

"Well, say your piece!" Monk roared.

"You will speak with civility!" snarled the voice from the phone.

Monk blew air out between his lips and tongue, making a loud and insulting noise known variously as the Bronx cheer and the razzberry.

He was kicked in the barrel of a chest for his performance.

"I fear you are going to come to an unfortunate end very soon," Kar sneered silkily.

Monk's brain was working rapidly, despite his rowdiness. This voice had an ugly, unreal rasp. He knew Kar must be pulling his mouth out of shape with a finger as he spoke, thus disguising his voice.

"What d'you want?" Monk demanded.

"You will write a note to your friend and chief, Doc Savage. The note will tell him to meet you at a certain spot."

Monk snorted. "You want me to lead Doc into your trap, eh? Nothin' stirrin'!"

"You refuse?"

"You guessed it!"

There ensued a brief silence. Kar was thinking.

"Give me the addresses of the men you call Renny, Long Tom, Johnny, and Ham!" he commanded. "I learned from a chemical supply firm where you lived. That is how my men came to be waiting for you to appear. But I could not find where the other four of your friends reside. You will give me that information!"

"Sure," Monk growled. "Just watch me do it!"

Then his pug nose wrinkled as he thought deeply. He asked a question: "How did you know our names? How did you find Renny, Long Tom, Johnny, Ham, and I always join Doc Savage when he tackles trouble?"

Kar's voice rattled an ugly laugh.

"The information was simple to obtain!"

"I'll bet it was!" Monk snorted. "Not many people know we work together!"

"I already knew that Doc Savage has his New York headquarters on the eighty-sixth floor of a skyscraper," Kar rasped. "I simply sent one of my men to strike up a conversation with the elevator operators of that skyscraper. My man learned you five men were often with Doc Savage. He wormed your nicknames from the elevator operators."

"What's behind all this?" Monk questioned.

Monk did not, of course, know anything about Kar's sinister purpose. He did not even know of the existence of the weird and horrible Smoke of Eternity.

"Doc Savage has interfered with my plans!" Kar gritted. "He must die! You five who are his friends would try to avenge his death. So you also must die!"

"You don't know what you're tryin' to do!" Monk declared.

"I do!"

"Oh, no, you don't! You'd be runnin' like hell if you knew what a terror Doc Savage is when he gets on the trail of a snake like you!"

This drew a loud snarl from Kar. "I do not fear Doc Savage!"

"Which shows you ain't got good sense!" Monk chuckled.

"Put him in the death chamber!" Kar commanded angrily.

The telephone was plucked from Monk's furry hands. He was hauled aft.

Evidently Kar was enough of a judge of character to realize he could never force Monk to lead Doc Savage into a death trap. So he was going to get rid of Monk immediately.

One of the men twisted metal dogs which secured a hatchlike steel panel in a wall of the submerged tank. This swung back. It revealed a box riveted to the hull. The box had the dimensions of a large trunk. It barely accommodated Monk's bulk as he was jammed inside.

At the end of the box was another steel hatch. But this was obviously secured tightly on the outside.

A small petcock protruded from the box ceiling. One of Kar's men opened this with a key. He fitted a grille over it.

A thin stream of water entered.

The hatch into the tanklike craft clanked shut. The dogs rattled loudly as they were secured.

Monk flounced about, wrenching at his manacles. He could not snap them with all his prodigious effort.

He tried to stop the inrush of water through the petcock. He failed. The petcock construction was such that he could not block it, due to the grille covering.

The water had risen above his ankles by now. The clammy wetness was like the creep of death.

Monk beat the steel plates of the outer hatch with his shackled legs. They held. Nothing less than nitroglycerin could shatter them.

Steadily, the water crawled upward. The minutes were passing with agonizing speed for Monk. He perspired. His brain raced. He could evolve no possible scheme of escape.

The river water now covered his mouth. He had his head rammed tightly against the roof plates. It could go no higher. Over his upper lip, the deadly liquid sloshed.

After the fashion of a diver, Monk determined to take a couple of quick inhalations, then draw in a lungful of air. He was going to hang on as long as he could.

But with the first indraw of air, water was sucked into his lungs.

Gagging, choking, he sank helplessly to the bottom plates.

Monk was drowning! There was nothing he could do to save himself; no way to inform Doc to get aid.

However, while Monk had been taken captive, during the time required for the trip up the river, Doc Savage was not idle. Monk's failure to appear was evidence that something was wrong—and Doc never let anything stay wrong for long!

Chapter 8

THE TRAIL

"I'm afraid, brothers, that Kar has got his hands on Monk," Doc Savage said slowly.

"Nothing less could have kept the big ape from showing up here," agreed Ham, the waspish, quick-thinking lawyer. He made an angry, baffled gesture with his innocent-looking black sword cane.

Below the eighty-sixth floor window of the skyscraper office, the inspiring panorama of New York City spread. They were beautiful, impressive things, those gigantic, gleaming spires of office buildings. From that height, automobiles on the street looked like little, sluggish bugs moving along.

Doc lifted a bronze hand. He got instant attention. Ham, Renny, Long Tom, and Johnny knew this signal meant Doc was about to start his campaign of action.

To Long Tom, the electrical wizard, came the first commands.

Doc gave Long Tom the address of that tenth house in a row of dwellings that were all alike. He told the exact secret wall recess.

"I want you to trace that phone wire," Doc explained. "It was not installed by the regular telephone company. Kar must have put it in himself. It leads to some secret lair of Kar's. I want you to follow it to that lair."

"Sure," said Long Tom. "I'll use a——"

"I know what you'll use," Doc interposed. "The apparatus is right here in my laboratory. You can find it!"

Long Tom hurried into the great laboratory room. He selected two boxes. They were replete with vacuum tubes, dials and intricate coils. They might have been radio sets, because one was equipped with head phones. But they weren't.

One box held an apparatus which created a high-frequency electric current. When this current was placed upon a telephone wire, it would make no sound audible to the human ear. But it would throw an electrical field about the wire. This field extended a considerable distance.

The other box was an "ear" for detecting this field. Using it, Long Tom could walk about with the head phones upon his head. The phones would give a loud squeal when he brought the "ear" within proximity of the wire charged with his peculiar current.

The wire might be buried yards underground, but the "ear" would detect its presence anyway. Nor would brick walls interfere with the sensitive detector.

Long Tom hurried out with his equipment. He took a taxi for the tenth house in the row of similar houses uptown.

"Next, Johnny!" Doc addressed the tall, emaciated geologist and archaeologist. "There is an island in the South Seas, some distance from New Zealand. It is known as Thunder Island."

Johnny nodded. He took off the glasses he wore and fiddled with them excitedly. These glasses were peculiar in that the left lens was extremely thick. This left lens was in reality a powerful magnifying glass which Johnny carried there for convenience. Johnny's left eye was virtually useless since an injury he had received in the World War.

"Go to the largest college of geology in New York City," Doc directed Johnny. "You will find there a collection of rock specimens from Thunder Island. They were turned over to the institution by Jerome Coffern, after an expedition he recently made to Thunder Island. I want those specimens."

"Mind telling me why you want them?" Johnny inquired.

"Of course not!"

In a few quick sentences, Doc Savage told of the existence of the horrible stuff called Smoke of Eternity.

"I am not sure what the Smoke of Eternity is," Doc explained. "But I have an idea what it could be. When the substance dissolves anything, there is a weird electrical display. This leads me to believe it operates through the disintegration of atoms. In other words, the dissolving is simply a disruption of the atomic structure."

"I thought it was generally believed there would be a great explosion once the atom was shattered!" Johnny murmured.

"That was largely disproved by recent accomplishments of scientists who have succeeded in cracking the atom," Doc corrected. "I have experimented extensively along that line myself. There is no explosion, for the very simple reason that it takes as much energy to shatter the atom as is released."

"But why the specimens from Thunder Island?" persisted Johnny.

"The basis of this Smoke of Eternity must be some hitherto undiscovered element or substance," Doc elaborated. "In other words, it is possible Gabe Yuder discovered on Thunder Island such an element.

"The man is a chemist and electrical engineer. From that element, he might have developed this Smoke of Eternity. I want to examine the rock specimens from Thunder Island in hopes they may give me some clue as to what this unknown element or substance is."

"I'll get the specimens!" Johnny declared.

He hurried out.

"Hm-m-m—Renny!" Doc addressed his other two friends. "I want you two to hurry down to Monk's penthouse place. See if you can find him."

These two also departed, Renny moving lightly as a mouse in spite of his elephantine bulk; Ham twirling his sword cane.

Doc Savage tarried only to enter the laboratory. From his clothing he removed the crumpled capsule of metal that had contained the Smoke of Eternity which had wiped out the body of poor Jerome Coffern.

Doc concealed the capsule by sticking it to the bottom of a microscope stand with a bit of adhesive wax.

Quitting his headquarters, Doc journeyed the eighty-six floors downward in an elevator. He got into a taxicab. The driver, he directed to take him to a point on Riverside Drive near where an ancient pirate ship was tied up.

Doc Savage intended to examine the old corsair bark at his leisure. His suspicions were aroused. The fact that the ill-savored Squint and his companions had found modern guns aboard, the familiarity they had shown with the strange craft, indicated they had been there before.

Aboard the buccaneer vessel, Doc hoped to find something that would lead him to the master fiend, Kar.

The moment he came in sight of the *Jolly Roger*, Doc's golden eyes noted something a bit puzzling.

Some distance down the river drifted a smudge of particularly vile black smoke. No factory smokestacks along the river were disgorging such stuff. Nor were any water craft, which might have thrown it off, to be seen.

The slight breeze was such that this darksome pall might have been swept from the vicinity of the *Jolly Roger*.

Too, far up the river, was a seaplane. It taxied along the surface, receding.

Doc strained the telescopic quality of his vision. He recognized the seaplane as the same which had attempted his life in Central Park!

Doc was thoughtful. His suspicions were now stronger.

But he had no way of knowing he was viewing the after-signs of Monk's being taken aboard the submersible tank hiding place!

Down to the pirate vessel, Doc hurried. A springy leap from the ramshackle wharf put his bronze form aboard. A leaf settling on the deck planks would have made more noise than he did in landing.

Doc glided to the superstructure. Pausing, he listened. A stray rope end, swinging in the breeze, made brushing noises up in the labyrinth of rigging.

Another sound, too! A man muttering in the vicinity of the galley!

Doc backed a pace. His sharp gaze rested on the galley stovepipe. The faintest wisp of dark smoke drifted out. The smoke was like that pall hanging downriver.

Instantly, Doc became a wary, stalking bronze hunter. He slid aft, then went down a companion. He made for the galley. He was shortly framed in the galley door.

Beside a rusty old cook oven stood a strange contrivance.

This was larger than the oven, but built along similar lines. It seemed to be a furnace for burning resinous, smoke-making material. A big pipe from this led the smoke to the galley flue.

A printed sign above the contraption read:

OLD-TIME PIRATES USED SMOKE SCREENS

Modern warships were not the first to employ smoke screens! Below is an apparatus used by the rovers of the Spanish Main to throw off clouds of

smoke intended to baffle the aim of pursuing men-of-war.

If visitors desire to see this smoke-maker in performance, an attendant will put it in operation.

There is a small charge of one dollar for this.

Doc Savage's mobile, strong lips made the slightest of appreciative smiles. Whether old-time corsairs had actually used smoke screens was immaterial. This was probably faked, like most of the other stuff aboard the ship.

But if it was desired to lay a smoke screen over this part of the river without attracting suspicion, here was an ingenious method. If anybody asked questions, the proprietors of the pirate exhibit could claim somebody had paid them a dollar to make the smoke.

Beside the smoke-maker stood a man. He had not yet become aware of Doc's presence. The man was cleaning ashes out of the smoke-maker.

The fellow was tall and thin. His pasty complexion, his shaking hands, his inarticulate mumbling, marked him as a drug addict.

"Well?" said Doc.

The man whirled. His mean eyes goggled. His teeth rattled as a great terror seized him.

He was one of the unsavory crew assembled by Squint in that tenth house of the row of similar dwellings.

Suddenly, he leaped across the galley, pitched through a door. His feet hammered down a passage.

"Stop!" Doc rapped.

The terrified man never heeded. He was not long on nerve. And he had heard enough about Doc to know the giant bronze man was Nemesis to his kind.

Doc pursued. He put a great deal of effort in his flashing lunge. He wanted to question this rat. And he knew he would have to get the fellow before——

It happened!

Came a piercing shriek! It ended in a ghastly chunking sound and a horrible gurgling.

The man had fallen through the death trap in the passage—the trap from which the spar had saved Doc.

The upended swords in the pit under the trapdoor had thorned out the life of the fellow before Doc reached him!

Doc slowly returned to the deck. He had hoped to learn why the smoke screen had just been placed. His chance for that was gone with the thin man's death.

Thus also had vanished whatever chance Doc might have had of learning that Monk was in a submersible barge under the river near by.

Chapter 9

THE COLD KILLER

Doc Savage moved toward the bows of the corsair craft. He desired to ascertain what had become of the bodies of Squint's unlucky companions. He had noted that the one who had died from the shock of a dismembered hand no longer reposed upon the deck.

The bodies had been added to the grisly exhibits of pirate butchery in the hold. A few garments of the seventeenth century had been drawn carelessly upon the bodies. So realistic was the rest of the exhibit that the real corpses fitted in perfectly with the ghastly scene. They could hardly be told from the papier-mâché victims of corsair lust.

Doc began at the bows and searched the buccaneer craft minutely.

He soon found a twisted pair of insulated wires of a telephone line. These came aboard inside one of the rope hawsers that moored the vessel to the wharf. So cleverly were they concealed that they would have escaped any but an unusually intent inspection.

Doc traced the wires. They descended to the very keel, near the limber board. Here they were covered with rubber for protection from the bilge water. They progressed aft. At times Doc was forced to tear up planking to keep track of them.

Near the stern, the wires suddenly passed through the hull into the water.

Doc returned to the deck. He stood near the taffrail. His golden eyes roved the river surface.

Entering the deck house, he removed his outer clothing and shoes. An amazing figure of bronze, he returned to the stern. He poised at the taffrail.

But he did not dive overboard immediately to follow the wires underwater.

A great bubble arose a few yards out in the river. A second came. Then a *blub-blub-blub* series of them!

This was air leaving the underwater cell in which Monk was imprisoned. The escaping air made room for the water that was drowning Monk.

But Doc knew only that the phenomenon was something suspicious. He waited to see what would happen next. Nothing did, except that the bubbles ceased to arise.

Doc dropped into the river. He drew plenty of air into his lungs before he struck. He swam, beneath the surface, out to the spot where the bubbles arose.

His powerful hands soon touched the steel tanklike submersible which lay on the river bottom. He explored along it. He found a box of a protuberance. This was the size of a very large trunk.

He heard faint struggle sounds from within the box.

Instantly, his great fingers went to work on the hatch which gave admission to the box. He got it open.

Monk toppled out.

Monk was a mighty distressed man, but far from dead. Opening his eyes, he could see Doc faintly in the water.

Monk's ill-timed bark of pleasure expelled the last vestige of air from his lungs. As a result, his drowning was nearly finished before Doc could get him to the surface.

"Imagine finding you here!" Doc chuckled. "You pick the strangest places to visit!"

Monk spouted a prodigious quantity of river water. He held up his manacled arms.

"Get these off, Doc!" he roared. "I'm gonna dive back down there and give them babies a taste of their own medicine! I'll tear a hole in the thing if nothing else!"

Doc Savage grasped the first of the three handcuffs on Monk's wrists. He brought the manacle close to his great chest and pulled.

Monstrous muscles popped out on his arms and shoulders. The handcuff chain snapped apart.

With successive duplications of this remarkable feat, Doc shattered the other cuffs securing Monk's wrists and ankles.

Monk immediately prepared to dive to the tank of a submarine on the river bottom. His pleasantly ugly face sank. He was thirsting for vengeance on the men who had tried to murder him.

Doc Savage followed him down.

Doc it was who found a way to attack those inside the sunken tank of the craft. He discovered the dogs which held the entrance lid could be worked from the outside as well as the inside. They operated on the principle which is occasionally applied to the hatches of regulation submarines.

With a twist, Doc threw them. His powerful arms wrenched up the lid. With a great rush, water poured in.

Doc stroked back to the surface. Monk sputtered and splashed there, his simian face disappointed.

"I had no luck!" he growled.

"Watch it!" Doc called. "They'll be swimming out!"

Hardly had the warning been voiced when a streaming head broke water. Monk's fist swung like a sledge. The victim would have drowned had Monk not seized and held him.

A second of Kar's men came up from the tanklike craft, which, no doubt, was already filled with water. Doc captured that one. For the next few seconds, half-drowned villains bobbed on all sides.

Snorting and chuckling uproariously, Monk laid about briskly with his long, furry arms. He sounded like a porpoise disporting atop the water. Monk liked plenty of noise when he fought.

Monk kept count of their bag.

"That's all of 'em!" he announced at length. "Every rat of them got to the top."

The conquest had not been a difficult one. Kar's men were all but unconscious as they reached the surface. It became a matter of simply stunning each one, a simple process for such fists and strength as Doc and Monk possessed.

They made a human raft out of their captives and shoved them to the *Jolly Roger*. Monk held them there, keeping them afloat. He administered a judicious belt with a hairy fist when one showed signs of reviving. He grinned, "How I like this job!"

Doc stroked to a wharf pile. He climbed it with a rapidity that made the feat seem ridiculously easy.

Coiled on the after deck, Doc Savage found a rope which would support the weight of a man. He lowered the end. Monk looped it under a prisoner's arms.

They had all the captives on the after deck of the *Jolly Roger* within a few seconds.

"What do we do with 'em?" Monk inquired.

"See what they know of Kar," Doc explained. He inspected the array of prisoners. "They may know something. None of them were with the group who met Squint."

"Squint—who's he?" Monk inquired. "Say, Doc, I still don't know what this is all about!"

Doc began with the fiendish murder of Jerome Coffern by the Smoke of Eternity and sketched briefly what had occurred.

"Whew!" muttered Monk. "And you think this Smoke of Eternity is a substance which shatters the atom! In that case, it certainly must have something new and hitherto undiscovered for its basic ingredient!"

"Exactly," Doc agreed. "It is possible Gabe Yuder discovered this new element, or whatever it is, on Thunder Island. He may be Kar."

They relieved their prisoners of arms, throwing the waterlogged weapons into the river. The pockets of the men disgorged nothing that might lead to Kar.

One by one, the villainous group regained consciousness. One or two tried to escape. They didn't have a chance against Doc's flashing speed. And Monk, for all his anthropoid appearance, was a hairy blur when he wanted to move quickly.

The prisoners were herded forward. Doc forced them down in the fore hold, which held the unnerving display of pirate bloodthirstiness. He wanted them to have a good look at the three of Kar's men who were already dead there. The sight might loosen their tongues.

The gruesome exhibit proved to be potent medicine. The captives shuddered. They became pale.

"Where can Kar be found?" Doc demanded, his powerful voice holding a ring of command.

He got no answer. He had not expected one yet.

Monk picked up a big, gleaming cutlass. He whetted it suggestively on a soggy shoe sole, then whacked an ear off a papier-mâché likeness of a bearded pirate, just to show Kar's men how it might go.

"Only say the word, Doc!" He slanted a great arm at a wizened fellow who looked the most cowardly of the lot. "I'll start on the little one, there!"

The man in question whimpered in fright.

Doc's golden eyes came to rest on the cowardly one. The play of flaky gleamings within those orbs seemed to increase. The golden eyes gathered a compelling, hypnotic quality. They searched the very soul of the quailing captive.

"I—I——" the fellow frothed.

There was no question but that in a very few minutes he could have been made to tell all he knew.

But he never got the chance.

A deck planking creaked above their heads. Some one lurked up there!

"Duck!" Doc breathed.

He and Monk faded into shadowy corners of the hold with the speed and silence of men accustomed to danger.

The man at the deck hatch must have caught a fleeting glimpse of Doc's bronze form.

A machine gun erupted down the hatch. The reports of the weapon were surprisingly mild—it was fitted with a silencer of some sort. The hosing metal torrent tore great, splinter-edged rents in the floor planks. It reduced a papier-mâché replica of a corsair victim to a chewed pile of paper-and-glue pulp.

Sudden silence fell.

Kar's men milled under the hatch, not knowing what to do. They looked up.

"Kar——"

The cowardly man of the group had started to speak. But he got no further than that one word.

Bur-r-rip! A machine gun volley poured into him. His wizened body seemed to lose all its shape under the murderous leaden stream.

The rapid-firer did not stop with his death. It ripped into the other members of Kar's gang.

Doc Savage knew that the first man to die had seen Kar at the hatch above. Kar was slaying the whole group so none of them could give information concerning him.

It was one of the most cold-blooded, fiendish things Doc had ever witnessed.

In a half dozen ticks of a stop watch, every man of Kar's in the hold died under the gobbling machine gun.

Then Kar ran wildly away from the hatch, across the deck. Both Doc and Monk heard the master murderer's leap to the wharf.

Doc's bronze, giant form flashed from the shadows. It seemed to slide upward on invisible wires. Powerful fingers seized the hatch rim. Doc looked out.

A man raced furiously shoreward along the wharf. He wore a dark raincoat. It enveloped his form down to the ankles. He had a large, nondescript, concealing hat.

Kar—for he it must be—still carried his submachine gun. He whirled suddenly and let fly a volley of bullets.

Doc dropped back into the hold an instant before slivers flew from the hatch edge. But he had seen that Kar's face was wrapped in a great mask of dark cloth. It covered

even his neck.

Whether Kar was Gabe Yuder it was impossible to tell. The fleeing figure *could* be Gabe Yuder, though.

Doc did not try to leave by the hatch again. He raced aft. Monk trailed him.

“What a cold killer!” Monk grated.

“There should be guns in the deck house!” Doc breathed.

They found the guns. A rack held quite an arsenal of modern weapons. Kar had prepared well. They sprang out on deck.

But Kar was something of a sprinter. Already, he had scampered well up the bluff which was surmounted by Riverside Drive. He kept to the concealment of scrawny shrubbery.

Doc saw a bush shake and fired into it. Machine-gun missiles came screaming back in a second. They forced Doc to cover.

Kar reached the low stone wall at the bluff rim. He dived over it.

Doc and Monk found no trace of the fiendish killer when they reached Riverside Drive.

Chapter 10

HOT PURSUIT

“Kar must have had an automobile waitin’ here on the Drive,” guessed Monk. “Did you get a look at his face, Doc?”

“No,” Doc replied slowly. “He was quite thoroughly masked. Whoever he is, he is taking pains that his face does not become known.”

Monk and Doc soon found themselves the object of many eyes. A crowd began to gather.

Monk’s clothing was still wet and clung to his great, beam-like limbs, making their anthropoid nature more prominent. He looked like a monster gorilla beside Doc.

Doc Savage had not donned the garments he had removed to dive from the *Jolly Roger* into the river. He stood clad only in shorts. Pedestrians on Riverside Drive got a glimpse of Doc’s amazing bronze form and stopped to stare in awe.

That giant, metallic figure was a sensation. A passing motorist sighted the bronze man and was so held that he forgot his driving and let his car jam into another.

“We better clear out before we start a panic,” Monk snorted.

Hailing a taxi, they got inside. Doc directed the chauffeur to turn into the street which held the row of houses, each of which was so closely like all the others.

Doc entered the tenth house quickly. He soon found Long Tom’s electrical apparatus which put the high-frequency current on the secret telephone line.

Glancing from the rear window at which he had listened, Doc discovered Long Tom working along the back of the houses with his sensitive electrical “ear” mechanism.

Doc tarried to note that the body of Squint had not been removed from the room. Evidently the other rooms in the house were untenanted.

Then Doc slid through the window, descended the wall as easily as a fly, and consulted with Long Tom.

“There is a telephone line from a tanklike submersible sunken near that old pirate exhibition vessel,” he explained. “The line enters the pirate ship, then leaves inside a mooring cable. When you trace this line down, you might trace that one also.”

“O. K.,” said Long Tom.

“And watch out for Kar. The man is a devil.”

Long Tom nodded and drew back his coat to show that he had donned a bulletproof vest. Belted to his middle, he also wore a singular pistol. This gun was fitted with a cartridge magazine of extra capacity, curled like a ram horn for compactness. The weapon was one of Doc’s invention. In operation, it was what is known as continuously automatic—actually an extremely small machine gun.

“I’m prepared,” Long Tom said, his rather unhealthy looking face set grimly.

Retracing his steps to the taxi, Doc directed the machine to his skyscraper headquarters downtown. He and Monk went inside in haste to avoid attracting undue attention. An elevator wafted them up to the eighty-sixth floor.

They entered Doc's office. Surprise stopped them.

Oliver Wording Bittman, the taxidermist, sat waiting!

Around and around his forefinger, the taxidermist was spinning the skinning scalpel which he wore on his watch chain. He leaped erect. A strange, worried light filled his dark, determined eyes. His rough, weather-darkened skin seemed a little pale. His large jaw had a desperate tightness.

"I am paying my visit to you rather sooner than expected," he said. He tried to smile. The smile didn't quite jell.

Doc knew there was something behind the perturbation of this man who had saved his father's life.

"You are in trouble?" he inquired curiously.

Bittman nodded violently.

"I certainly am!" He unbuttoned his vest and shirt with thin fingers. He lifted a bandage below.

There was a shallow scrape of a wound across the man's ribs. It resembled the mark of a bullet.

"I was shot at," Bittman explained. "You can see how narrowly the bullet missed being my finish. This occurred only a few minutes after you left my apartment."

"Did you see who fired?"

"It was Yuder!"

"Gabe Yuder?"

"It was!" Bittman said fiercely. "He escaped in an automobile. But not before I saw his face. The man you call Kar is Gabe Yuder!"

Violent flickerings were in Doc's flaky eyes as he spoke to Bittman.

"In some mysterious manner, Kar learned I visited you, Bittman. One of his men, piloting a seaplane, made an unsuccessful attempt on my life soon after I left your apartment."

"This means Kar has marked me for death," muttered Oliver Wording Bittman. He juggled the watch-chain scalpel nervously. "I—I wonder—if—could I—join you for my own protection? To be frank, I do not believe the police would be equal to a thing such as this."

Doc Savage hesitated not at all. Although he and his five remarkable men worked best alone, unimpeded by the presence of one of lesser ability, he could not refuse Bittman. The man had done Doc's father a supreme favor, as evidenced by the picture and the letter Bittman possessed.

"Of course you can join us," Doc replied generously. "But perhaps I had better warn you that being with us will not be exactly safe. We seem to draw death and

violence like honey draws bees. You might be more secure from danger if you went into hiding somewhere.”

Bittman’s large jaw set firmly. “I am not a coward who runs to a hiding place! I wish to assist you in my feeble way. Jerome Coffern was a friend of mine! I beg you to permit me to do my bit to bring the man who murdered him to justice! That is all I ask. Will you not grant it?”

This speech moved Doc Savage. Bittman had voiced Doc’s own motives in pursuing the devilish Kar.

“You shall become one of us,” Doc declared.

He knew, however, that in accepting Bittman’s presence, he was taking on added responsibilities. Bittman’s life would have to be guarded.

Johnny, the elongated, gaunt geologist and archæologist, now appeared. He came in bearing a sizable box. It seemed quite heavy.

“The rock specimens from Thunder Island,” he announced. “There’s a lot of them. Jerome Coffern’s made a complete collection.”

Doc Savage gave the specimens a swift inspection. But he did not put them under a microscope or start analyzing them.

“No time right now to examine them intensively,” he explained. “That can come later.”

He locked the specimens in a safe which stood in the outer office. This safe was rather large. In height, it came above Doc’s shoulder.

Taking fresh clothing from the concealed locker, Doc put it on.

He got from the laboratory a large sheet of cardboard such as artists use to make drawings upon. A cabinet yielded pencils.

“If you’ll just lend me some assistance,” he requested Oliver Wording Bittman, “I am going to make a sketch of Gabe Yuder, as you described him. I want you to watch me and point out any differences between my sketch and Yuder’s features.”

Doc’s steady, sensitive bronze fingers moved with a rapidity that defied the eye. On the cardboard took form, as though by magic, the features of a man.

“A little fuller in the cheeks,” said Bittman, “and a smaller jaw.”

The work came to an end.

“That is a remarkable likeness!” said Bittman.

“This is for the police,” Doc told him. “We will have them put out an alarm for Gabe Yuder. If we get him—we will——”

“We will have Kar!” Bittman said fiercely.

Calling a messenger, Doc dispatched the drawing to the nearest police station.

Soon after, the voices of Renny and Ham were heard in the corridor.

“Poor Monk!” Renny’s voice rambled. “We found nothing but a bootblack who saw Monk forced into a car. That means those devils took him for a ride. He’s done for!”

There was the trace of a sob in Ham’s reply.

"I'm afraid you're right, Renny. It's a terrible thing. Monk was one of the finest men who ever lived. I actually loved Monk!"

Monk heard this. Devilment danced in his little, starry eyes. He looked like he was going to explode with mirth.

For Ham, the waspish, quick-thinking lawyer, had never before expressed such sweet sentiments. He was wont to call Monk the "missing link" and other things even less complimentary. To hear the sharp-tongued Ham talk, one would think nothing would give him more pleasure than to stick his sword cane in Monk's anthropoid form.

This peeve of Ham's dated back to the Great War, to the incident which had given Ham his nickname. As a joke, Ham had taught Monk some French words which were highly insulting, telling Monk they were the proper things to flatter a Frenchman with. Monk had addressed the words to a French general, and that worthy promptly had Monk clapped in the guardhouse for several days.

But within the week after Monk's release, Ham was hailed upon a charge of stealing hams. Somebody had planted the evidence. Ham had never been able to prove it was Monk who framed him, and it still irked him to think of it. He blamed Monk for the nickname of Ham, which he didn't particularly care for.

Ham and Renny entered. They saw Monk.

"Haw, haw, haw!" Monk let out a tornado of laughter. "So you love me, eh?"

Ham carefully wiped from his face the first flash of joy at seeing Monk.

"I'd love to cut your hairy throat!" he snapped angrily.

Doc advised Ham and Renny what had happened to Monk. As he finished, the telephone rang. Long Tom's voice came over the wire.

"I've traced the phone wire from that tenth house," he advised. "And also the one from the *Jolly Roger*."

"We'll be right up!" Doc declared.

Monk, Renny, Ham and Johnny were plunging through the door as Doc hung up. They had buckled on bulletproof vests. They had seized the small, deadly machine guns which were Doc's invention.

Oliver Wording Bittman seemed dazed by the suddenness with which these men went into action. Swallowing his astonishment, he dived in their wake.

Doc summoned an elevator.

"Better take two taxicabs!" he advised when they were on the street. "If Kar should turn that Smoke of Eternity on one carload, it wouldn't get us all."

"Pleasant thought!" Monk grinned.

The two cabs wheeled up Fifth Avenue. Doc rode the runningboard of the foremost machine. He habitually did this, for his very presence was a charm which magically gave him right of way through all traffic. New York City's traffic policemen had been instructed by their chiefs to give every assistance to this remarkable man of bronze.

Too, Doc preferred to be outside where his keen eyes missed nothing. For this reason also, Doc's personal cars were always roadsters or convertibles, the tops of which could be lowered.

The trip uptown turned out to be uneventful.

Long Tom, thin and sallow and looking like an invalid, but in reality as tough as any of Doc's entourage, stood at a corner on Riverside Drive. His two boxes of apparatus were at his feet.

Doc had his cab pull up beside Long Tom.

"Where'd the wires go?" he asked.

Long Tom made a wry face. "I'm afraid we're out of luck. The wires led from that tenth house, along the rear of other houses and went under Riverside Drive through a culvert. From there, they led underground down to that pirate ship, the *Jolly Roger*. They went aboard through a hawser, down to the keel, then into the water to——"

"To the tanklike submersible!" Doc said disgustedly. "So the wires in the room and on the boat were one circuit!"

"That's it," Long Tom agreed.

Doc Savage now shook his bronze head. "This is strange, Long Tom! When Kar talked to Monk, the fellow would hardly have been reckless enough to have done so from that room. He knew I had discovered the place."

"The secret phone circuit didn't branch off anywhere," Long Tom said with certainty. He pointed at his instruments. "My thingamajig would have shown it if the wires were tapped anywhere."

Doc's golden eyes ranged along the landward side of Riverside Drive. Apartment houses fronting the Drive were new and tall, although those on the side streets were not nearly so opulent. The Drive apartments commanded a view of the Hudson. They brought neat rentals.

Doc's low, strange, trilling sound abruptly came from his lips. It was hardly audible now. Probably no one but Long Tom heard it. And Long Tom grinned. He knew this sound presaged some remarkable feat of Doc's, for it came at the bronze man's moments of greatest concentration. The sound with the weird, melodious quality of some weird jungle bird always precursed a master stroke.

"Let us do some investigating, brothers," Doc said softly.

He led them into the tenth house from the corner, which held in an upstairs room the end of the secret phone line. But Doc did not go upstairs. He guided the group out through a rear door.

Here was a long, narrow court. The place was untidy. Rickety old wooden fences marked off backyards hardly larger than good-sized bedspreads. Rusty clotheslines draped like old cobwebs.

The court resembled little else than a brick-walled pit. At the Riverside Drive end, the rear wall of a great apartment house towered many stories. At the opposite end was a lesser building. And on either side, the shabby stems of old tenements buttressed each other solidly.

Evening was near. The hulking buildings threw shadows into the pit of a court.

Doc moved along the court, toward Riverside Drive. His sharp eyes soon located the secret phone wires. These followed the chinks between bricks for the most part.

They had been coated with a paint the exact color of the brickwork.

They reached the wall of the immensely larger building which fronted Riverside Drive. Turning here, the thin, hardly visible strands traced along the rear of the structure.

At one point, a loop abruptly dangled out—a very small loop.

Doc pointed at this. “Notice anything peculiar about that?”

Long Tom stared.

“The insulation is gone at that point!” he ejaculated. “The naked copper of the wires shows!”

“Exactly. Note also that there are many windows directly above the spot.”

“You mean Kar tapped them there and——”

“By reaching down and clipping the ends of other wires to them,” Doc replied. “That means he did it from the window immediately above! Those loops are too small to be fished for from a greater distance.”

To Renny and Johnny, Doc breathed a command. “You two stay here. Watch that window. Shoot at the slightest hostile move.

“The rest of you come with me!”

He led them swiftly around to the front of the apartment building which overlooked Riverside Drive.

They shoved past a bewildered doorman. The foyer was decorated elaborately. Deep carpet swathed the floor. It seemed quite a high-class establishment.

Doc described to the doorman the location of the apartment they suspected.

“Who lives there?” he asked.

“No one, yet,” replied the doorman. “It was rented some time ago, but the tenant has not yet moved in.”

Doc, Monk, Ham, Long Tom and Oliver Wording Bittman hurried up the stairs. Luxurious carpet made their footsteps noiseless. They reached the suspicious apartment.

Halting the others with an uplifted arm, some yards from the door, Doc advanced alone. He did not want them near enough that the sound of their breathing would interfere with his listening. For Doc’s ears were keen enough that he could detect the faintest respiration noises of men within the apartment.

He listened. Lowering close to the threshold, where there gaped a small crack, he used his nostrils. The olfactory senses of the average man are underdeveloped through insufficient use. He has no need for a super-keen organ of smell. Indeed, city life is more comfortable if the multitude of odors present go unnoticed. But Doc Savage, through unremitting, scientific exercise, had developed an olfactory sense far beyond the common.

Doc’s ears and nostrils told him no one occupied the apartment. He tried the door. Locked! He exerted what for his great muscles was moderate pressure. The door swished inward, lock torn out.

Not only was the place untenanted, but it held no furniture. The bare, varnished floor glistened faintly in the light of approaching evening.

Doc glided to the window. He waved at Renny and Johnny in the brick-sided pit of a courtyard below. His gesture advised them to stay where they were.

Back to the door, Doc whipped. His movements seemed effortless for all their speed.

Although there was no sign of a wire by which the secret phone line had been tapped, Doc was not satisfied. His trained brain told him where to look.

He tugged at the corridor carpet immediately outside the door. It came up readily.

The ends of two fine wires were revealed.

"They used a splice long enough to reach from these through the window!" Doc told the others.

Wrenching up the carpet, he followed the wires down the corridor.

Oliver Wording Bittman was white-faced. The flesh on his big jaw looked hard as rock. But he was not trembling.

"I am unarmed," he said jerkily. "C-can one of you loan me a gun? One of those compact machine guns! I want to do my part to wipe out those fiends!"

Doc reached a quick decision. It was his duty to take care of Bittman's life, a repayment for the man's service to his father.

"We neglected to bring along an extra gun," he said. "If you wish to help, you might hurry down and call the police."

Bittman smiled. "I see through your ruse to get me out of harm's way. But, of course, I will call the officers."

He retreated down the wide stairway.

Doc continued to follow the wire. It terminated at a door of a front apartment.

Hardly had he determined that fact when a storm of bullets crashed through the door.

Only Doc's instinct for caution, which had urged him to keep clear of the door, saved his life.

"They're inside!" Monk howled. "Now for a rat killin'!"

Monk's compact machine gun coughed a blatting roar of sound. He literally cut the door off its hinges. It fell inward.

More lead came out of the apartment of the besieged. The slugs hit nobody. But they gouged plaster off the walls. The plaster dust became a blinding cloud. A machine gun equipped with a silencer was doing most of the shooting from within the apartment.

"That sounds like Kar's typewriter!" Monk bellowed. "He's in there!"

Doc abruptly backed from the door.

"You handle this end!" he directed.

He glided down the stairs to the foyer.

Oliver Wording Bittman stood in a telephone booth, speaking rapidly into the instrument.

“Yes! Send a riot squad!” he was saying.

Doc’s bronze form slid outside. Excitement had gripped the street. A cop was coming from the corner, tweedling vigorously on his whistle. Upon the thoroughfare, the shots within the apartment building sounded like clamoring thunder.

To the apartment window, Doc’s golden eyes flashed. What they saw was about the most disappointing thing possible.

A rope made of knotted bedclothing dangled from the open window! This makeshift cord hung to within ten feet of the walk.

Doc’s gaze raked right and left. They ranged far up and down Riverside Drive. Nowhere did they detect trace of any one who might have escaped down that rope.

Running lightly and leaping, Doc grasped the rope end. Powerful fingers clamped an ornamental fresco and helped the bedclothing support his weight. He went up rapidly.

An ugly face poked out of the window. A pipestem arm brought an automatic pistol into view. But before the weapon had a chance to discharge, an incredible vise of bronze fingers clamped the killer’s scrawny neck. They jerked.

The man came out of the window with a snap. Screeching, he fell to his death far out in the street.

An instant later, Monk, Long Tom and Ham charged the room. Their compact guns stuttered briefly. Two of Kar’s men collapsed. They had been among those assembled by Squint. One fell and leaked crimson over the muffled machine gun which had been used by Kar at the pirate ship, *Jolly Roger*.

Of Kar, there was no sign.

“He got away—down the rope of bedclothing,” Ham declared regretfully. “Although it is possible he was never in the room!”

A brief examination showed the secret phone line terminated in the apartment of death. Glancing from the window, Doc also ascertained another thing.

“You can see the *Jolly Roger* from here,” he informed Monk. “That accounts for Kar’s appearance. He saw us capture those men of his from the underwater tank.”

Doc returned with his friends to his skyscraper office downtown.

The police received from Doc Savage an account of what was happening. Doc, however, withheld all reference to the plan to steal the gold destined for the Chicago banks.

This puzzled Ham.

“We’ll stop that robbery ourselves,” Doc explained. “Kar will use his infernal Smoke of Eternity. The police have no defense against it. Many of them would be killed.”

“Well, won’t Kar use it on us, too?” Monk snorted.

“If he applies it to you, I want to be watching!” the sharp-tongued Ham told Monk. “I’ll bet the cloud of smoke it turns you into will have a spike tail, horns and pitchfork!”

“Maybe. But it won’t make a noise like this!” And Monk gave a boisterous imitation of a pig grunting.

Ham reddened and shut up. All Monk had to do to get Ham’s goat was make some reference to a porker. Monk often made those piggy, grunting noises just to see Ham swell up with rage.

Long Tom suddenly emitted a howl of surprise. Wandering about the office nervously, he had chanced to look behind the safe.

A large hole gaped there! The solid steel had simply been wiped away!

Doc hurriedly opened the safe.

The rock specimens from Thunder Island were gone!

“Kar, or one of his men, opened a hole in the rear of the safe with that Smoke of Eternity, and got the specimens!” Doc declared.

“But how did he know they were there?” Monk muttered.

It was Oliver Wording Bittman who suggested an answer. He indicated the spire of a skyscraper some blocks distant. From an observation tower which topped this, it was possible to see into Doc’s office.

“They must have had a man watching from there!” he offered.

Doc drew the shades, saying, “It won’t happen again.”

“Doc, that shows you were on the right trail with those specimens,” Johnny, the geologist, spoke up excitedly. He adjusted his glasses which had the magnifying lens on the left side. “Otherwise, Kar would not have taken so much trouble to take them away.”

Night had fallen. In the great buildings surrounding Doc’s high perch, only a few glowing freckles marked lighted windows.

The police commissioner of the City of New York paid Doc Savage’s office a call in person to express his appreciation for Doc’s services thus far in wiping out the fiendish Kar and his gang. Shortly after this, Doc received a telegram, also expressing thanks, from the New Jersey police official in whose jurisdiction the murder of Jerome Coffern had occurred.

And the tabloid newspapers ranted at the cops for not telling their reporters what was happening. The police were keeping secret Doc’s connection with the sudden epidemic of death among criminals, at his request.

Doc now locked himself in his laboratory. He retrieved from the bottom of the microscope, where he had hidden it, the tiny capsule which had held the Smoke of Eternity. With all the resources of his great laboratory and his trained brain, he set to work to learn the nature of the strange metal.

It was nearly midnight when he came out of the laboratory.

“You fellows stick here,” he told Monk, Ham, Renny, Johnny, Long Tom and Oliver Wording Bittman.

He departed without telling the six men whence he was bound or what nature of plan his profound mind had evolved.

Chapter 11

DOC SPRINGS A TRAP

Three o'clock in the morning!

A black ghost of a night seemed to have sucked the city into its maw. There was fog, like the clammy breath of that night ghost. Out on the bay, a night-owl ferry to Staten Island hooted disconsolately at some fancied obstruction in its path.

The financial district was quiet. The silence in Wall Street was like that among the tombstones in Trinity Churchyard, which lies at the uphill end of the street.

The big feet of occasional policemen made dull clappings on the deserted sidewalks. Periodic subway trains rumbled like monstrous sleepy beasts underground.

Things more sinister were impending around the bank, the vaults of which held the gold coin that to-morrow was to go to the aid of hard-pressed Chicago financial institutions.

The watchman didn't know it, as yet. He was a thick-headed chap, honest, but inclined to do things suddenly and think about it later.

"When I see somethin' suspicious, I shoot and ask questions afterward," he was wont to say. He was proud of this. So far, it had miraculously failed to get him into serious trouble. The only people he had shot were those who happened to need it.

The watchman noted a strange grayish haze which seemed to hang in the bank. He passed this off as fog. He would have thought differently, had he seen an enormous hole which gaped in one wall of the building. But he failed to see this, because most of his attention went to the doors and windows, where crooks usually tried to enter.

Nor did the watchman see a ratty man who slid out of the gloom of a cashier's cage. This marauder raised an air pistol. He pointed it at the man's back.

Suddenly a mighty bronze form flashed from the adjacent cage. A powerful hand clipped upon the air pistol. Another terrible hand covered all the ratty man's face, drawing the loose skin, lips and nostrils into a tight bunch from which no outcry could escape.

There ensued a brief flurry. The air pistol went off with a dull *chung!*

Only then did the watchman wake up. He spun, instinctively tugging at his hip pocket for his gun. His jaw fell in horror.

The ratty man had taken the missile from the air pistol. The fellow lay on the floor. That is—his upper body lay there! His legs had already dissolved in a grisly grayish smoke, shot through and through with weird electrical flashes.

The air pistol slug of Smoke of Eternity had hit the man in the foot. The discharge of the thing was an accident.

Over the dissolving form towered an awesome man-figure that looked like solid, tempered bronze. It was such a figure as the watchman had never seen.

The watchman went wild. He tried to put into effect his shoot-first-and-question-later creed. He got his gun out.

But about that time, a ton of dynamite seemed to explode on his jaw. He never even saw the great bronze fist which had hit him.

Doc Savage swept the watchman up. He glided silently across the floor. The gloom behind a vice president's desk swallowed him and his burden.

Into the bank now came more than a dozen furtive men. They carried automatic pistols and submachine guns.

One man alone had an air pistol. "C'mon!" he snarled. "Kar's orders was to push this right through!"

"Hey, Guffey!" called one. "Didja fix the watchman?"

When there was no answer from their companion, they muttered uneasily. Then they advanced.

"Gosh, look!" a man choked.

On the floor, just turning into the horrible gray vapor, lay a human head.

"It's Guffey!"

For a moment, it looked like they were going to flee. The sight of the fantastic thing happening to Guffey's head drained whatever courage they had.

"Aw, get next to yourselves, you mugs!" sneered the man who carried the only other air pistol. "You don't see the watchman around, do you? Guffey just had a little accident. The Smoke of Eternity dissolved both him and the watchman."

After a few more mutters, the explanation of the watchman's absence and Guffey's demise was accepted. The men set to work. They advanced on the vault. The man with the air pistol fired it at the vault door.

Instantly, the thick steel began dissolving into the strange smoke.

Over in the shadow of the vice president's desk, Doc Savage's sensitive bronze fingers explored the air pistol, the slug from which had finished Guffey. He was disgusted to learn it held no other capsule cartridge of the Smoke of Eternity.

Doc recalled the words of the man dying from a lopped-off hand aboard the *Jolly Roger*. The fellow had said that Kar never gave one of his men more than a single cartridge of the Smoke of Eternity. Kar feared, probably, that his men would launch out on a robbery campaign of their own if supplied with a quantity of the stuff.

The dissolving of the vault door had now ceased, the potency of the missile of Smoke of Eternity exhausted.

Kar's men were reluctant to go near the opening, at first. They were like boys playing with a mad dog. They didn't know but what the fearsome dissolving substance might do them harm.

But one finally entered the vault. The others followed. In a moment, they reappeared weighted down with sacks of clinking gold coin. Gone was their hesitation now. The gold had affected them like potent liquor. They were drunk with the thought of such wealth.

In the shadow of the desk, Doc's mighty bronze form remained motionless. The numskull guard slept silently at his feet. Doc was letting the robbery go forward!

But it was for good purpose. He wanted to trail the loot to Kar!

The thieves were stacking the swag near the hole they had opened in the bank building.

Doc's golden eyes missed no move. He reasoned they would haul it away in one or more trucks. Two million dollars in gold weighed a great deal.

His reasoning was right—just as right as had been his guess that Kar might try to get his hands on this gold without waiting for it to leave New York by train. For Kar was clever enough to realize the train plot might have been overheard by Doc.

A large truck rolled up in the dark side street beside the hole in the bank wall. Into this, the thieves heaved sacks of gold coin.

At this point, the watchman began to revive. With his first move, he was pinned helplessly by hard bronze arms. He could not have been held more solidly had he been dressed in a block of solid steel. Nor could he cry out, or use his eyes.

The last bag of gold was hoisted into the truck by tired arms that were very unused to anything that smacked of work. The truck was large. It held all the gold.

The thieves piled in. The truck rolled away.

Doc's impressive voice throbbed against the ear of the helpless watchman. It was pregnant with command.

"Call the police! Tell them the bank was robbed by Kar's men. They will know who is meant by Kar's men. Do you understand?"

The watchman started to swear at Doc, but desisted quickly when he felt the power of those great bronze fingers.

"I understand," he mumbled.

"You are to tell them nothing else until they arrive," Doc continued. "Then you can tell them of me. Tell them Doc Savage was here. They will keep it out of the newspapers. And, most important of all, you are not to tell the newspapers of me, understand?"

The watchman snarled that he did. Doc had saved his life, but the man was far from grateful.

Doc Savage glided for the door.

Instantly, the watchman made a dive for his gun, which lay on the floor near the spot where the body of Guffey had dissolved. The man's fingers clenched the weapon.

But when he lifted the muzzle, no bronze man could be seen. This reminded the watchman of the horrible dissolving of a human body he had witnessed. He got an attack of the jitters. His knees shook so he had to sit down on the floor and recover his nerve.

Doc Savage followed the truck. He had expended only a few minutes with the watchman. The truck had rolled slowly, so there would be less noise. Three blocks only, it had covered.

Doc ran. He haunted the gloom next to buildings. The truck headed uptown. Doc kept pace easily.

After fifteen blocks or so, the big bronze man hailed a nighthawking taxi. His physical condition was so perfect that he was breathing no more swiftly than normal when he entered the taxicab.

“Follow that truck,” Doc directed. He noted the taxi driver had an honest face and frank manners. He displayed a bill.

The denomination of the bill made the driver gulp.

“This can’t be honest money!” he grinned.

“Stop and take aboard the first cop you see, if you think it’s not honest,” Doc invited.

“You win!” the driver chuckled.

The hackman knew his business. He drove ahead of the truck, haunted side streets parallel to its course, and remained behind, where he might arouse suspicion, only at rare intervals.

Keeping to the East Side, where fish trucks were already beginning to rumble on the streets, the thieves drove far uptown. Near the northern end of Manhattan Island, they turned west and crossed the isle. Then they came down the other side. They had simply gone out of their way to mislead the police, should the officers get a description of the vehicle.

The thieves’ destination was the *Jolly Roger*!

The truck pulled down the bluff from Riverside Drive on a rutty old road used by dump vehicles.

Doc dismissed his taxi at the top of the bluff. The shadows gobbled him up. He reappeared near the ancient corsair craft, to lurk in the shelter of a tangled bush.

He watched the thieves consign the bags of gold coin to a hiding place. The simplicity of that hiding place surprised him.

They merely dumped the gold off the ramshackle wharf!

The spot they chose for the dumping was out in deep water, near the stern of the *Jolly Roger*, but between the hull of the old craft and the wharf.

“Drop it close to the hull, you fool!” Doc heard one of the thieves order another. “Be sure it lands on the shelf fastened to the hull!”

So that explained it!

Far enough beneath the river surface that no one would ever notice, there was a shelf affixed to the *Jolly Roger*. Considering that the police now knew Kar had used the old corsair ship, it was a daring move to conceal the loot here. But perhaps the safer for that! Searchers would hardly suspect so prominent a spot.

It was far from what it seemed—this old buccaneer vessel.

Doc waited patiently for some sign of Kar.

Another man appeared unexpectedly, running from the direction of the bluff. He made a good deal of noise in the darkness.

Guns were clutched uneasily. Then the thieves hailed the newcomer as one of their number. “We nearly let you have it!”

Conversation followed, the new arrival speaking rapidly. The words were pitched too low to reach Doc, who was some distance away.

Then tones were raised.

“All but four of you clear out!” commanded the late arrival. “That’s Kar’s orders. I’m to take the four who stay to Kar.”

Several loud grumbles wafted to Doc’s sharply tuned ears. But whatever the dissension was, the thieves accepted to the command of their leader. Probably they were complaining about leaving the gold unwatched.

The last of the coin plunked overside to land on the shelf fastened to the *Jolly Roger* hull. All but four of the looters got in the truck. The big machine rumbled away.

The four who had remained stood on the wharf with the man who had brought them their orders. Several minutes passed. Noise of the truck died away.

“C’mon!” said the messenger loudly. “I’ll take you to Kar now!”

The man turned toward the old pirate ship.

“Kar is on the *Jolly Roger*?” ejaculated one of the gang.

“Sure! What’d you think?”

The men disappeared aboard the corsair vessel.

Little more than a darker blur in the murk, Doc’s bronze figure flashed to the *Jolly Roger*. He scaled the rail with a catlike leap.

Shuffling footsteps located his quarry. They were aft. Down a companion, they went. Doc trailed. He had not visited this part of the craft, despite the number of times he had been aboard. The weird vessel was a labyrinth of narrow passages and tiny cubicles. Evidently every old-time pirate had had to have his individual cabin.

The police, Doc knew, had searched the *Jolly Roger* from stem to stern when they removed the bodies of Kar’s mobsters to the morgue. Had Kar been hiding aboard, they would have found him.

Doc kept only a few yards behind the five he followed. He entered the third of a series of cramped passages.

A door slammed behind him, barring the passage.

He flung forward. But even his marvelous fleetness could not get him to the passage end before that, too, was blocked by a closing door.

Then the entire ceiling of the passage descended with a crash upon his head!

The dropping roof would have crushed the life from a body a whit less like springy steel than Doc’s. The mass of monster timbers must have weighed a full ton. The innocent-looking up-and-down beams at the passage sides formed guides upon which the ugly trap operated.

Doc caught the tremendous weight on broad, arched shoulders. He put forth gigantic effort. He broke the deadly force somewhat. But the shock bore him to hands and knees.

Instantly, the door in front of Doc opened. A flashlight sprayed blinding luminance into his golden eyes.

“Got him!” chortled the man who had brought the message to the thieves. “We outsmarted him slick as could be!”

An air pistol snout poked into the flash beam. It leveled at Doc’s perfectly formed bronze features.

Chung! It discharged.

The flashlight promptly went out as the man who held it leaped back. Obviously, he was fearful some of the ghastly Smoke of Eternity would be splashed upon his person.

From a distance of several yards, the men waited.

“How did Kar get wise the bronze guy was followin’ us?” one asked the messenger.

“Simple,” was the chuckled reply. “The watchman at that bank telephoned the morning newspapers a big bronze bird had attacked him and robbed the vault. Guess he phoned the papers before the police. Probably wanted to see his name in print.

“Anyway, it caught the newspapers just at the deadline. They came out with it on the front page. Kar has men watching every paper to grab the editions as they hit the street. He does that to keep track of things. Sometimes the papers have news ahead of the police. Anyhow, the minute Kar got his dope, he reasoned the bronze guy was trailin’ the loot in hopes it would lead him to the chief’s hangout.”

“So he sent you——”

“So he sent me here to make that loud talk about leadin’ you guys to him.” The speaker laughed nastily. “Kar knew Doc Savage would follow us right into this trap!”

“Kar is pretty slick,” said one of the group, smitten with evil admiration.

“You said it! Slickest of all is how he keeps anybody from ever seein’ him, or even of learnin’ what his real name is.”

“We were in luck that the watchman called the papers!”

The flashlight spilled glare onto the passage deadfall.

Vile gray smoke had made a sizable smudge. Eerie electrical sparks played in a pronounced fashion.

The heavy timbers of the deadfall were dissolving!

“That,” leered one of the men, “fixes the bronze guy!”

But, whether the bronze man met his end or not, his companions were still at his office headquarters; while Doc was out on his errand, they were waiting for the next move.

Chapter 12

THE TERRIBLE DESTROYER

In Doc Savage's skyscraper office, six men were waiting the night out, obeying Doc's command to wait as he made his hurried exit the previous night.

Dawn was not far off. Over on the Sixth Avenue Elevated, trains were beginning to rattle past more often. In another hour, the city would awaken in earnest.

On a table in the office lay the last edition of a morning newspaper. Emblazoned in scare-type on the front page was the story the stupid watchman had turned in. The scream heads read:

MYSTERIOUS BRONZE MAN ROBS BANK

"I wonder if we should do something about that?" Johnny, the geologist, murmured anxiously, wiping his glasses with the thick left lens.

"Doc knows what he is about!" declared Long Tom, who had his nose buried in a highly technical pamphlet on advanced electrical research. "Shut up and let me read."

"Yes, do shut up!" Ham echoed. "I want to listen to this remarkable music!"

Monk and Renny, with the innate calmness of men huge physically, were sleeping. Monk snored. His snores had the peculiar quality of no two sounding remotely alike.

Ham, the waspish, quick-thinking lawyer, sat near Monk, listening with great interest to the variety of snore noises in Monk's repertoire. His sword cane was between his knees.

"Can you imagine!" Ham jeered. "Not only is Monk the homeliest bird on earth, but he makes the awfulest noises!"

Of the six men present, only Oliver Wording Bittman betrayed nervousness. He got up from his chair often. He paced the floor.

"Aren't you worried about Doc Savage?" he inquired wonderingly. "He left near midnight. Now it is almost dawn, and no word."

Long Tom repeated his previous declaration. "Doc knows what he is doing. Long ago, we learned not to worry about him."

Bittman made a move to return to his chair. His fingers sought the scalpel on his watch-chain. Twirling the thing seemed to give him nervous surcease.

Suddenly he leveled an arm at the door.

"Listen!" he breathed. "Did you hear something?"

Monk promptly awakened—although the words were far less loud than others he had slept through. One had a suspicion Monk had been pretending sleep so as to annoy Ham with his snoring.

Renny's gigantic fist had ruined the door panel, but temporary repairs had been effected with rough boards.

A faint sound came from the other side of the door. Feet scuffing the corridor floor! Some one in flight!

Monk kicked over the chair in which Renny slept. In a thundering avalanche, Doc's five friends hit the door. They volleyed through. Oliver Wording Bittman jumped out of their path as though getting clear of a stampede.

A man was just wedging into one of two waiting elevators.

Doc had described all of the recruits assembled to Kar's cause by Squint. This was one of them!

The man got the elevator door shut before Doc's friends reached it. The cage sank swiftly.

But directly beside the lift the sneak had used, stood another car, open.

In the office, Oliver Wording Bittman searched about wildly, calling, "Where are the guns?" He was not going to barge into trouble unarmed, it seemed.

Renny, Long Tom, Johnny, and Monk dived into the open elevators. Monk stamped the button which started the doors sliding shut.

Quick-thinking, waspish Ham threw himself against the closing panels, halting them.

"Hold on a minute!" he clipped. "That man deliberately let himself be heard! And there is no attendant in this elevator!"

The others stared at Ham, not comprehending what he was driving at.

"Scat!" rumbled Monk. "If you don't wanta see action, get out of the way of somebody who does! You can stay and guard Bittman. He still ain't got no gun."

"Shut up!" Ham rapped. "Come out of there! All of you!"

"But what——"

"Come out and I'll show you what I suspect!"

The conversation had occurred rapidly. Renny, Monk, Long Tom, and Johnny erupted from the elevator door as tumultuously as they had entered.

Reaching into the cage gingerly, using his sword cane for a prod, Ham threw the lift control lever to the point marked, "Down."

Nothing happened.

Ham let the doors slide shut, closing the master circuit of the hoist machinery. Ordinarily, the cage would have departed with a gentle acceleration.

But this time it fell!

The dull report of a blast echoed from high overhead. An explosive had been placed in the lift mechanism!

"Aw——" Monk muttered. He was not affected as much by the narrow escape from death as by the thought he would have to thank his roasting mate, Ham, for saving his life.

Ham's quick thinking had saved them from Kar's death trap!

"We'll use Doc's scooter!" Renny barked.

They ran down the battery of elevators. The metal-paneled last door was shut. Apparently no cage stood there.

Renny's monster hand found a secret button and pushed it. The doors cracked open. A waiting cage was revealed.

This was Doc Savage's private lift, to be used in reaching the street in moments of emergency. Doc's friends called it his "scooter." It operated at a far greater speed than any other cage in the huge skyscraper. It always waited here on the eighty-sixth floor for Doc's use.

Oliver Wording Bittman now came dashing out of the office. He had apparently reconciled himself to going into action without a gun.

"Wait for me! I want in on this!" he called.

He sprang into the elevator with the others, Monk hit the control lever. The cage floor seemed to hop out from under their feet. So swift was the descent that the sensation of falling persisted for some seventy stories. And the stopping piled them down on all fours.

"Golly!" grinned Monk. "I always get a wallop out of ridin' in this thing!"

They hurried out to the street.

"There he goes!" declared Long Tom.

Their skulking visitor stood beside the curb half a block distant. Parked at this point was a cream-colored taxi. The man drew a taxi driver's uniform cap from the cab, donned it. Evidently this was his masquerade.

Suddenly he discovered Doc's men.

He bounded into the cab. The machine jumped from the curb, turned in the street like a dog chasing its own tail, and hooted away.

Fortunately, Renny had his own car parked near. It was a tiny sedan, ill befitting Renny's immense bulk. Into it, Doc's men piled.

The chase was on!

Few vehicles other than an occasional milk wagon moved on the streets. That was lucky. The headlong pace the pursuit set allowed for no niceties of traffic dodging.

Up Broadway they thundered, leaving a trail of bleating police whistles behind.

Renny's peewee limousine proved a surprise. It ran like a racer. And Renny was something of a Barney Oldfield at the wheel. The fleeing cab was slowly, steadily overhauled.

Desperate, the machine dodged, doubled back. It only lost ground.

Finally, the taxi veered over to Riverside Drive, then off the Drive and down a rutty workroad—the same road followed by the gold truck Doc Savage had trailed.

Renny steered his machine in pursuit.

Behind them, a police squad car caterwauled along the Drive, but missed seeing them. It wandered off, wrapped in the bedlam of its own siren, vainly searching for the two automobiles which had used the early morning streets of New York for a race track.

The fleeing thug drove almost to the tumble-down pier where lay anchored the *Jolly Roger*. He hopped out, kept behind the taxi and scuttled for the pirate vessel.

A pistol flamed desperately from his hand as he caught sight of Renny's little sedan bucking down the rutty road. The murk was thick, so he missed.

Renny instantly leveled one of the compact little machine guns Doc had devised.

"It would be better if we could question the fellow!" Ham suggested. "Maybe we can make him lead us to Kar!"

Realizing the truth of that, Renny withheld his fire. He braked to a stop. Monk all but tore a door off the tiny sedan in getting out. They pounded after the fleeing rat.

Hollow clatterings arose as the rat ran across the wharf timbers, then a rowdy thunder as Renny and the rest arrived. The would-be killer had no time to draw in the gangplank. Wildly, he sprang for the first shelter handy—the forward deck hatch. His body plummeted straight into the black hold interior.

The fellow made a bad landing. Monk nearly overhauled him there, his great, anthropoid hulk descending with a loud crash into the hold, and his hairy fingers trapping the quarry's coat.

But the Kar rodent twisted and tore out of his coat. He fled sternward.

It was Renny who winged the man with a quick shot. The fellow plunged down, a leg shattered by the bullet.

In a moment, Doc's five men and Oliver Wording Bittman had surrounded the captive. They prepared to ask questions.

Not even the first query was put, however.

Several flashlights suddenly popped blinding beams upon them. The glare came from the hatchway above, and from the door in an aft bulkhead. The ugly nozzles of machine guns appeared in the luminance.

Doc's men stood helpless. They had pocketed their own compact and deadly weapons while they examined the prisoner.

"Let'm have it!" snarled a voice from the hatch rim.

Another rat suggested: "Maybe Kar will want——"

"Sure—he wants 'em dead! We got the bronze guy! We'll get these fellows and finish the job! Let's have it!"

Oliver Wording Bittman gave a shrill cry and sprang to one side, seeking madly to evade the incandescent blaze of the flashlights held by Kar's killers.

On the hatch rim, a machine gun in the hands of one of Kar's men released an awful hail of bullets.

While Doc was seemingly in the grip of death due to Kar's planning, Doc's friends, too, had fallen in a trap of the evil Kar!

Chapter 13

HIDING PLACE!

Doc Savage, as he braced himself on all fours with the terrific weight of the deadfall crushing down upon his back, knew the fate intended for him. He saw the slight steadying of the air gun which presages a trigger being pulled. He saw the finger of Kar's hired killer snug to the trigger.

The many hundreds of pounds atop him prevented even his mighty bronze body from negotiating a leap. He could not possibly reach the air gun muzzle and knock it aside.

Nor did he attempt to!

Doc had another plan. Inside his buttoned coat, he wore a metal plate which covered most of his chest. It was no ordinary metal, that plate. It was composed of the same material as the capsule missiles which held the Smoke of Eternity.

Not without results had Doc consigned himself to his locked laboratory to analyze the capsule. The metal was a rare alloy, but its nature had soon been revealed by a searching analysis.

As a matter of precaution, in case he was shot at with the Smoke of Eternity, Doc had fashioned himself a body armor from the rare alloy, a supply of which could be assembled from the absolutely complete stock of little-known medicals and chemicals which his laboratory held.

Hence, the instant Doc saw the air gun about to discharge, he put forth a herculean effort and managed to get his armor before the muzzle. The capsule containing the terrible dissolving compound shattered on the armor.

Doc had saved himself!

Supporting the vast weight on his back with one hand, Doc used the other to tear off the armor and the front of his coat. The Smoke of Eternity was very potent—it might creep around the armor.

Some of the weird stuff spilled on the deadfall. The ponderous timbers began dissolving.

Not without effort, Doc moved rearward along the passage a few feet, being careful the while not to permit the heavy roof to crush him lower.

He listened to the elated conversation of his attackers.

"That," said one of the men, "fixes the bronze guy!"

"Hey!" barked another an instant later. "What's the noise?"

Men could be heard, charging wildly onto the *Jolly Roger!*

"We gotta look into this!"

Doc's assailants hurried away.

The moment they were gone, Doc employed the full power of his huge muscles and lifted the deadfall. He worked clear, afterward easing the deadfall down so as not to

make a thump.

Doc crept out on deck. Forward, a man was snarling.

“Let ’em have it!” were his words.

The man never heard the mighty bronze Nemesis that towered up behind him.

Doc Savage took in the scene. Renny, Long Tom, Ham, Johnny, Monk, and Oliver Wording Bittman were all in the hold, brightened by flashlight beams.

The fellows who thought they had just killed Doc were gripping machine guns.

Also gathered about were the other members of the gang who had robbed the bank.

All the thieves had returned!

Doc’s eyes searched for Kar. No sign of the master mind did he discern.

The machine gunners were preparing to fire. The leader of the gang would be the first to kill. He hissed, “*Now!*”

But the fellow’s trigger finger did not discharge a single shot! The rapid-firer was whisked out of his clutch by a grip of such strength there was no resisting it.

The weapon erupted a loud squawl of reports. A ghastly lead storm struck Kar’s assembled slayers. Dying men toppled over the hatch rim, to fall into the hold like ripe fruit.

“Doc!” howled Monk, down in the hold. “It’s Doc!”

The respite furnished by their bronze leader gave the besieged men time to unlimber their compact guns.

Kar’s gunmen who had been covering them from the bulkhead door now tried to shoot. They were too late. A hot wind of bullets wilted them.

The captive Doc’s friends had been about to question tried to escape. Johnny knocked him cold with a set of bony knuckles.

With powerful leaps, Renny and Monk sailed upward and grasped the hatch rim.

“We’ll help Doc!” Renny clipped.

Doc needed little help, though. By the time Renny and Monk pulled themselves outside, a Kar killer flung down his weapon.

“Don’t croak me!” he blubbered.

“The rest of you—drop your guns!” Doc’s powerful voice dominated the uproar.

Weapons clattered on the deck. Arms flew skyward. The bleating pleas for mercy made a bedlam like a yelping coyote pack.

“What a brave gang!” sneered waspish, quick-thinking Ham. He kicked a dropped submachine gun. “Only take these toys away from them and they are helpless!”

“Tie them up,” Doc directed. “I’m going to have a talk with the one who seems to have taken Squint’s place as straw boss.”

Doc collared the man who led him into the deadfall trap in the passage—the fellow who had fired the dissolving compound at Doc only a few minutes before.

A whine of fear escaped the man. He looked at Doc’s golden eyes, gleaming in the luminance of flashlights, and the whine became a screech.

“Lemme go!” he slavered. He was afraid he would be killed on the spot.

“He don’t want much!” Monk chuckled fiercely.

Doc held the man, forcing their eyes to meet. “Where’s Kar?”

“I don’t know anybody by that——” The lie ended in a loud wail as Doc’s amazing hands tightened a trifle.

“Do you want to die?” Doc’s voice was like the knell of doom.

The man obviously didn’t. And his resolution not to talk was rapidly evaporating.

“I dunno where Kar is,” he whimpered. “Honest, I don’t! He’s got a new hangout that nobody knows about but himself. He calls me whenever he’s got orders. I don’t even know who he is. I ain’t never seen him! That’s the truth—honest, it is!”

“Ever hear of a man named Gabe Yuder?” Doc inquired.

The captive wriggled. “I dunno!”

Doc’s tone commanded the truth. “Have you?”

“I guess so. I seen that name on a packin’ box, once. I think it was a box the Smoke of Eternity was shipped in.”

“Is he Kar?”

“Huh?” The captive considered the matter. “He might be.”

“Where does Kar keep his supply of the Smoke of Eternity?”

A mean, foxy look came into the prisoner’s face. He glanced to one side, then hurriedly back. “What do I get for telling?”

“Plenty!” said Doc. “Your life.”

“You gotta promise to turn me loose,” whined the captive. “It’s worth that to you, too. I’ll tell you why! Kar has only got so much of the Smoke of Eternity. It’s all in the hidin’ place. Kar can’t make any more until he goes way off to an island somewhere an’ gets the stuff to make it out of. You destroy his supply and you’ve got him.”

“No.” Doc’s bronze mouth was grim. “You will remain my prisoner. I will not free you.”

“Then I don’t tell you where the Smoke of Eternity is!”

“You don’t have to.”

“Huh?” The man’s eyes moved slightly—toward the same spot at which he had looked at first mention of the Smoke of Eternity hiding place.

That eye-play had shown Doc where the horrible dissolving compound was stored!

“I know where it is!” Doc’s voice had a triumphant ring.

“Where?” Monk demanded eagerly. “If we destroy the supply, and Kar can’t make any more, we’ve fixed him.”

“Until he goes to Thunder Island and gets whatever unknown element or substance is the basis of the weird stuff,” Doc pointed out. “I’ll show you where the cache is in a short while. First, we’ll do a couple of things. No. 1 is, tie up these prisoners.”

The binding was effected in short order.

“Now we get the gold ashore,” Doc directed.

This took considerably longer. Doc and Renny did the diving. They looped ropes around the sacks. The others hauled the coin to the wharf.

“Carry it to shore,” Doc commanded, to their puzzlement.

The sun was well up before the task was completed.

Doc now took care that all the prisoners were clear of the *Jolly Roger*, and the wharf as well, by some hundreds of feet.

He dived overboard near the stern. As he had suspected, he found the shelf on which the gold coin had been hidden was not the only one fixed to the *Jolly Roger* hull below the water line. On the opposite side was another.

The Smoke of Eternity cache was here. It consisted of a single large canister of the rare metal which was impervious to its effects. This had a capacity of perhaps five gallons.

Doc brought the canister to the deck. He placed it in plain view atop the deck house.

Going ashore, he used a pistol to perforate the canister.

The result was awesome to the extreme. The earlier phenomena when the Smoke of Eternity was released were pygmy in relation. It was like comparing a match flame to an eruption of Vesuvius. In the space of seconds, the *Jolly Roger*, the ramshackle wharf, and a sizable bite of the shore were wiped out.

It was impossible to tell how deep into the bowels of the earth the annihilation extended. But it must have been a respectable distance, judging from the terrific rush of water to fill the hole. Anchored ships far down the Hudson snapped their hawsers, so great was the pull of water. A Weehawken ferry gave its passengers a hair-raising ride as it went with the current.

The gray, vile smoke arose in such prodigious quantity as to make a pall over all the midtown section of New York. The play of strange electrical sparks created a sound like a hurricane going through a monster forest.

But, beyond a general scare, no harm to anybody resulted.

Chapter 14

THE RACE

One week had passed since the incidents on the *Jolly Roger*. The nearly two million dollars in gold coin, which Doc had recovered, had been restored to the bank. One noteworthy incident accompanied the return of the wealth.

The officials of the bank learned Doc was a great benefactor of mankind, that his purpose in life was the righting of wrongs. So they offered a generous reward of one hundred thousand dollars, thinking Doc would decline to accept, and that the bank would get a lot of good publicity.

Doc fooled them. He took the money. And the next day ten restaurants began supplying free meals to deserving unemployed.

The police never received a single one of Kar's villains for trial and sentence to the penitentiary. Instead, Doc sent his prisoners to a certain institution for the mentally imperfect, in a mountain section of up-State New York.

All criminals have a defective mental balance, otherwise they would not be lawbreakers. A famous psychologist would treat Kar's men. It might take years. But when released, they would be completely cured of their criminal tendencies.

"Which is what I call taking a lot of pains with 'em!" Monk had remarked.

Of Kar, there had been no sign. The man had gone into hiding, probably far from New York, Doc rather suspected.

Despite the absence of any hostile move by the master villain, Oliver Wording Bittman had remained close to Doc and his men. This was a privilege Doc could not deny the man, in view of the debt of gratitude the elder Savage had owed him.

"You can play safe," Doc said. "Although it is hardly likely Kar will tackle us again, now that his supply of the Smoke of Eternity is gone. We have him checkmated—until he can replenish himself with the ghastly stuff."

"You think he will try to do that?" Bittman inquired.

"I hope so."

Bittman was puzzled.

"I have put Ham to checking on the passports issued all over the country," Doc explained. "The moment Kar leaves the United States for the South Seas, we will know it."

"You think Kar must go to Thunder Island for the unknown element or substance which is the main ingredient of the Smoke of Eternity?"

"I am sure of it. The fact that Kar stole the rock samples from Thunder Island proves it. By stealing the samples from my safe, he told me what I hoped to learn by analyzing the rocks."

Doc Savage was even now waiting for Ham to appear with an early morning report on the passports he had examined. Ham was having the pictures from all passports sent by telephoto from the west coast.

While waiting, Doc Savage was taking his remarkable two-hour routine of exercise. They were unlike anything else in the world. Doc's father had started him taking them when he could hardly walk, and Doc had continued them religiously from that day.

These exercises were solely responsible for Doc's amazing physical and mental powers. He made his muscles work against each other, straining until a fine film of perspiration covered his mighty bronze body. He juggled a number of a dozen figures in his head, multiplying, dividing, extracting square and cube roots.

He had an apparatus which made sound waves of frequencies so high and low the ordinary human ear could not detect them. Through a lifetime of practice, Doc had perfected his ears to a point where the sounds registered. He named several score of different odors after a quick olfactory test of small vials racked in the case which held his exercising apparatus, and which accompanied Doc wherever he journeyed.

He read a page of Braille printing—the writing for the blind which is a system of upraised dots—so rapidly his fingers merely seemed to stroke the sheet. This was to attune his sense of touch.

He had many other varied parts in his routine. They filled the entire two hours at a terrific pace, with no time out for rest.

Ham suddenly appeared, twirling his sword cane. He had an air of bearing important news.

"You had the right dope, Doc!" he declared. "Look at this set of pictures which were telephotoed from San Francisco!"

He displayed four reproductions, still wet from the developer bath of the telephoto apparatus. Doc examined them.

"Four of Kar's men!" he declared. "They're part of the group Squint assembled!"

"They sailed on the liner *Sea Star*, bound for New Zealand," Ham explained.

"Sailed!"

"Exactly. The vessel put out to sea yesterday."

Doc swung to the telephone. He called the number of one of New York's most modern airports. He instructed, "My low-wing speed plane, the large one—I want it checked over and fueled to capacity at once!"

"There was no passport issued to Gabe Yuder," Ham pointed out.

"Gabe Yuder may not be Kar!" Doc declared. "Kar would fear to monkey with a passport. Possibly he stowed away on the *Sea Star*, in the cabin of one of his men. At any rate, it's up to us to stop that gang from securing from Thunder Island the element that is the basic ingredient of the Smoke of Eternity."

Doc now called the large banking house with which he did business.

"Has it arrived?" he inquired of the firm president.

"Yes, Mr. Savage," was the answer. "The sum was exactly six million dollars. It was cabled by the National Bank of Blanco Grande, in the Central American Republic of Hidalgo, exactly on schedule."

"Thank you," said Doc, and hung up.

This fabulous sum was from Doc Savage's secret reservoir of wealth—a lost valley in the impenetrable mountains of Hidalgo, a valley inhabited by a race of golden-skinned people who were pure descendants of the ancient Mayan nation. In the valley was a great treasure cavern and a fabulous mine of gold—the treasure-trove of ancient Maya.

It was from this amazing spot that Doc's limitless wealth came. But the money was in a sense not his—he must use it in the thing to which his life was devoted, in traveling to odd ends of the world in search of those needing help and punishment, and administering to them.

His method of letting the Mayans know when to send him a mule train laden with gold was as strange as the rest—he broadcast from a powerful radio station on a certain wave length at high noon on a seventh day. The chief of the Mayans listened in at this hour.

“We don't need to worry about cash,” Doc told Ham.

At this point Oliver Wording Bittman, the taxidermist, spoke up.

“I hope you may consider my assistance of some value.”

“You mean you wish to accompany us?” Doc inquired.

“I certainly do. I must confess my contact with you thus far has been very enjoyable and the excitement highly exhilarating. I should like to continue in your company. My experience on the expedition which I took to New Zealand with Jerome Coffern should render me of some value.”

“You speak any of the native dialects?”

“One or two.”

To Doc's lips came words of a language native to the South Seas. Bittman replied, although rather uncertainly, in the same tongue.

But Doc still hesitated. He did not want to lead this man into danger, although the fellow seemed pathetically eager to go along.

“Perhaps I can assist in finding natives who accompanied Jerome Coffern and Kar to Thunder Island,” Bittman said hopefully. “Talking to those men should help us.”

That decided Doc.

“You shall go with us if you wish,” he said.

Preparations were pushed swiftly. Doc's five men knew what they might possibly need.

Monk took a unique, extremely portable chemical laboratory which he had perfected.

Long Tom took some parts from which he could create an astounding variety of electrical mechanisms.

Renny, the engineer, took care of charts and navigation instruments, as well as machine guns—for Renny was a remarkable rapid-firer marksman.

Johnny posted himself on the geology and natives of the district they were to visit, while Ham cleared up aspects of law.

“We’ll have to wait two days on a liner from the Pacific coast,” Renny complained.

“I have a scheme to remedy that!” Doc assured him.

The afternoon was young when they took off in Doc’s speed plane. This craft was a latest design, trimotored, low-wing job. The landing gear folded up into the wings, offering little air resistance. It had a cruising speed of about two hundred miles an hour.

It was the final word in aircraft.

The ship climbed rapidly. At sixteen thousand feet, it found a favorable air current. The Appalachian Mountains squirmed below. Later, clouds cracked open to give a sight of Pittsburgh.

The passengers rode in comfort. The fireproof cabin permitted them to smoke. The cabin was also soundproofed. The all-metal ship had a gasoline capacity that, in an emergency, could take it nonstop across the Atlantic.

Doc flew. He was as accomplished at flying as at other things. His five friends were also pilots of better than average ability.

At Wichita, Kansas, Doc landed to refuel, and to telephone long-distance to the San Francisco office of the shipping firm which owned the *Sea Star*, the liner which Kar’s men had boarded.

The *Sea Star* was already some hundreds of miles offshore, the owners informed him.

It was night when they swooped down upon an airport near Los Angeles.

“This is what I call traveling!” Oliver Wording Bittman said admiringly.

They took on sandwiches. Monk purchased a can of tobacco and cigarette papers. The fuel tanks were filled to capacity with high test. Bittman went off with the word he was going to shop for some medicine effective against air sickness.

In the meantime, workmen had been supplanting the plane’s wheels with long floats. A tractor hauled it to the water. Doc had purposefully selected a flying field near the shore. The whole thing required less than two hours.

Taking the air, Doc nosed straight out into the Pacific.

“Good Lord!” Bittman gulped. “Are we going to fly the ocean?”

“Not unless Renny has forgotten how to navigate, and Long Tom can’t take radio bearings,” Doc replied. “We’re overtaking the *Sea Star*.”

“But the plane——”

“The owners of the *Sea Star*, at my request, radioed the captain to lift the plane aboard his craft.”

Long Tom worked continuously over the radio equipment, his pale fingers flying from dial to dial. Periodically, he called to Renny the exact direction from which the *Sea Star*’s radio signals came, as disclosed by the directional loop aerial he was using. It was ticklish business, flying directly to a ship so far out to sea.

Daylight had come again before they sighted the *Sea Star*. The liner was steaming in a calm sea.

Doc landed near by. He taxied expertly into the lee of the massive hull. A cargo boom swung over. Lines dropped from its end. Doc secured these to stout steel eyes which had been built—with thought of this very purpose—into the speed plane.

Passengers crowded the rails and cheered as the plane was hoisted aboard the liner. Curious speculation was rife. Doc's bronze, giant figure created the sensation it always did.

After seeing his plane lashed down on the forward deck, Doc closeted himself with the *Sea Star's* master.

"You have four desperate men aboard," he explained. "Here are their pictures." Doc exhibited the telephoto copies of the passport photographs of Kar's four men.

The ship captain eyed them. He gave a gasp of surprise.

"Those four men transferred to a small, but very speedy and seaworthy yacht which overhauled us yesterday!" he declared.

"Then we're out of luck for the time being," Doc murmured, his powerful voice showing none of the disappointment he felt.

Doc now described Gabe Yuder—repeating Bittman's word-picture of the man. "Is such a fellow aboard?"

"I do not believe so," replied the commander. "There is no one by the name of Gabe Yuder, or Kar, and no one answering the description you have just given me."

"Thank you," replied Doc.

He left the captain's cabin slowly and conveyed the bad news to his companions.

"But how on earth did they know we were coming?" Oliver Wording Bittman murmured, twirling the watch-chain scalpel about a forefinger.

"Yes—how did they know?" Monk growled.

"Kar must have had some one in New York shadowing us," Doc offered. "When we took off by plane, Kar received the news and put two and two together. Possibly the fast yacht which took his men off was a rumrunning vessel he got in contact with through underworld channels."

"Well, what do we do about it?" Renny inquired.

"The only thing left to do—tangle with Kar on Thunder Island."

The following days aboard the *Sea Star* were nothing if not monotonous. Doc and his friends had rambled the world too much for an ordinary ocean voyage to prove interesting.

They did not know what Kar might be doing. Further conversation with the master of the *Sea Star* convinced Doc the yacht which had taken Kar's men aboard was very fast indeed—speedier even than the liner!

"The fiend may be ahead of us!" Bittman wailed.

"Probably is," Doc admitted.

When some hundreds of miles from New Zealand, Doc could have taken a short cut by transferring to the air. But at the moment the *Sea Star* was bucking a South Sea gale,

a thing of whistling winds filled with shotty spray, and gigantic waves which all but topped the bridge.

The plane was fortunate to exist, lashed down on the forward deck. It could not possibly have been lowered overside, so as to take off. And the *Sea Star* was not equipped with catapults for launching planes, as are some modern ocean greyhounds.

So Doc remained aboard.

Auckland, the *Sea Star's* port of call in New Zealand, was a welcome sight. The water was calm enough in the harbor to permit the unloading of Doc's plane, although the gale still raged.

Johnny, the geologist, visited various local sources of information and dug up what he could on Thunder Island.

"It's a queer place," he reported to Doc. "It's the cone of a gigantic active volcano. Not a speck of vegetation grows on the outside of the cone. It's solid rock."

Johnny looked mysterious.

"Here's the strange part, Doc," he declared. "That crater is a monster. It must be twenty miles across. And it is always filled with steam. Great clouds of vapor hang over it. I talked to an airplane pilot who had flown over it some years ago. He gave me an excellent description."

"That's fine." Doc smiled.

"He says there's another island, a coral atoll, about fifty miles from Thunder Island," Johnny continued. "This is inhabited by a tribe of half-savage natives. He recommended that for our headquarters."

"Not a bad idea," agreed Doc.

Oliver Wording Bittman had been away in search of the native New Zealanders who had taken Jerome Coffern and Kar to Thunder Island months ago. He returned shaking his head.

"A ghastly thing!" he said hollowly. "Every man who accompanied Jerome Coffern and Kar has mysteriously disappeared in recent months."

Doc Savage's golden eyes gave off diamond-hard lights. He saw Kar's hand here, again. The man was a devil incarnate! He had callously murdered every one who might connect him with Thunder Island. His only slip had been when his two hired killers slew Jerome Coffern almost in the presence of Doc Savage!

"I hope I get my hooks on that guy!" Renny said grimly. His great hands—hands that could squeeze the very sap from blocks of green timber—opened and shut slowly.

"We'll do our best to get you that wish." Determination was uppermost in Doc's powerful voice. "We're hopping off for Thunder Island at once!"

Chapter 15

THE FLYING DEVIL

Thunder Island!

The great cone projected high enough above the southern seas that they sighted it while still more than a hundred miles distant. The air was clear; the sun flamed with a scintillant revelry. Yet above the giant crater, and obviously crawling out of its interior, lurked masses of cloud.

“The dope I got from that pilot was right!” Johnny declared, quickly removing his glasses with the magnifying lens to the left side so he could peer through high-magnification binoculars. “Note the steam which always forms a blanket above the crater.”

“Strange lookin’ place!” Monk muttered, his little eyes taking in Thunder Island.

“Not so strange!” Johnny corrected. “Steam-filled volcanic craters are not so uncommon in this part of the world. It is a region of active craters. There is, for instance, Ngauruhoe, a cone in New Zealand which emits steam and vapor incessantly. And for further example of unusual earth activity, take the great region of geysers, strange lakes of boiling mud and hot springs, which is also in New Zealand. Like the phenomena in the Yellowstone Park, in the United States, this region——”

“You can serve that geology lecture with our supper,” snorted Monk. “What I meant was the shape of that cone. Notice how steep it gets toward the top? Man alive! It’s a thousand feet straight up and down in more than one spot!”

“The cone rim is inaccessible,” said Johnny, peevishly.

“You mean nobody has ever climbed up there and looked over?”

“I believe that is what inaccessible means!”

“You’re gettin’ touchy as Ham!” Monk snorted. “Hey, fellows! There’s the little atoll that is inhabited! We make our base there, don’t we?”

The atoll in question was much smaller than Thunder Island. Of coral formation, it was like a starved green doughnut with a piece of mirror in the center. This mirror was, of course, the lagoon.

Doc banked the plane for the atoll.

As they neared the green ring, they saw the vegetation was of the type usual to tropical isles. There was *noni enata*, a diminutive bush bearing crimson pears, ironwood, umbrella ferns which grew in profusion, candlenut trees, and the paper mulberry with yellow blossoms and cottony, round leaves. Hibiscus and pandanus spread their green and glossy flowers, and there were many *petavii*, a kind of banana, the fronds of which arched high.

“It’s inhabited, all right!” announced Monk. “There’s the native devil-devil house on top of the highest ground!”

Johnny used his superpower binoculars on the structure of pagan worship, then gasped, “The inhabitants must be near savages! The devil-devil house is surrounded by

human skulls mounted on poles!”

“Not an uncommon practice,” began Johnny. “Formerly——”

“There’s the village!” barked Long Tom.

The cluster of thatched huts had been lost among the coconut palms at the lagoon edge. They looked like shaggy, dark beehives on stilts.

Natives dashed about, excited by the plane. They were well-built fellows, gaudy *pareus* of *tapa* cloth, made from the bark of the paper mulberry, girded about their hips. Many had tropical blooms in their hair, a number of the women wearing a blossom over an ear. Some of the men had scroll-like designs in blue *ama* ink upon their bodies, making them quite ugly, judged by civilized standards.

Several *prahus* appeared on the lagoon, each boat filled with perturbed natives. The brown men grasped spears, and knives of bamboo as sharp as a razor, which could be sharpened again simply by splitting a piece from the blade.

“They seem kinda excited!” Monk grunted.

“Yes—entirely too excited!” Doc replied thoughtfully.

Doc’s big plane wheeled over the atoll as gracefully as a mighty gull. It dipped. With a *swis-s-s-h* of a noise, the floats settled on the glass-smooth lagoon.

The *prahus* filled with natives fled as though the very devil was after them. Thousands of *koi*, a black bird which travels in dense flocks, arose from the luxuriant jungle. As Doc cut the motors, they could hear the excited notes of cockatoos.

“I don’t like the way they’re acting,” Doc warned. “We’d better keep our eyes open, brothers!”

He grounded the plane near the cluster of thatched huts. Tall palm trees showed evidence of being cultivated for coconuts—at least, they were fitted with the ingenious native traps for the destructive *tupa* crab.

The traps consisted of a false “earth” well up the tree. The crabs, wont to descend the palms backward, upon touching these “earths,” would release their grip on the tree under the impression they were on the ground, thus falling to destruction.

Suddenly Ham gave a startled yelp, and dropping his sword cane, clapped a hand to his leg. An instant later, the fiendish, chuckling echoes of a rifle shot leaped along the lagoon.

Some one was sniping at them!

More bullets buzzed loudly near the plane.

Ham was barely scratched. He was the first to dive out of the plane and take shelter among the palms. The others followed, guns ready.

Doc’s golden eyes noted a surprising thing. The shot seemed as much of a shock to the natives as to the flyers!

After a moment, Doc’s perceptive ears caught a word or two of the native language. He recognized the lingo—it was one of the myriad of vernaculars in his great magazine of knowledge.

“Why do you treat peaceful newcomers in this fashion?” he called in the dialect.

The natives were impressed by hearing their language spoken in such perfect fashion by the mighty bronze man. Soon they replied.

For some minutes, strange words clucked back and forth. The tension subsided visibly. The very power of Doc's pleasant voice seemed to spread good will.

"This is strange!" Doc told his fellows, none of whom comprehended the native tongue. "They don't know who fired that shot. They're trying to tell me they thought there were no rifles on the island!"

"They're liars!" Monk grinned. "Or else the bumblebees here are made out of lead."

"They're wrong, of course," Doc replied thoughtfully. "But I'm sure they did not know there was a rifle here. There was apparently but one gun, at that."

"We'd better stop gabbing and hunt for the sniper!" Ham clipped waspishly. "In case you've forgotten, he nearly winged me!"

"Keep your shirt on, Ham." Doc indicated natives who were prowling off through the tropical growth. "They're instituting a search for the hidden marksman."

The sniper was not located, though. The natives searched briskly for a time, but the natural languidness common to tropical folk soon caused them to lose interest when they found nobody. Standing around in groups and staring at the white men, especially their mighty leader of bronze, was much more interesting.

"It never fails!" Monk chuckled. "Doc is a sensation wherever he goes!"

Ham cast his eyes over the crowd surrounding Monk. This was only slightly smaller than the group about Doc. Monk's incredible homeliness and titanic, apelike frame had them utterly agog.

"You don't do so bad!" Ham jeered. "They figure you're the missing link!"

But he regretted the insult a moment later when Monk cornered a native and gravely explained, by gestures, that the tribe must watch the many pigs running about, or Ham would steal them. It didn't help matters when fully thirty natives ran up with squealing porkers in their arms and tried to thrust the gifts onto Ham.

Renny was entertaining and overawing the islanders by the amazing feat of crushing hard coconuts in one vast hand.

Johnny and Long Tom, well-armed and alert, moved into the jungle to get breadfruit which weighed several pounds apiece and were pitted on the surface like a golf ball. Delicate, beautiful orchids were like varicolored butterflies in the shadowed, luxuriant growth. The hunters also gathered coconuts, so as to make *feikai*, or roasted breadfruit mixed with coconut-milk sauce.

Oliver Wording Bittman wandered alone into the jungle, but returned soon and kept close to Doc, as though for protection.

Doc busied himself performing a minor operation upon an ill native. He was thus engaged when an exciting development occurred.

A machine gun blatted a procession of reports. By the terrific swiftness of the shots, Doc knew it was one of the guns he had himself invented.

A man screamed with a mortal wound.

Kar-o-o-m!

A tremendous explosion brought a tremor to the hut in which Doc was operating upon the native. He and Bittman rushed out.

Near the plane, a sooty cauliflower of smoke had sprouted. Bits of débris still swirled in the air. It fell about a gruesome, torn thing upon the lagoon edge. The dismembered body of a man!

“It was one of Kar’s gunmen!” Renny called. Renny held a smoking machine gun. “The fellow had a bomb, with the fuse already lighted! He was running to throw it in the plane when I saw him and shot.”

“Sure it was one of Kar’s men?” Doc inquired.

“You bet. One of the four we hoped to trap on the *Sea Star*!”

“That is too bad,” Doc declared regretfully. “It means the yacht which took them off the *Sea Star* was speedy enough to get here ahead of us.”

“You think Kar is right here on this coral atoll?”

Instead of replying, Doc proceeded to question what his accurate judgment told him were the most intelligent of the natives. What he learned cast an important light on the situation.

“Listen to this!” he translated for his friends. “I asked the natives if they had seen a ship, but they haven’t. Then I asked them if they had sighted a man-made bird that flies, such as ours. And the answer explains their terror at our arrival.”

“You mean Kar came around in a plane and bombed or machine gunned them?” Ham queried.

“Nothing so simple as that! The reply they gave me was utterly fantastic. They claim great, flying devils nearly as large as our plane sometimes come from Thunder Island to seize and devour members of the tribe. They thought we were such a flying devil.”

“They must drink caterpillar liquor!” Monk snorted.

“Eh?” said Ham.

“Two drinks and the birds are after you!”

“Furthermore,” Doc continued, “they claim they sighted such a flying devil only yesterday. Questioned closely, they admit it did not flap its wings, and that it made a loud and steady groaning noise. That means they saw a plane. And what craft could it be but Kar’s?”

Renny growled, “Kar is——”

“Already at Thunder Island! The man you just wiped out was landed here by Kar for the specific purpose of stopping us in case we visited this atoll. He has been hiding from the natives. No doubt, Kar intended to pick him up later.”

“But where did Kar get a plane——”

“Honolulu, New Zealand, or even Australia. They had time. Remember, the storm delayed the *Sea Star* on which we came. It is possible Kar evaded that storm, and his boat was faster.”

Ham slanted his sword cane at the sun. “What do you say we fly over and have a look at Thunder Island? There’s barely time before dark.”

“We’ll do that very thing, brothers,” Doc said swiftly. “Every one of you will put on parachutes. Kar’s plane might attack us and have the good luck to slam an incendiary bullet into our gas tank. In such event, ’chutes would be pretty handy.”

Preparations were quickly completed. The big speed plane skimmed down the glassy lagoon and took the air, watched by an awed crowd of natives. Doc opened the throttles wide and boomed for Thunder Island at better than two hundred miles an hour. Night was not far off.

The volcanic cone gathered majestic height as they flew nearer. Its vast size was astounding, impressive. The steaming clouds piled like cotton above it. It was as though the world was hollow and filled with foam, and the foam was escaping through this gigantic vent.

“One of the most striking sights of my life!” said the artistic Ham.

Even the prosaic Monk was impressed, agreeing, “Yeah—hot stuff!”

Doc’s mighty bronze hand guided the plane around the stupendous cone of bleak stone that was Thunder Island. Nowhere was there a blade of green growth. The titanic, rocky cliffs could not have been more denuded had they been seared with acid. The lifeless aspect, the baldness of the waste, was depressing.

“Even a goat couldn’t live there!” Renny muttered.

“Unless he formed an appetite for rocks,” snorted the irrepressible Monk.

Nowhere did they see sign of Kar!

“That’s queer!” Ham declared. “There are no canyons or great caves in which he could hide his plane. If he was here, we certainly would have seen him.”

“Do you think he has secured a fresh supply of the element from which the Smoke of Eternity is made, and gone back to civilization?” asked Oliver Wording Bittman. “He most naturally wouldn’t tarry here.”

“Impossible to tell—except that I doubt he would have deserted his man on the atoll,” replied Doc. “There is one chance—we’ll try the crater.”

“Into that terrible steam!” Bittman wailed. “We shall perish!”

Bittman looked terrified at the prospect. He even moved for the plane door as though to take to his parachute. But Renny’s great hand restrained him.

“You’ll be safe enough with Doc,” Renny said confidently.

“We shall be scalded——”

“I think not,” Doc assured him. “The top of that cone is many thousands of feet above sea level. Indeed, you will notice traces of snow near the rim. At that height, it takes little more than moist, warm air to make a cloud like this ‘steam’ over the crater.”

“You mean we may be able to fly down into the crater?” Monk asked.

“We’re going to try just that,” Doc smiled.

Up and up climbed the powerful speed plane, motors moaning on increasing song of effort. The first wisps of steam whipped grizzled pennants about the craft. Doc opened the cockpit windows and kept an accurate check on a thermometer.

“This is nothing but cloud formation caused by very warm and moist air lifting out of the crater!” he called, raising his voice over the motor howl—for opening the windows nullified the soundproofing of the cabin.

The vapor thickened. It poured densely into the cabin. The very world about them seemed to turn a bilious gray hue. Visibility was wiped out, except for a few score yards, beyond the wing tips.

“Long Tom,” Doc’s energetic voice had little trouble piercing the engine clamor, “set the danger alarm for five hundred feet!”

Long Tom hastily complied. This danger alarm was simply an apparatus which sent out a series of bell-like sounds very distinctive from the motor uproar, and another sensitive device which measured the time that ensued until an echo was tossed back by the earth. If this time interval became too short, an alarm bell rang.

With it in operation, if the plane came blindly within five hundred feet of the crater bottom or sides, an alarm would sound. Doc had perfected this device. It was little different from the apparatus all modern liners use to take depth measurements.

Deeper into the crater moaned the plane. It spiraled tightly, as though descending the thread of an invisible screw in the crater center. It might have been a tiny fish in a sea of milk.

“Let’s go back!” wailed Oliver Wording Bittman. “This is a horrible place!”

“It does kinda give a guy the creeps!” Monk muttered. “*Ye-e-ow-w! Look at that thing!*”

Monk’s squawl of surprise was so loud it threatened to tear the thin metal sides off the plane. Every eye focused in the direction both his great, hairy arms pointed. What they saw was little, but it chilled the blood in their veins.

A black, evil mass seemed to bulk for an instant in the gray domain of vapor. It might have been a tortured, sooty cloud from the way it convulsed and changed its shape. Then it was gone, sucking after it a distinct wake of the pigeon-colored vapor.

“I c-couldn’t h-have s-seen what I d-did!” Monk stuttered.

“What was it?” Ham shouted. “What was that thing in the cloud? It looked big as this plane!”

Monk panted like a runner. His eyes still protruded.

“It wasn’t quite that b-big!” he gulped. “But it was the ugliest thing I ever saw! And I’ve seen plenty of ugly things!”

“If you own a mirror, you have!” Ham couldn’t resist putting in.

Monk made no reference to pigs—which was in itself demonstration of what a shock he had just received.

“I saw one of them flyin’ devils the natives on the atoll told Doc about!” Monk declared. “And what I mean, flyin’ devil is the name for it.”

“You must have had a swig of that caterpillar liquor,” Ham jeered.

“Quick!” Doc Savage’s mighty voice crashed through the plane. “The machine guns! Off to the right! Get that thing! *Get it! Shoot it!*”

Every one gazed to the right.

“It’s comin’ back—the flyin’ devil!” Monk bawled.

The black, evil mass had appeared in the misty world again. It convulsed and altered its shape, as before. But now the aviators had the opportunity to see what it really was—they could drink in the awful horror of the monster with their eyes.

The thing was flying along—keeping pace with the plane! Terrible eyes appraised the ship, as though deciding whether to attack.

It had a ghastly set of jaws—nearly as long as a man’s body, and spiked full of foul, conical teeth. The body had neither hair nor feathers—it was like the skin of a dog denuded by the mange.

Most awesome of all were the wings, for they were membranous, like those of a bat. As they folded and unfolded in flight, the membrane fluttered and flapped like unclean gray canvas. On the tip of the first joint of the wings were four highly developed fingers, armed with fearful talons.

The appalling monster suddenly gave vent to its cry. This was an outrageous combination of a roaring and gargling, a sound of such volume that it reduced the pant of the plane motors to insignificance. And the noise had an ending as ghastly as its note—it stopped in a manner that gave one the sickening impression that the noise itself had choked to death the gruesome thing.

“A prehistoric pterodactyl!” screamed Johnny. “That’s what it is!”

“A what?” grunted Monk.

“A pterodactyl, a flying reptile of the Pterosauri order. They were supposed to have become extinct near the end of the Mesozoic age.”

“They didn’t!” snorted Monk. “You can look for yourself!”

“Use those machine guns!” Doc directed. “The thing is going to attack us!”

The hideous flying reptile was slowly opening its huge, tooth-armed jaws!

Rapid-firer barrels poked through the plane windows. They spewed. Empty cartridges rained on the floorboards. Bullets found their mark.

The aerial reptile started its blood-curdling cry. The sound ended in a drawn, piercing blare. The thing fell, bones broken, foul canvaslike wings flapping. It was like a dirty gray cloth somebody had dropped.

Monk grinned. “What a relief that it——”

The plane lurched madly as Doc whipped the controls about.

A second of the prehistoric pterodactyls had materialized out of the vapor. A gigantic, eerie thing reminiscent of a mangy crocodile clad in a great gray cape, it plunged at the plane.

Its horrid, conical teeth closed upon the left wing. A wrench, a gritty scream of rending metal—and the plane wing was ruined! The ship keeled off on a wing tip and began a slow spin.

The pterodactyl hung to the wing it had grabbed, like a tenacious bulldog.

“The parachutes!” Doc barked. “Jump! We may crash any instant!”

Chapter 16

THE AWFUL NIGHT

In quick succession, Doc's five men piled through the plane door, hands on the ripcord rings of their back-pack parachutes.

Renny was first to go. Monk paused to grab his can of tobacco out of a seat, then followed. Long Tom, Ham and Johnny dived after him.

Only Oliver Wording Bittman held back, trembling.

"I don't want——" he whined.

"Neither do we!" Doc said firmly. "There's no choice!" Then, before it should be too late, Doc swept Bittman up in bronze arms of vast power and sprang with him into space.

As calmly as though he were on solid ground, Doc snapped open Bittman's 'chute, then dropped down a few hundred feet and bloomed his own mushroom of silk. A jerk, and he floated gently. He had time to view the astounding domain about him.

The vapor, as he had half suspected would be the case, was becoming less dense. At the same time, the warmth increased. The hot, moist air, suddenly striking the cool strata above the crater, formed the steamlike clouds, which had curtained whatever additional shocking secrets the place held.

A stutter of machine gun shots below drew Doc's golden eyes. He hastily plucked his own compact rapid-firer from its belt holster.

The pterodactyl had released its silly hold on the falling plane and had attacked Johnny. The lanky archaeologist's bullets had driven its first dive aside. But it was coming back. The repellent jaws were widely distended. Each of the many odious, conical teeth could pierce through a man's body.

Doc's machine gun clattered. He knew where to aim. Greater even than the learning of Johnny, whose profession was knowing the world and all its past, was Doc Savage's fund of knowledge on prehistoric reptiles and vegetation. Doc realized this pterodactyl probably had little or no brain. He shot for the neck bones and shattered them.

The air reptile tumbled away. Johnny lifted a grateful face.

"My shots didn't seem to do much good!" he called.

"Try for the neck or eyes!" Doc replied.

Strong air currents now made themselves felt. The parachutes were swept rapidly to one side, away from the edge of the crater.

Directly below, Doc's gaze rested upon a remarkable sight. It would have been a fearsome sight, too, except that his practiced eye told him they were going to be carried clear of danger by the wind.

A mud lake, narrow, but spreading for thousands of rods along the crater side, was below. A crust, resembling asphalt and apparently very hard, covered the lake. This must be nearly red-hot, judging from the heat of the moist air which rushed upward.

Probably this amazing mud lake reached in a horseshoe shape halfway around the crater. Certainly, the ends were lost to sight.

A natural lava wall confined it to the crater side, well above the floor.

The ruined plane fell into the mud lake. Its weight broke the crust. Instantly, there was a great eruption at that point. A geyser column of scalding, lavalike mud shot hundreds of feet upward, driven by steam pressure gathered beneath the crust. Steam itself now exuded. It made a deafening roar.

A thunderous crackling swept over the mud lake as the crust settled. From countless points came minor eruptions. The steam, squirting outward and upward, enveloped the falling parachutes.

They could not see where they were landing!

The parachutes pitched like leaves in the disturbed air. Not only did the gushing, superheated winds carry them clear of the mud lake, but they were flung far out on the crater floor.

Doc, compact machine gun in hand, waited. His golden eyes sought to pierce the steamy world. The air was so hot as to be near sickening. It possessed a weird, unusual fragrance.

It was like the atmosphere within a greenhouse—impregnated with the odor of rankly growing plants.

The thunderous crackling from the mud lake subsided as quickly as it began.

Suddenly a shocking din arose below. A piercing, trumpet-like cry quavered. A coarse, beastly bawling joined it. Tearing of branches, the hollow pops of green timber breaking, the dull reverberations of great bodies thumping the earth, made a nightmarish discord. It was a sound to make the flesh creep.

“Renny! Monk! The rest of you!” Doc’s resonant tones pealed through the hobgoblin clamor. “Spill air from one side of your ’chute and try to avoid the vicinity of that noise!”

From below the abyss of steam, where his men were lost from view, came replying shouts. But there was little time to comply.

The frond of an immense plant brushed past Doc’s mighty bronze form. The plant was of colossal size. It seemed to be something on the order of a tree fern. So towering was it that there elapsed a distinct interval before the parachute reached the ground.

Doc landed in a tangle of creepers and low trees which looked like ordinary evergreens. More ferns, these much smaller, made a spongy mat of the whole. It was like descending in a pile of enormous, coarse green cobwebs.

Shucking off the parachute harness, Doc sprang to less tangled footing. The ground was a soft mulch underfoot—as though fresh plowed.

The hideous uproar they had heard from the air had subsided! A low rumble had replaced it. This rumble seemed to be some great monster in flight! The sound was already some distance away, and departing like an express train.

Of a sudden, there came into the surrounding air the low, trilling note that was part of Doc. Now, more than ever, was that sound suggestive of a strange bird of the jungle.

It might have been a wind filtering through the ghostly, fantastic forest around about.

And as always, that inspiring sound conveyed some definite meaning. This time it was—be silent! There is danger near!

Doc knew that grisly, caterwauling concert he had heard while in the air meant a fight between behemoths of a prehistoric reptilian world. He recognized the plant forms about him. Some had been extinct for ages.

Doc had dropped into a land which was very much as it had been countless ages ago. A fearsome, blood-curdling land where survival of the fiercest was the only law!

Doc's strange sound trailed away in echoes that, although they possessed no definite tune, were entrancingly musical in their quality.

Now he could hear some gigantic horror breathing near by!

The breathing was hurried, as though the terrible thing had been engaged in strife. The sounds were hollow, very loud—almost like the pant of an idling freight locomotive!

Suddenly vegetation swished and crashed as the monster got into motion.

It was charging Doc!

Doc's mighty bronze figure flashed sidewise, moving with a speed such as it possibly had never before attained. But as he changed position, his golden eyes were sharpened for sight of the peril that rushed him.

He saw it—as fearful and loathsome a sight as human eyes ever beheld!

The shocking size of the horror was apparent. It bulged out of the steam like a tall house. It hopped on massive rear legs, balancing itself by a great tail, kangaroolike.

The two forelegs were tiny in proportion—like short strings dangling. Yet those forelegs that seemed so small were thicker through by far than Doc Savage's body!

The revolting odor of a carnivorous thing accompanied the dread apparition. The stench was of decaying gore. The hide of the monster had a pebbled aspect, somewhat like a crocodile. Its claws were frightful weapons of offense, being of such proportions as to easily grasp and crush a large bull.

Perhaps the most ghastly aspect of the thing were the teeth. They armored a blunt, revolting snout of a size as stupendous as the rest of the hopping terror.

So great was the weight of the thing that its feet sank into the spongy earth the depth of a tall man at each step.

“What is it, Doc?” Monk shouted.

“Tyrannosaurus!” Doc answered him. “Look lively!”

The monster reptile, after bounding past Doc, stopped. An instant following Monk's called words, the beast charged the sound of his voice.

“Dodge it, Monk!” Doc barked. “Dodge it! The thing probably has a very sluggish brain. That has always been supposed to be a trait of prehistoric dinosaurs. Get out of its path, and several seconds will elapse before it can make up its mind to follow you!”

Shrubs ripped. A stream of shots erupted from Monk's compact machine gun. Bushes fluttered again. Monk gave a bark of utter awe.

“Monk!” Doc called. “You shouldn’t have tried to shoot it! Nothing less than a cannon can even trouble that baby!”

“You’re tellin’ me!” Monk snorted. “Man! Man! The bat of a thing that chewed the wing of our plane was a pretty little angel alongside this cuss! *O-o-op!* Here it comes again!”

The noisy charge, and Monk’s dodging, was repeated. Monk did not fire this time. He knew Doc was right. The little machine guns, efficient though they might be, would bother this reptilian monster less than beans thumbed at an alligator.

“Made it!” Monk called.

“Then keep that noisy mouth shut!” snapped the waspish Ham. “It rushes the sound of your voice!”

The steam—it had come from the eruption of the mud lake—was rapidly disappearing. The ferocious tyrannosaurus would soon be able to search them out with its eyes!

“All of you get over with Monk!” Doc shouted.

He nimbly evaded the great reptile as it sought his voice, then worked over until Monk’s anthropoid figure loomed in the dispersing steam.

Oliver Wording Bittman was there. The taxidermist’s face was the color of a soiled handkerchief. His jaw jerked up and down visibly, but he had his tongue thrust between his teeth, fearful lest their chattering attract the awful bounding reptile.

Doc felt surprise. Bittman had turned into a craven coward! But this direful world in which they found themselves was enough to reduce the valor of even the bravest.

Johnny, Long Tom and Ham were with Monk. They, too, were pale. But the light of a magnificent courage glowed in their eyes. They were enthralled. They lived for adventure and excitement—and it was upon them in quantities undreamed of.

“Where’s Renny?” Doc’s tone was so low the odious tyrannosaurus, still prowling about, did not hear.

Renny was not present!

Doc’s shout pealed out like a great bell. “Renny! Renny!”

That drew the giant reptile. With frantic dodging, they evaded it.

But there came no answer from Renny!

“That—that cross between a crocodile, the Empire State Building and a kangaroo, must have got him!” Monk muttered in horror.

“A terrible fate!” gulped Johnny, the geologist. “The tyrannosaurus is generally believed to be the most destructive killing machine ever created by nature! To think that I should live to see the things in flesh and blood!”

“If you wanta live to tell about it, we gotta get away from the thing!” Monk declared. “How’ll we do it, Doc?”

“See if we cannot leave the vicinity silently,” Doc suggested.

An attempt to do this, however, nearly proved disastrous. The monster tyrannosaurus seemed to have very sensitive ears. Too, it could see them for a distance

of many yards, now that the steam had nearly dissipated. It rushed them.

Doc, to save the lives of his friends, took the awful risk of decoying the reptile away while the others fled. Only the power and agility of his mighty bronze body saved him, for once he had to dodge between the very legs of the monster, evading by a remarkable spring snapping, foul, fetid teeth that were nearly as long as a man's arm.

Gliding under a canopy of overlapping ferns, Doc evaded the bloodthirsty reptile.

Darkness was descending swiftly, for the steam above the pit, although it let through sunlight, kept out the moonbeams and made the period of twilight almost nonexistent.

While the days within the crater were probably as light as a cloudy day in the outside world, the nights were things of incredible blackness.

Doc found his companions in the thickening murk.

"We'd better take a page out of the life of Monk's ancestors and climb a tree for the night!" suggested Ham.

"Yeah!" growled Monk, goaded by the insult. "Yeah!" He apparently couldn't think of anything else to say.

"We can tackle that tree fern!" Doc declared, pointing.

The tree fern in question was on the order of a palm tree, but with fronds all the way up. In height, it exceeded by far the tallest of ordinary palms. Doc and his men climbed this.

"Remarkable!" Johnny murmured. "Although this species is closely related to fern growths found in fossilized state in certain parts of the world, it is much larger than anything——"

"You must consider the fact that this crater is merely a spot left behind in the march of time," Doc interposed. "Some changes are bound to have taken place in the countless ages, however. And after all, science has but scratched the surface in ascertaining the nature of prehistoric fauna and flora. We may; indeed, we surely should, find many species undreamed of hitherto——"

"How we gonna sleep up here without fallin' off?" Monk wanted to know.

"Sleep!" jeered Ham. "If you ask me, there won't be much sleep to-night. Listen!"

In a distant part of the crater, another ferocious fight between reptilian monsters was in progress. Although the sound was borne to them muffled, it had a fearsome quality that brought a cold sweat to each man.

"What an awful place!" Oliver Wording Bittman whimpered. Terror had literally frozen the taxidermist to the limb to which he clung.

It was a ghastly night they spent. No sooner did one titanic struggle of dinosaurs subside, than another arose. Often more than one noisy, blood-curdling fight was in progress at the same moment.

Vast bodies sloughed through the dense plant growth, some going with great hops as had the tyrannosaurus, others traveling on all fours.

Sleep was out of the question. Doc and his friends felt safe in their fern top—until some monstrous dinosaur came along and browsed off the crest of a fern which they

could tell by the sound was nearly as tall as their perch. After this, throughout the night, they rested in momentary expectation of meeting disaster.

But, had they been in perfect safety, they would not have slept. Slumber was unthinkable. There was too much to hear. For they were wayfarers in another world!

They might as well have stepped back in time a thousand ages!

Daylight returned as suddenly as it had departed. With the appearance of the sun, a heavy rain fell, a tropical downpour that lasted only a few minutes. But as the water hit the red-hot surface of the mud lake up on the crater side, tremendous clouds of steam rolled.

The day was about as bright as a very cloudy winter afternoon in New York City, due to the “steam” clouds always above the crater.

It was at once evident that the ferocious dinosaurs preferred to prowl at night. For with dawn, the hideous bloodshed within the crater subsided to a marked degree.

Doc at once led his friends—with the exception of the whimpering Oliver Wording Bittman, who would not desert his perch in the fern-tree—to see what had happened to Renny.

They found Renny’s collapsed parachute at last. The spot where it lay was some hundreds of yards from the nearest giant fern which would offer safety to a man.

Monk had been making himself a cigarette. But at sight of what lay near Renny’s parachute, his big and hairy hands froze, can of tobacco in one, papers in the other.

For all about Renny’s ’chute was torn and ripped turf. And blood! Amid the gore lay Renny’s hat.

It looked like a dinosaur had devoured Renny!

“Maybe—he got away?” Long Tom mumbled hopefully.

But Doc, after a quick circle of the spot, replied: “There is no human trail away from this place! I’m sure of that! The soft earth would take the prints. Renny never walked away from here!”

Monk slowly stuffed the tobacco can in a pocket. He had no appetite for a smoke now.

A reverent, sorrowful silence prevailed, dedicated to the memory of Renny.

This was broken in a frightful fashion.

“Over there!” Ham’s voice cracked. “What——”

They looked, as one man, at first hoping Ham had sighted Renny. But it was not that.

Out of the unhealthy rank jungle growth had come an amazing animal. In appearance, the thing was a conglomerate of weasel, cat, dog and bear. It was remarkable because it seemed a combination of most animals known to the twentieth century world.

But it was approximately the size of a very large elephant!

Monk gulped, “What the——”

“A creodont!” breathed Johnny, awed. “The ancestor of a great many of our modern animals!”

“Yeah?” muttered Monk. “Well, from right now on, you don’t catch me out of jumping distance of a tree!”

These words brought home to the others the shocking fact that they were helpless before the nondescript but fierce creodont. This animal could not be dodged as they had evaded the tyrannosaurus. It could turn too quickly! And its jaws were full of great teeth; its claws long and sharp. And no safety lay within reach!

The creodont abruptly charged!

Their guns cracked. But the gigantic animal came on as fast as ever. The thing had its head low—they could not locate its small eyes for an effective target.

The men spread apart. But that could help but little. The monstrous creodont would lay about among them, crushing and mangling. They could not hope to outrun it!

Only a few yards distant, the creodont reared and separated its great, frothing jaws. It sprang with a hideous snarl.

It looked like the end for Doc and his men—an end as terrible as they supposed Renny had suffered.

Chapter 17

RENNY, THE HUNTED

While Doc and his friends faced the dangers of this weird place the first night, Renny, lost from the others, had difficulties of his own.

When Renny's parachute lowered him to the spongy floor of the vast crater, he landed in the midst of such a scene as his wildest nightmares had never produced.

He dropped squarely into the fight which was heard from the air. This was a ferocious battle between the same tyrannosaurus which had pursued Doc and the others, and a three-horned rhinoceros of a monster.

Renny's parachute spilled over the revolting face of the terrible tyrannosaurus. Renny instantly squirmed out of the 'chute harness and dropped to the cushionlike earth.

The tyrannosaurus, pitching about like a tall house caught in a tornado, soon got the silken folds out of its face.

But Renny had no time to witness that. The other beast came thundering straight for Renny.

The iron-fisted engineer had inspected the pictures of a few of the genus triceratops in textbooks, and had gazed without particular interest at a skeleton of one as displayed in a great museum. Beyond that, his knowledge did not extend.

He recognized the thing as a triceratops, for Renny had an excellent memory. But he didn't know it was a herb eater. He wouldn't have believed that at the moment, anyway. The thing looked like it was bent on making a meal out of Renny.

The monster dinosaur came at him with all the noise and impressive size of a snorting locomotive. Renny didn't have time to clutch for his gun. It was just as well. He could not have stopped the triceratops.

The huge reptile possessed three rhinoceroslike horns. Two jutted straight forward, one above each eye. These were fully as long as Renny's by-no-means-short body. The third horn was much smaller, and set down on the nose, as though for rooting purposes.

The striking thing about the triceratops was the great bony hood extending back from the head. This natural armor protected the neck and fore part of the body.

The armor was marked with great, fresh gouges. The fearful tyrannosaurus had been engaged in slaying this armored, three-horned vegetation eater for supper. Only the armor had saved the triceratops.

The three-horned dinosaur was now fleeing madly for its life! But Renny had no way of knowing that. He happened to be directly in the path of the thing. There was no time for a leap sidewise.

"Only one chance!" Renny gritted—and sprang high into the air, flinging his two-hundred-and-fifty-pound frame directly between the two massive horns set over the dinosaur's eyes.

Renny's hands, each one a gallon of knuckles, clasped the horns. They clung tightly.

When the hulking beast ran straight forward, not even shaking its vast head, Renny merely hung on. The space between the horns was ample to accommodate him. The smaller lower horn furnished a footrest.

"If I get off, the thing will turn on me!" Renny reasoned—wrongly.

This particular dinosaur was a peace lover, despite its formidable looks. Its only idea now was to get away from the terrible tyrannosaurus. Such a small object as Renny clinging to its head bothered it not at all for the time being.

The steam was dissipating now, and Renny could take in his surroundings. His amazing steed had a bald skin. It reminded Renny of an elephant's hide, although rougher and thicker. It was hard as sole leather to his touch.

"A bullet wouldn't faze the thing!" he decided.

Renny's scant knowledge was sufficient to inform him the major portion of this creature's brain probably lay in its spine. It was even likely the spinal cord served as a brain, a function not uncommon in the prehistoric members of the dinosaur tribe.

The stampeding beast wallowed through a small body of water without slackening pace. Renny was drenched. He noted the water was very warm, like piping hot coffee. It did not scald, though.

The breathing of Renny's conveyance was becoming labored. The thing was short of wind. Renny began to have an unpleasant feeling it would soon stop. He wondered how he would dismount without meeting disaster.

The problem solved itself.

Blindly, as unvarying in its wild course as a bullet, the triceratops hit a great tangle of lianas and ferns and small coniferous trees. It gouged through by main strength.

Renny was left behind, hanging over a vine!

To this vine Renny clung for a time. He listened. The ground was about seven feet below. Renny didn't know but what other predatory monsters might be about. He glanced up nervously, fearing sight of the gruesome, batlike flying reptiles.

Exploring, Renny found he still had his pistol-like machine gun.

"Wish I had a pocketful of hand grenades too!" he muttered.

He dropped down from the liana and set out on the triceratops's back trail. He found traveling difficult. Clinging creepers and packed ferns interfered.

Renny had penetrated the thick jungles of the upper Amazon. He had explored in rankst Africa. But he had never seen a jungle which approached this for denseness. Without the path the dinosaur had opened, Renny would have been baffled.

As it was, he had to be alert steadily, lest he stumble into the waist-deep tracks of the monster.

He soon noted the unusual character of the growth. Many of the trees were of a type he had never seen before. But others had a familiar look.

“The ones I don’t recognize became extinct ages ago,” he concluded. “The others, more fitted to changing conditions in the outside world, survived.”

Renny chuckled. He felt exhilarated, now that he had escaped with his life.

“What I mean, this is a sure-enough example of how evolution has worked on the rest of the world!”

Suddenly came the dismaying knowledge that night had almost arrived.

Renny was conservative. He knew the safe thing to do.

“I’ll hunt a tree for the night!” he concluded.

But he was not fortunate enough to be in a region of tall growth. He saw that climbing any of the small ferns or evergreen trees about him would not give him safety from the hulking dinosaurs.

He began to run, hoping to reach Doc before darkness. But, as though the very moist, depressively hot air were turning a jet-black ink, night started closing in.

Sprinting, Renny reached the body of water through which his huge steed had plowed. About to plunge in, he hesitated. A great gurgling arose beyond the enormous rushes that edged the shore. The sound was like huge tanks of water emptying in succession. Then a vast body, which was apparently dunking up and down and making the noises, must have rolled over.

A miniature tidal wave came boiling inshore. It reached above Renny’s knees! What a monster this prehistoric beast must be!

Over the rushes suddenly projected what Renny at first took to be the head and neck of a snake. A work-a-day-world serpent magnified a thousandfold! A large barrel could not have held the head!

For all its snaky look and fantastic size, the head had a peaceful look, though. A repetition of the loud water noises showed that the long, lithe neck was attached to a monster body.

Slowly, the weird beast came dragging out of the water.

Renny felt a ticklish sensation in his scalp, which might have been his hair standing on end.

The thing was longer than a freight car!

“Good——” Renny spun and fled.

He knew he had just looked at a member of the family of largest creatures ever to tread the earth. Even the ferocious, meat-eating killer, the tyrannosaurus, was eclipsed by the bulk of this colossus.

The great reptile he had just seen was a “thunder lizard,” or brontosaurus.

Renny recalled they were popularly supposed to be peaceful giants, haunting the water and feeding on lake plants and shore growth. The theory held by scientists is that they were not meat devourers.

Renny had no desire to test the accuracy of that theory. Compared to the thunder lizard in size, he was like a mouse beside a fat hog. He didn’t know but what the beast might decide to try a man for a change of diet.

So Renny ran for all he was worth. The thunder lizard, apparently curious or playful, lumbered after him. The earth shook in a pronounced manner under its incalculable weight.

Quitting the trail opened by the armor-plated monster which had brought him here, Renny dived into the tangled vegetation. He lost his hundreds of tons of gamboling pursuer.

“Whew!” He mopped his forehead with both sleeves. “Whew!”

He felt his way onward, machine gun ready in one hand. So dark had become the night that he could not even see the weapon he held. He halted often to listen to the awful uproar of the night.

Once a nocturnal fray broke out near by, and the course of the battle brought it directly for Renny! He fled madly. Strong in his nostrils was the fetid, near-suffocating odor of a great carnivore. He knew here was genuine danger! It was another of the monster killers of prehistoric ages, a tyrannosaurus. His parachute had fallen upon one of those!

Renny crept away, marveling at the variety of ear-splitting sounds emitted by the weird beasts of the crater. He reasoned the things could see somewhat in the darkness. He had noticed the eyes of the reptiles were particularly fitted for vision in restricted light. But in darkness such as this, it was impossible for them to see much. They must hunt largely by the sense of hearing, perhaps some of them with the organ of smell.

“What a place to have to live in!” he muttered.

It was only a moment later that fresh disaster overtook him.

Came a great fluttering sound from above his head! It was as if some one were shaking a large carpet up there.

“What the——” Then Renny knew what it was. One of the flying reptiles! A pterodactyl—one of the horrors which had disabled their plane!

Wildly, Renny flung up his gun.

But before he could pull the trigger, the gruesome marauder was upon him!

Renny now got one of the few pleasant surprises of the night. He realized this aërial, batlike thing was much smaller than the one which had assailed the plane. Probably it was a chick of the species!

Evading the snapping, toothed beak, Renny clutched with his powerful hands. He got fistfuls of the revolting, membranous wings. The stuff felt like rubber. It was clammy. And a noisome stench accompanied the reptile.

The beak crunched. It took off the entire back of Renny’s coat!

Grasping again, Renny secured a hold on the fearsome head. The body of this pterodactyl was about the size of an ostrich’s. Renny put forth a superhuman effort, tossing himself about violently. He succeeded at last in what he was trying to do. He wrung the neck of the flying reptile!

But the thing did not die immediately! It whipped about, as tenacious of life as the tail of a snake. But Renny had at least stopped its attack. The slow death meant the

creature scarcely had a definite brain center. Possibly it depended on its brain so little that it could even go on living for a time with that organ entirely removed!

“What a place this is!” Renny muttered.

He lifted the expiring pterodactyl. Its lightness was astounding.

“Bones hollow and filled with air!” decided Renny, drawing on his scant knowledge of prehistoric life forms.

He tossed the flying reptile away, took a step sidewise—and froze in horror!

Another specimen of monster dinosaur was approaching. The struggles of the dying air monster were attracting it!

Renny retreated hastily. He tried to be silent. But this was impossible in the abyss of darkness.

He heard the heavy steps of the approaching giant. They sank noisily into the spongy earth, so vast was the weight upon them. At the dying pterodactyl, the steps stopped.

A ghastly crunching of flesh and popping of chewed bones indicated the flying reptile was being devoured.

Renny quickened his pace, thinking to escape while the beast was occupied. But he had the misfortune to stumble. His shoulder brushed a bush. There was considerable noise.

The beast charged!

The rapidity with which it came showed Renny he could not hope to outrun it. He tried a desperate experiment. Halting, he quickly wrenched off what of his coat had remained after the bite delivered by the Gargantuan aerial reptile.

Renny carried a waterproof cigarette lighter, although he did not smoke. It was handier than matches. He plucked it out of a pocket. Its tiny flame sprang up. He set fire to his fragment of coat.

Whirling the coat around his head speeded the fire. In an instant it was a sizable brand.

He flung it in the face of the charging monster!

As the flaming cloth gyrated through the air, Renny got a fleeting view of the repellent dinosaur stalking him.

It had a lizardlike body, armored with great bony plates. It traveled on all fours. Its head was uncouth as that of a mud turtle, but more than a yard in length. The low-slung carcass of the creature, although thin from side to side, was very high.

Most striking of its characteristics was the double row of huge, horny plates standing on edge down its back. These looked like two lines of monster saw teeth.

The name of the thing—stegosaur—escaped Renny. Anyway, what interested him at the moment was its reaction to the fire. Would it flee?

It didn't!

Renny realized the colossal reptile did not have the brains to recognize the fire as danger. Pivoting, he ran with all his speed.

Ferns whipped him. The needled tips of coniferous shrubs gouged at his eyes. Lianas held him back. He tore at the growth with his powerful hands. Suddenly, penetrating that jungle became like burrowing through a stack of green, wet hay.

Behind him thundered the leviathan of the reptilian world. It seemed to gain as though he were standing still. Great knots of the soggy earth, dug up by its churning feet, fell noisily.

Renny had been in few tighter spots in his eventful life. He could not outrun this thing. In the darkness, he could not hide effectively—it would smell him out.

It was now no more than twice Renny's own length behind him!

And Renny stumbled and fell!

That fall was his salvation. A deep trench had brought him down. Evidently it had been opened by the snout of some tremendous rooting dinosaur.

Renny rolled into the trench!

The pursuing reptile passed over him! It was as though an earthquake had laid upon the surrounding ground. The earth walls of the trench gave under the vast weight. They caved.

Renny was buried by the earth!

He was drawing in a breath of relief when the cave-in came. So he had a quantity of air in his lungs. He held it there. Not a muscle did he move.

The clumsy reptile turned slowly and came back. The stupid thing did not know what had become of its quarry. It tramped the vicinity for a time, searching.

Earth pressed in more tightly as it strode somewhere near Renny.

The big-fisted engineer had held his breath about as long as he could. His lungs felt lead-filled. His ears sang.

The giant dinosaur lumbered majestically away. It had given up. The earth covering Renny had kept the reptile from scenting him.

In a near frenzy, such torture was he suffering, Renny squirmed about. He threshed in the soft earth. For a moment he thought he was entombed alive. But the convulsive effort this belief made him put forth brought him near the surface.

His head came out into the warm, damp, crater air.

A ferocious bedlam of snarling and growling greeted him.

Sharp teeth sank into his body!

Chapter 18

WHERE TIME STOPPED

Meanwhile, Doc and his men stood before the charge of the giant creodont, not knowing what strange thing would happen next.

The thing sprang for Monk. It missed, thanks to Monk's great leap to one side. Monk's machine gun hosed a stream of bullets into the side of the animal. This gave them an instant respite. The huge creature turned to bite itself where the bullets had hit, as though it had been jabbed there by thorns.

The beast was a fierce, deadly killer, even though it did look like a combination of weasel, dog and bear, with possibly a little long-haired elephant for good measure.

"Beat it, the rest of you!" Monk rapped. "Maybe I can delay the thing long enough for you to reach safety!"

Monk made a move to step in the path of the charging animal. He was willing to sacrifice himself, if only it would help his friends. This looked like the only thing that would save them.

"Wait!" Doc's strong bronze hand stopped Monk.

"But Doc——" Monk started to object.

"Dry up—you homely ape!" Doc was actually chuckling in the face of the frightful danger! His tone was calm. His movements, although lightninglike, seemed unhurried.

"Let's have your tobacco, Monk!" Doc's hand suddenly possessed the can of smoking tobacco. So swiftly had it been taken that Monk hardly saw the gesture.

"Now—pick 'em up and lay 'em down!" Doc's powerful arm propelled Monk in the direction of the nearest tree large enough to furnish safety.

"Good—good luck, Doc!" Monk muttered. Then he sprinted away at full speed. Monk didn't see how even Doc's sovereign powers could prevail over this prehistoric monster.

Emitting a loud, fierce noise, a combined bark and squeal and snarl, the hybrid behemoth sprang.

Doc's sinewy fingers had tweaked open the tobacco tin. In a trice, he had the tobacco clutched, half in either palm. He sprang forward to oppose the giant beast. His arms moved nimbly.

An effective pinch of the tobacco was jammed into each of the thing's little eyes. The rest went into its nostrils.

A swipe of a huge paw laid open Doc's coat and shirt. But the metallic skin was hardly touched. Doc's speed was nearly unbelievable.

Springing away, Doc raced for safety.

The prehistoric beast, blinded by the tobacco, its organs of smell temporarily ineffective for the same reason, could only bound about and release its blood-curdling growls.

Doc joined his friends up a massive fern.

"Afraid you'll be without tobacco now," he told Monk.

Monk grinned admiringly, "I been thinkin' about quittin' smokin' anyway."

Through a lacelike design of vines and branches, they could see the antics of the monster they had just escaped, thanks to Doc's ingenuity and marvelous physique. The thing was alternately pawing at its smarting eyes and ramming its repulsive muzzle into the moist, soft earth.

"There it goes!" Long Tom emitted a sigh of relief as the beast decided to run. It volleyed away with a great uproar.

"Wonder how Oliver Wording Bittman is making out?" Johnny puzzled. "We haven't heard a bleat from that tree where we left him."

"Probably so scared he's lost his voice," said the sharp-tongued Ham.

Doc came to Bittman's defense. "You've got to admit he has something to be scared of. Personally, it's my duty to take care of the man, craven coward though he may become. He saved my father's life."

"Sure," said the big-hearted Monk. "Bittman's nerve was O. K. until we hit this fantastic crater. In fact, it was a continuous source of wonder to me to see how anxious he was to be with us every time we made a move. Remember how he went with us when we tackled Kar? That took nerve. Maybe his courage will return when he gets used to this strange place—if it's possible to get used to it."

Monk, it seemed, was right.

Oliver Wording Bittman slid down from his fern-tree perch as they approached. His features were pale, but his big jaw was thrust out in a determined fashion. He fiddled with the skinning scalpel which still decorated his watch-chain.

"I am ashamed of my cowardly performance during the night," he said, embarrassed. "I guess I am not a brave man. At any rate, my courage completely departed at sight of this ghastly world. But I think I have it back, at least in part."

"No one could be blamed for becoming shaky at sight of such an unbelievable, terrifying place," Doc smiled.

"Yeah—it'd give anybody the jitters!" Monk grinned.

Johnny was using the magnifying lens on the left side of his glasses to inspect unusual plants.

"The more I see of this place, the more astounding it becomes," he declared. "Notice there are few flowering plants or trees of the type which shed their leaves."

"Evolution practically stopped in this crater many ages ago," Doc offered.

Johnny began to wax eloquent. "No doubt this was once part of some land continent, probably the Asiatic. The prehistoric animal life entered and were trapped here in some manner——"

"Trapped—how?" Monk grunted.

It was some little time before this question was answered. They moved forward, seeking more open ground. They found it upon a knoll from which an extensive view

could be obtained.

“Golly!” muttered Monk, as he gazed at the frowning heights of the crater rim. “We must be at sea level, or below. This crater looks like it was better’n ten thousand feet deep!”

Doc’s golden eyes ranged the crater edge as great a distance as possible. Due to the gloominess of the light which penetrated the clouds above the pit, the opposite wall of the crater was lost to sight. Long plumes of steam arising from what were obviously streams of boiling-hot water, helped hinder vision.

The day was really a hot, wet, ghostly gray twilight.

“I do believe I’ve seen moonlight brighter than this!” Long Tom said.

But they could get a fair idea of their surroundings. The utter denseness of the jungle was a thing to cause awe.

As they stood on the knoll, another sudden rainstorm came. Steam rolled from the hot mud lake like fluffy cotton. The violent downpour seemed to occur several times each day.

“The tremendous rainfall is caused by the moist hot air lifting to the cold air at the top of the crater, where it condenses and falls back as rain,” Doc Savage explained. “The great rainfall also explains the plant growth being so rank it is nearly a solid mass.”

He glanced about appraisingly.

“This vegetation is only slightly less dense than that which flourished during what scientists call the coal age.”

“You mean it was jungle like this that made coal beds?” Monk grunted.

“Exactly. Let a landslide cover some of this jungle, or let water and mud cover it, and in the course of a few ages, we would have an excellent chance of a coal vein. Partial decomposition without access to air would do the work.”

Further appraisal of their amazing domicile led Doc to level a mighty bronze arm.

“There, brothers, is the explanation of these prehistoric life forms being forced to remain here through the ages!”

Johnny, the geologist, quickly comprehended what Doc meant.

“At one time a path gave access to the crater,” he declared. “Some natural upheaval, probably an earthquake shock, destroyed the means of getting in and out. And the dinosaurs were forced to stay.”

“Through the æons of time that they have remained here, the outer sides of this cone weathered down. The land sank. Oceans rushed in. And this crater became Thunder Island, supposedly an active volcanic cone projecting from a seldom-visited section of the southern seas.”

Monk scratched his bullet of a head. “But, Doc, how do you account for these critters not changin’ through the ages, like they did in the outer world?”

“Evolution,” Doc smiled.

“But evolution is a changing——”

“Not necessarily,” Doc corrected. “Evolution is a change in animals and plants and so on, as I comprehend it. But those changes are caused by slowly altering surroundings. For example, if an animal lives in a warm country, its fur will be light, or it may have no fur at all. But if the country turns cold, the animal must grow a heavy coat, or perish. The acquiring of that fur coat is evolution.

“Conditions here in this crater have remained exactly as they were ages ago. The air is warm. There is a great deal of rain. The luxuriant plant growth makes food plentiful. Probably the seasons down here are alike the year around.

“So the prehistoric animals trapped here experienced no necessity for changing themselves to fit altered conditions, because conditions did not alter.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Monk admitted.

After this, silence fell. It was a somber quiet. They were thinking of Renny. They believed him dead, on the evidence of what they had seen—his hat and the gore surrounding it.

“We’d better be moving,” Doc said at last. “First, we will visit the neighborhood of the hot mud lake, on the chance some supplies might have spilled out of our plane. In case you haven’t noticed it, we’re practically out of ammunition.”

The others hastily examined their guns. They found only a few cartridges in each weapon. Monk, naturally the most reckless, had but four cartridges left.

“Throw the lever which changes your guns to single-shot operation,” Doc directed. “We’ve got to count every bullet. Although the weapons are virtually useless against these prehistoric monsters, they will be effective upon Kar.”

“Kar!” Ham clipped. “I had nearly forgotten that devil! Have you noted any signs of him, Doc?”

“Not yet. But we are not giving up our pursuit. Not even these big dinosaurs can keep us from Kar.”

They visited the hot mud lake. So terrific was the heat of the lavalike stuff that they could not approach within yards. Too, they dreaded a sudden eruption, such as had been caused by the plane plunging into the lake.

Such geyser displays apparently came often. Great splatters of mud, now cooled, decorated the steep slope for some distance below the hot lake.

“Imagine one of them droppin’ on the back of your neck!” Monk mumbled.

“Better still, imagine what would happen to the crater floor if this broke!” Ham pointed at the lavalike dike retaining wall which confined the horseshoe-shaped body of superheated, jellylike mud well upon the crater side.

“It would be too bad on a pig, if he happened to be down on the crater bottom, huh?” Monk suggested. Then he watched Ham’s features assume the inevitable flush of ire.

They found no speck of equipment from the plane. The craft was hopelessly gone.

To show there was no chance of salvaging it, Doc cast a small chunk of wood out on the crusted lake surface.

So hot was the crust that the wood smoldered and quickly burst into flame!

“Golly!” muttered Monk. “Let’s get out of here before that thing takes a notion to cut up!”

“We shall skirt the crater,” Doc decided. “You notice the larger vegetation grows near the edges. In the center is a series of small streams. These bodies of water run sluggishly, and are hardly more than elongated bog holes.”

“How about lighting a fire and getting some breakfast?” suggested the taxidermist, Oliver Wording Bittman.

Bittman had indeed regained much of his nerve. But it was with a patent effort that he was striving to maintain the standard of calmness before peril set by Doc and his men.

“No fire,” Doc replied. “It might show Kar our whereabouts, if he is in the crater. Anyway, we have nothing to cook.”

“The breakfast part of his idea still sounds good to me,” spoke up Long Tom. “What do we eat, Doc?”

“I’ll try to find something,” Doc smiled.

They betook themselves from the vicinity of the mud lake.

“Quite a climb!” Ham puffed as they descended the steep slope.

Ham, amazingly enough, had retained his sword cane through all the excitement of the parachute leap and the horror of the ensuing night. He was seldom without that secret blade. But, although it was mightily effective upon human opponents, it was virtually useless against the giant dinosaurs. The tempered blade would snap before it could be forced through one of the thick, wood-hard hides.

However, Ham very soon got a chance to use his sword cane.

An animal about the size of a large calf suddenly bounded up before them. It had four spongy looking antlers, two in the usual spot atop the head, the other pair down below the eyes. It had a cloven hoof and looked edible.

With a swift spring that would have been a credit to even Doc’s brawny form, Ham ran the strange animal through with his sword cane.

“We eat!” he grinned.

“I have an idea how we can build a fire without the smoke being noticed,” Doc offered. He had suddenly discovered he was hungry. “We’ll kindle a blaze near one of these streams of boiling water from which steam arises.”

“Talk about necessity being the mother of ideas!” Monk grinned.

They kindled a fire, although experiencing difficulty with wet wood. Too, another sudden deluge of rain nearly put out the flames. But at length they had their breakfast cooking.

“What are we eatin’?” inquired Monk.

“A primitive type of deer,” decided Johnny, the geologist.

By dipping a corner of his handkerchief into the boiling stream beside which they had built their fire, then permitting the wet cloth to cool and tasting it, Doc ascertained the water was drinkable, although it had a saline quality.

He proceeded to boil a hunk of the primitive deer in the natural caldron.

“I did that once in Yellowstone Park,” said Ham.

Doc and his men kept an alert watch for danger. They were not disturbed. The meat was palatable, but had a pronounced grassy taste.

It was a sober meal, what with the thought of Renny’s possible fate.

“The insects are interesting,” remarked Long Tom. “There seem to be few butterflies, moths, bees, wasps or ants. But there’s plenty of dragonflies, bugs, and beetles.”

“The insects you see are the less complex types, for the most part,” Doc explained. “They aren’t quite developed enough to make cocoons or gather honey. They came first in the course of evolution.”

Because the great warmth within the crater would not permit them to keep meat fresh even until the next meal time, they discarded the remainder of their primitive deer. They quitted the vicinity.

“We will now go ahead with our circling of the pit,” Doc said. “There may be a path by which a climber as agile as a man might depart.”

Monk let out a displeased rumble. “Ugh! You mean to say we may be stuck in here, Doc?”

“Did you notice a spot where you could climb out?”

“No-o-o,” Monk admitted uneasily.

Traversing some little distance, they reached a particularly tall shrub. Monk climbed this to look around. He had no more than reached the sprawling top when his excited call came down to Doc and the others.

“Smoke! I see a fire!”

Doc ran up to Monk’s side with the agility of a squirrel.

Two or three miles distant across the crater bed, smoke curled from the jungle.

“Sure it isn’t steam?” Ham inquired skeptically from the ground.

“Not a chance,” Doc replied. “It’s darker than steam.”

“And I just saw a burning ember, apparently a leaf, in the smoke!” Monk added.

He and Doc clambered down to the ground.

One word was upon the lips of everybody.

“Kar! You think it is Kar’s fire?”

“Can’t tell,” Doc admitted. “But we’ll find out soon.”

They went ahead hurriedly. Ham’s sword cane now came in doubly handy for slashing through the tangled growth. There were no forest lanes overhead—open stretches of branches through which Doc and Monk might have swung, anthropoidlike. They had to confine themselves to the earth.

Doc’s great bronze form came to an abrupt stop. Strange lights danced in his flaky golden eyes.

He was studying something he had found underfoot.

“What is it?” Long Tom inquired.

“Footprints.”

“Let me see!” Oliver Wording Bittman hurried over.

Monk made an angry growl. “Kar?”

“No.” A joyful brightness had lighted Doc’s golden eyes.

“What are you so tickled about?” Monk wanted to know.

“The footprints are Renny’s. I’d know those oversize tracks anywhere. Too, one of his shoes had a cut on the sole, and these tracks show just such a cut.”

“Then Renny may be alive!”

They met Renny within the next few minutes. The elephant-like, big-fisted engineer had heard them. He came striding out of the tangled growth—the same as ever!

In one hand, Renny dangled the skin of a small, lemon-colored animal. In markings, this pelt resembled that of an undersized hyena.

“Here’s the history of my night!” Renny chuckled after greetings were exchanged.

Rapidly, he told of his wild ride on the great colossus with the three horns and the huge bony shield over its neck, of the playful thunder lizard in the lakelet, of his fight with the odorous and batlike flying reptile chick, and of the creature with the double row of upstanding, saw-teeth protuberance down its back.

He told of ducking into the handy trench, and of being buried. Then he came to the point where he shoved his person out into the hot night—and teeth had seized him.

Renny exhibited a small chewed spot on his shoulder. He shook the pelt of the hyenalike animal.

“It was this little thing bit me!” he laughed. “It made enough noise to be a lion. I choked the darn thing. I’m gonna make a pen wiper or somethin’ out of its hide to commemorate one of the worst scares I ever got. When it took hold of me, I sure thought the jig was up.”

Doc suddenly remembered something. “That smoke! Did it come from a fire you made?”

“What smoke?” Renny asked vacantly. “I haven’t made any fire.”

Chapter 19

ATTACK OF THE GNAWERS

“It’s Kar!” Ham muttered. “Kar made that fire!”

“Unless there are human beings residing in this place,” Johnny pointed out.

“My thumb goes down on the idea that people may live in the crater,” said Doc. “Thought that the comparatively defenseless human race could exist in here through the ages is a little preposterous. Anyway, we have seen no sign of monkeys or apes, which some evolutionists claim branched off from the same source stock as man.”

“There’s not much doubt but that they did!” said Ham nastily, looking intently at Monk’s hairy, simian figure. “We have the living proof with us.”

“A lot a shyster lawyer knows about evolution!” Monk grinned.

They set forth toward the fire again.

“Use caution!” Doc warned. “If it is only one of Kar’s men, we want to follow the chap to Kar. Or capture him alive and force him to tell us where Kar is!”

A stream of boiling-hot water barred their path. It was shallow, but too wide to leap across. They were forced to trail along it. But it only grew wider. It seemed to reach an indefinite distance. It was too hot for wading.

Doc solved the problem. Cutting two tough shoots not unlike bamboo, he fashioned a pair of makeshift stilts. The others quickly followed suit. With these, they negotiated the overly hot stream.

Oliver Wording Bittman, who wailed that he had never walked on stilts as a boy, was helped across the boiling water by Doc.

Soon after, the matlike jungle became horny with great upthrusts of rock.

At the very first of these stony juttings, Doc halted. He examined the rock with interest. He tapped at it quietly with his gun barrel. He borrowed Johnny’s glasses to use the magnifying lens on the left side.

“Hm-m-m!” he said thoughtfully.

If the bestial creodont which would have destroyed them except for the tobacco Doc threw in its eyes—if that animal was a mixture of many animals, so was this rock a mixture of many ores. Without proper apparatus for assaying, a great deal could not be told.

“What’s so interesting about that spotted dornick?” inquired Oliver Wording Bittman, fingering the scalpel on his watch-chain.

“Just the wide variety of ores which it apparently contains,” Doc replied.

Renny glanced at Doc. “You mean we may be near the region from which came the rare element or substance which is the basis of the Smoke of Eternity?”

“It’s a thought,” Doc admitted.

Greater was their caution now. The strange rocks became more plentiful. Indeed, the jungle gave way to a wilderness of glistening, mottled stone. This shimmering waste stretched directly before them until it ended against the sheer cliff of the crater side.

They penetrated farther. Signs of rare metals were all about. But it was doubtful if any were present in sizable paying quantities.

“I’d like to spend a month in here, just classifying rock types,” declared Johnny, the geologist.

Doc Savage appraised the stony fastness.

“I want to look this over,” he said. “I can move faster alone. You chaps wait here. The fire is on the other side. I’ll scout that, investigating this rock formation en route, then return.”

His friends spread out among the strange rocks, inspecting curious formations. A couple of them sidled back into the jungle, intent on seeing if they couldn’t locate some kind of an edible herb. A meat diet would soon get monotonous, especially a meat with as strong a grassy taste as their primitive deer.

Doc continued into the rocks. They became difficult to get through, as though they were broken glass, the glass being as thick as a house.

This region of strange rocks was larger than he had thought. It must extend for at least two miles. It pressed against the cliff base its whole length.

In order to see the better, Doc clambered atop a vitrified mass.

Spang!

A bullet hit beside him. It sprayed wiry bits of lead into his bronze skin.

A quick leap put Doc in shelter. He was already in safety when the satanic laughter of the echoes came hopping across the arid rock wilderness.

The shot had come from the direction of his own friends!

Hardly more than a bronze blur in the steam-made twilight, Doc sped for his men.

He found them in excitement.

“Who fired that shot?” Doc demanded.

“None of us. It came from the jungle—to the right.”

“Where’s Bittman?”

Oliver Wording Bittman was not about!

Doc sprang away. Herculean sinews carried his bronze form over knife-edged boulders and ridges around which it took the others minutes to go.

He topped a huge stone block.

Directly below him sprawled Bittman. The taxidermist’s body, so thin it was a skeleton and a few hard muscles, lay grotesquely atwist.

It was motionless!

A sailing spring put Doc beside Bittman. His mighty bronze hands started to explore.

Spang!

Another shot!

The bullet would have slain Doc—if he had been one iota less quick on coordinating eye and muscles. For he had seen a rifle barrel stir out of the jungle foliage. He had flattened his giant form.

The rifle slug slicked through the space his body had vacated. It hit a rock and climbed away with a loud squawk.

Doc's own gun rapped. Once! Twice!

A man came tumbling, slowly, stiffly, out of the foliage. He was a short, broad man. He had the look of a human frog. Doc had never seen him before.

The man piled into a dead heap. One bullet had drilled his forehead. The other had stopped his heart.

Several seconds, Doc waited. No more shots came. He used his sensitive ears to their fullest. His bronze nostrils twitched, sampling the warm, moist air that should bring him any alien odors.

He decided no more bushwhackers were about.

Oliver Wording Bittman stirred. A low, whimpering sound trailed from his lips. His head lifted.

Suddenly he seized Doc's leg. He gave a terrific wrench. Doc, taken by surprise, came lightly to a knee. His brawny hands trapped Bittman's arms.

"Oh!" Bittman choked. "Oh!"

He relaxed. Remorse came into his thin face.

"I—I saw a gun pointing at me!" Bittman moaned. "I realized it was Kar. I—I guess I must have—fainted. When I revived, my first thought was to fight for my liberty. I thought you were Kar's man. I'm sorry. My head wasn't clear——"

Doc nodded thoughtfully. "Fainting was the most fortunate thing you could have done in that case. It dropped you out of sight of the bushwhacker."

Striding over, Doc inspected the dead gunman.

Renny, Ham, Johnny, Long Tom and Monk came up.

"Ever see this man before?" Doc indicated the corpse.

None of them had.

"Come on!" Doc directed. "Let's investigate that fire!"

They made all speed possible across the waste of stone. They were not shot at. The wall of jungle again took them in.

The mysterious fire was close. To their nostrils came the tang of its smoke.

"Quiet!" Doc warned.

Fifty yards more were traversed at a snail's pace. But it is difficult for seven men to move through an incredibly dense tangle of plant growth without noise. Especially when one has no particular woodcraft, such as Oliver Wording Bittman.

"Wait here!" commanded Doc.

Then he was gone like a bronze shadow. The jungle tissue seemed to absorb him. There was no sound.

In a moment, Doc's golden eyes were inspecting the clearing wherein smoked the fire.

No one was there. The fire had about burned out. It had been lighted for cooking purposes, between two immense logs. The logs alone now burned.

Near by lay mining paraphernalia—picks, shovels, an empty dynamite box and some stray, clipped ends of fuse.

A long minute, Doc appraised the scene. Then he strode boldly into the clearing—his keen senses had shown him no bushwhackers lurked near by.

He circled the open space, then criss-crossed it several times. He moved swiftly. And when he had finished, his retentive mind had a picture of what had gone on in the little glade.

Kar's men had camped here. They had been mining somewhere in the waste of strange rock.

They had been mining the unknown element or substance which was the basis of the Smoke of Eternity!

What had caused their departure was difficult to say. Either they had secured what they sought, or had been frightened away by the knowledge Doc and his men were near.

Doc called his men. They hurried up.

"At least six men are in the gang—probably five, now that we got one." Doc indicated a half dozen tracks—only his dexterous eye could determine they were marks of as many distinct men. "Of the four men Kar sent out of the United States on the *Sea Star*, we did for one at the coral atoll, as he tried to bomb our plane. To the surviving three, he has added from the crew of the speedy yacht which took his men off the *Sea Star*, or from some other source."

"But where did they go?" muttered Oliver Wording Bittman. The taxidermist, although his fingers were still too shaky to play with the scalpel on his watch-chain, had recovered amazingly.

"We'll trail them," Doc declared.

It taxed Doc's woodcraft hardly at all to find the trail. Broad and plain, smaller ferns and shrubs trampled down, it led off around the crater. A half mile, they had simple going.

Then the way came to an abrupt end!

It terminated at one of the many shallow, wide streams of hot water. As earlier in the day, Doc employed stilts to cross this obstacle.

But he could find no trail on the other side!

"They used a raft or a boat of some sort!" he called to his men.

"We'll take one side and you the other until we find where they landed!" Ham offered.

But this soon proved unfeasible. The slough of hot water quickly became a great swamp. Although this water was far from boiling in temperature, it was still too hot to wade. And some of the channels were too deep for their stilts and too wide to jump.

“We’ll have to give it up!” Doc said regretfully.

Time had been passing swiftly. It was nearing dark again, and Doc made preparations looking to a safe night.

“We’ll take a lesson from the fact that the top of a tree near us was browsed off last night,” he decided. “Each man will seek refuge up a separate tree. That way, if one meets with an accident, it won’t spell doom for the others.”

The outburst of an awful fight between a pair of reptilian monsters less than a mile away lent speed to their search for a satisfactory location. The prehistoric giants were beginning their nocturnal bedlam.

The adventurers found a grove of the palmlike ferns which made an ideal set of perches. Up these, they hurriedly clambered.

Once more, night poured like something solid and intensely black into the crater of weird Thunder Island.

A few words were exchanged in the sepia void. Then conversation lagged. They knew the slightest sound was liable to draw the unwelcome attention of some reptilian titan.

Ham had selected a bower near Monk.

“So I can throw a club at Monk if he starts snoring,” Ham chuckled.

Within half an hour after darkness fell, the awful bedlam of the dinosaurs had reached its grisly zenith. The cries of the things were indescribable. Often there came the revolting odor of great meat eaters prowling near by.

Suddenly Doc discovered a glowing cigarette end in a fern top near the thick jungle.

“Watch it!” he called. “The light might show Kar our position!”

“I’m sorry!” called Oliver Wording Bittman’s voice. A moment later, the cigarette gyrated downward, to burst in a shower of sparks.

Doc and his men were tired—they had not slept a wink the night previous. Although the satanic noises within the crater were as fearsome as on the night before, they were becoming accustomed to them. Noises that made their ears ring and icicles roll down their spines now worried them no more than passing elevated railway trains bother a dweller in the Bronx.

But Doc had developed a sort of animal trait of sleeping with one eye open. He heard a faint noise. He thought he saw a light some distance away.

Later, he was sure he detected a distinct, dragging noise very close!

The sound stopped. Nothing immediate came of it. Doc dropped off to sleep. Too many monsters were prowling about continually to be bothered with one noise.

A loud shuffling beneath their trees aroused him again. He listened.

There seemed to be scores of great beasts below!

“Hey!” yelled Monk an instant later. “Some darn thing is eatin’ on the bottom of my tree!”

To Doc’s keen ears came the sound of grinding teeth at work on the base of Monk’s fern. Then big incisors began on his own tree!

Capable bronze hands working swiftly, Doc picked off a fragment of his own shirt. He put a flame to it, got it blazing, and dropped it. The burning fragment slithered from side to side as it fell. It left a trail of sparks. But it gave light enough to disclose an alarming scene.

A colony of monster, prehistoric beavers had attacked them!

The creatures were about the size of bears. They had the flat, black, hairless tails of an ordinary beaver. But the teeth they possessed were immensely larger, even in proportion.

A determined fierceness characterized the beasts. Although they made no snarlings or squealings, the very rapidity of their angry breathing showed they were bent on accomplishing something.

And that was the destruction of Doc and his men!

Doc Savage's gaze moved quickly to one side. He had remembered the dragging noise heard earlier. He sought the spot where it had ended. A powerful suspicion was gripping him.

He was right!

One of the great prehistoric beavers lay dead! The rear legs were tied together—*tied with a rope!*

"Kar is responsible for this!" he clipped at the others.

"How could——"

"He has visited this crater before. He knows how the weird animals here react. He knew it was a trait with these big beavers to avenge the death of one of their number. So he had his men kill one and drag it here. The animals followed the trail. They can scent us up the trees. They think we're the killers."

At this point, the fragment of Doc's shirt burned out.

To his ears came a *gru-u-ump, gru-u-mp* chorus. Lusty teeth working upon their tree retreats! And from the sound, they wouldn't take long to bring down the giant ferns! They seemed to bite in like axes.

"Thank Heaven!" came Oliver Wording Bittman's sudden gasp. "My tree is close enough to other growth that I can crawl to safety! Is there anything I can do to help you men? Perhaps I can decoy them away?"

"Not a chance!" Monk snorted. "There must be a hundred of them! And they're chewing so fast they couldn't hear anything! Say! My tree is already beginning to sway!"

Doc Savage drew his gun.

He fired it downward. A single report! It sounded terrific.

An astounding thing promptly happened!

The entire colony of prehistoric beavers quit gnawing. They stampeded! Away through the jungle they went at top speed! Not an animal remained behind!

"Bless me!" Monk chuckled. "What kinda magic you got in that smoke-pole, Doc?"

Doc Savage was actually as surprised as the others. Then the explanation came to him. How simple!

“What is the method the beaver uses to warn its fellows of danger?” he asked.

“It hauls off and gives the water a crack with its tail,” Monk replied.

“That explains it,” declared Doc. “These giant prehistoric beavers use the same danger warning, evidently. They mistook the sound of the shot for an alarm given by one of their number.”

Monk burst into loud laughter.

Chapter 20

THE DEATH SCENE

The remainder of the night was uneventful—if noisy.

With daylight, and the simultaneous retiring of the more ferocious of the colossal reptiles, Doc and his men slid down their tree ferns to see what damage the overgrown beavers had done.

Doc's shot had not been fired any too soon. Monk's tree was supported by a piece no thicker than his wrist. And some of the others were as near falling.

One noteworthy incident enlivened their investigations.

"It's gone!" Oliver Wording Bittman's shriek crashed out.

The skeleton-thin taxidermist was clutching madly at his watch-chain.

"My skinning scalpel!" he wailed. "It has disappeared! I had it when I retired, I am certain!"

Doc helped Bittman look for the scalpel under the tree. They didn't find it. Bittman seemed distraught.

"It can be replaced for a few dollars," Doc suggested.

"No! No!" Bittman muttered. "It was a keepsake. A souvenir! I would not have taken five hundred dollars for it!"

Unable to locate Bittman's vanished trinket, the adventurers set out in search of breakfast. They cannily kept close to the giant tree ferns which offered the best safety available to man here in the ghastly lost domain of time.

Doc Savage it was who bagged their breakfast. A large ground sloth flushed up in their path. A bronze flash, Doc's mighty form overhauled it. A rap of his mighty fist stunned the creature. It resembled a cross between a tailless opossum and a small bear, and looked inviting enough.

"It feeds on herbs and such fruit as there is," Doc decided. "It shouldn't be bad eating!"

It wasn't. But before eating, while the sloth was cooking over a fire near a steaming brook, Doc took his exercises. He never neglected these. The previous morning he had taken them in the tree, although he had not slept a wink during the night.

The kit containing the vials of differing scents and the mechanism which made the high and low frequency sound waves had reposed in his pocket throughout. It was, other than their arms, practically the only piece of their equipment they had saved.

After breakfast, Doc made an announcement.

"I'm leaving you fellows. Stick together while I'm gone. I mean that! Don't one of you get out of sight of all the others! The danger always afoot in this place is incalculable!"

"Where you going, Doc?" Ham queried.

But Doc only made a thin bronze smile. A swift motion—and he was gone! The earth might have swallowed him.

Doc's friends would have been awe-stricken had they seen the pace with which he traveled now. His going was like the wind. For there was no need to accommodate his steps to the limited speed of his less acrobatic companions. He seemed but to touch the rankest wall of jungle—and he was through. Often he took to the top of the growth, leaping from bush to creeper to bush, maintaining balance like an expert tightrope walker.

Near the slain prehistoric beaver which had been dragged to their nocturnal refuge by Kar's men, Doc picked up a trail. Kar's men had numbered two!

Doc's speed increased. He swept along the trail like a bronze cloud pushed by a swift, if a bit sporadic, breeze. A mile dropped behind him, then another.

His golden eyes missed little of the amazing prehistoric life about him.

One incident intrigued him particularly.

He glimpsed a very black, sleek animal. It had white stripes and spots traveling the length of its body. In size, it approximated an African lion. But it was vastly different in build, being chunky and sleepy looking.

The unusual animal had a black, bushy tail nearly four times the length of its body! This tail waved above the matted tropical growth like a banner—a flag of warning.

And flag of warning it was! Doc realized the creature must be ancestor to the common and obnoxious American polecat!

As he watched the animal, one of the stupendous killers, a tyrannosaurus, came bounding along. Its stringlike front legs occasionally batted sizable trees out of its path. The reptilian monster stopped often, balancing on its enormous three-toed feet, and turning slowly around after the manner of a dog standing on his rear legs. The carnivorous giant must have failed to satisfy its appetite during the night, and was still hunting.

Doc, concealed behind a clump of ferns, kept perfectly motionless. In doing this, he was obeying the first rule of the wild—the same rule that causes a chicken to freeze into immobility when it is sighted away from shelter by a hawk. Common safety commanded that he let the hideous reptilian giant quit the vicinity before he continued on the trail of Kar's men. And motionless objects escape notice best.

Doc was surprised to see the great prehistoric killer, as large as many a house, flee from the black-and-white edition of a skunk's ancestor. It was a lesson in the effectiveness of the latter's gas-attack defense. It was not unlikely that the little animal was the only thing on earth the odious reptile behemoth feared.

The trail of Kar's men worked toward the center of the crater. Several times it was evident they had sought to hide their tracks by wading in the edge of such water pools as were not too hot. But Doc held the scent.

Doc halted to cut a long, bamboolike shoot, not unlike the ordinary cane fishing pole. He stripped off the leaves. He worked on the larger end for some minutes. After that, he tested the heft of the javelin he had fashioned.

For the next few minutes, his alert gaze not only kept track of the trail he was following, but roved in search of something to test his spear on.

He found game in the shape of a small but vile-looking creature which had a back covered with hairs that were stiff and pointed like thorns. No doubt this was the predecessor of the common porcupine.

Doc cast his javelin accurately. He inflicted a minor wound on the beast's flank. It ran off briskly—and suddenly fell dead.

As the animal tumbled lifeless—the trilling sound abruptly came to Doc's lips. Low and mellow, inspiring, but now awesome, it was such a sound that probably had never before been heard in this lost crater—this land of terror. The sound seemed to creep away and lose itself in the weird, luxuriant jungle, and silence came.

It was as though some profound fact had become certainty in Doc's mind.

The bronze master hurried on, following the tracks of his quarry. They had not been able to do an effective job of hiding them, due to the intense darkness of the night and the fear of the prehistoric reptilian giants which must have been gripping their hearts.

Although the larger reptiles had attracted most of the attention, there was by no means a dearth of smaller creatures. Doc saw many armor-backed beasts resembling armadillos. Some of these were no larger than rats. Others reached sizable proportions.

Very interesting were prehistoric horse types no larger than sheep. Indeed, one who had not studied ancient evolution types might have mistaken them for short-eared rabbits. A close examination would have shown many differences, though. For one thing, the horselike head was quite pronounced.

Many species of chipmunklike creatures scurried about. These ranged from the size of a mouse to animals larger than dogs. As the ground sloped upward toward a hill, these hole-dwellers became more plentiful.

Suddenly a foul, slate-colored cloud whipped over the jungle. The stirring of great wings like filthy canvas on a skeleton frame made the fronds of the gigantic ferns clatter together as in a gale.

Doc flattened. The slimy wings beat above him. It was as though a great invisible hand were shaking a loose bundle of vile cloth. The rancid reek of carrion was wafted by the squirming wings.

But Doc had been too quick. The immense flying reptile was carried past by its own momentum. Its tooth-armored beak grabbed space with a rattling like boards clattered together.

Not even whipping erect, Doc's bronze form flew like an arrow for the nearest safety—a clump of thorny growth some acres in extent. He had an idea the membranous wings of the pterodactyls were tender. They would not venture into the thorns.

He reached safety! The aerial reptile crashed in after him. The thorns spiked it. With a hideous roaring and gargling outcry, it sprang back.

Doc drew his pistol. He could at least disable this monster with a couple of shots, then be on his way.

But another pterodactyl abruptly came! Then another! The cries of the first had attracted them. And they kept coming.

The great batlike shapes became so thick overhead as to literally blot out what light there was. And the wind their wings made bent and twisted the fern fronds and threatened to rend them from their anchorage. The putrid stench was near overpowering.

Doc was in a dilemma. He didn't have cartridges enough to fight the pterodactyls. To venture out of the thorn patch would be fatal.

Evidently the flying reptiles often chased quarry into the thorns. For, despite the almost nonexistent brains of the things, they knew enough not to venture among the stickers.

Doc relentlessly settled down to wait until the pterodactyls gave up and went away. He believed they would soon depart—if he kept motionless.

But a horrible new development came!

One of the colossal hopping reptiles came bounding up! It was drawn by the cloud of aerial monsters. Perhaps it had secured quarry which the pterodactyls had chased into the thorns, on other occasions.

The thorny thicket bothered the terrible tyrannosaurus killer not at all! Its tough hide was impervious! It walked into the thorn patch and began to look for Doc. Hopping a couple of hundred feet, it would stop to turn around slowly.

Its hideous, stringlike front legs—legs that were none the less thick as a barrel—flipped in a ghastly fashion. Probably this was caused by the nervous gnawings of appetite. But it looked to the Doc like the thing was clapping hands over the prospect of a human meal!

Doc moved only when the hideous head with its tremendous, frothing rows of teeth was turned from him. Then he took care not to make noise.

He had an unpleasant feeling the reptile titan was going to find him—unless he did something quickly!

To complicate things, he unexpectedly confronted one of the black, marked, bushy-tailed predecessors of the modern polecat. The noisome thing gave every sign of going into action.

Doc's gun rapped twice. So well-placed were the shots that the bushy-tailed animal dropped instantly.

The reptilian monster had heard the shots. It hopped through the thorns, searching. Its vicious eyes seemed about to pop from its revolting head in its blood lust.

Suddenly it bounded straight for the spot where Doc had shot the striped animal.

But Doc's accomplished wits were equal to the occasion. He had drawn his knife. With quick strokes, he skinned the beast he had shot.

He draped the distinctive black-and-white hide over him like a coat!

Doc now walked boldly out of the thorn thicket!

The hopping monster, mistaking him for the malodorous animal, in the hide of which he was masquerading, backed off.

Even the flying reptiles, the batlike pterodactyls, made the same mistake. They flopped away from him as though he were a plague.

Doc hurried to freedom!

He pursued the trail of Kar's men with more caution, aware it was vaguely possible the villains might have located him by the shots and the cloud of reptile bats.

The steps of the fleeing pair suddenly took to an open glade. The length of their paces showed they were making a wild sprint.

The reason was soon apparent.

Doc came upon a scene of carnal slaughter. The spongy ground was rent, upheaved. Footprints were deep as Doc's hips! The tracks of a tyrannosaurus, a terrible killer titan of a reptile such as the one from which he had just escaped!

The prehistoric monster had devoured Kar's two men! Doc, gazing about, saw unmistakable proof of that fact. A shoe, a portion of a human foot still in it, and bits of two different suits of clothing, gave the evidence.

The pair had met a fitting end, considering the evil nature of the journey which had put them abroad in the ghastly night within the crater.

Doc turned back. He ran. The two unfortunate villains, in dragging the giant prehistoric beaver to the grove of ferns where Doc and his men had bivouacked, had undoubtedly left another trail. Doc intended to follow that.

He had pursued the outward trail with great speed, but his return was immeasurably swifter. He carried the black-and-white pelt, rolled tight so it would not smell so badly, under one mighty bronze arm.

A shock awaited him at the spot where he had left his friends. They were gone!

Many tracks were about. They told Doc's jungle-wise eyes a story—told it as perfectly as a book could have.

Kar had seized his friends!

Chapter 21

HUMAN MONSTERS

With the swiftness of a trade wind, Doc took up the new trail. It was broad, plain. Entirely too plain!

Doc knew Kar would expect him to follow. Probably the man would set a trap. He would hope that Doc's excitement over the capture of his friends would dull his keen senses.

But the shocking knowledge served only to sharpen Doc's perceptive powers. He kept wide of the trail, his keen eyes locating it by the most vague of signs. A stalking leopard could not have gone more silently than the bronze giant.

A tiny patch of thorns appeared. Discovering the trail of Kar's men and their captives—Doc's friends—led directly through the burry growth, Doc approached furtively to investigate.

"They're not overlooking any bets!" he said grimly.

For a considerable distance into the thicket, the needle-tipped thorns were daubed with a brownish substance. Undoubtedly a deadly poison!

It was the first of Kar's traps!

Doc went on, not lessening his caution.

Kar's men had taken their prisoners along the crater side, traversing a region Doc had not yet explored. They held a course as straight as possible. It seemed they had a definite objective.

Doc's golden eyes picked up the tracks of Renny, Monk, and Ham in one spot. The trail of Long Tom and Johnny appeared soon after. None of them seemed to be wounded. At least, their footprints did not show the uneven depth and irregular spacing characteristic of a badly injured man.

Oliver Wording Bittman was lagging behind the whole group. However, his tracks also seemed normal.

But Doc knew he would have to make speed. His friends were being kept alive for only one reason, he believed. Kar was using them as a bait to decoy Doc into a trap.

Rather, into a series of traps! For Doc's adamant gaze located a creeper across his path. The vine stretched just a bit too tautly. He investigated.

The creeper was attached to the trip of a machine gun! Had Doc as much as touched it, a stream of lead would have riddled him.

He detached the machine gun and took it along, to use on Kar if necessary.

Sometime later, he found another of the poisoned thorn reception committees arranged for him. There was a deadfall which probably wouldn't have broken his back, considering the speed with which Doc could move. A more dangerous snare came next.

Doc noted a peculiar, dragging movement Monk's big feet made at intervals.

"Good boy, Monk!" Doc smiled.

Monk was making those marks with his feet just before each trap. He was warning Doc!

The mighty bronze man now made better time.

The ground here was higher than any upon which Doc had stood within the crater—excepting only the rim of the mud lake up on the crater side. And this spot was so far from the point where he had surveyed the crater bottom that the ever-present fog of moist, hot air had prevented him seeing much of the detail.

The jungle growth abruptly became scattering. Small glades appeared. Then larger meadows! A rank, crude sort of grass floored these. The ground felt less spongy.

A mass of rock jutted up before him. It lay close to the sheer, nearly two-mile-high cliff of the crater wall. No doubt it had fallen from the wall centuries ago.

To Doc, the rock looked big as a sizable cut off Gibraltar. Others were behind it, too. They were nearly as large. All had toppled from the hulking cliff.

The trail weaved among these. Doc kept fully a hundred yards to one side, wary of bushwhackers. He came to a vast dornick which had a deeply corrugated surface. This would offer shelter to a climber. Doc mounted to reconnoiter.

He saw Kar's plane!

The craft was an amphibian—could land on ground or water. It had two motors, both very large. Its cabin would accommodate eight or nine passengers. The long upper wing and the bobbed lower wing and rudder and elevators were joined in a spidery box kite of a framework.

With black fuselage and yellow wings, it looked like a bloated dragonfly crouched in a natural hangar formed by the leaning together of two great stone blocks.

Huge timber had been employed to build a massive fence to keep out lesser carnivora. The cavern between the two blocks of rock was too small at the entrance to admit the king-giant of the killer reptiles, the tyrannosaurus.

The construction work had been done some time ago! Months past, at least!

“Kar built the hangar on his other trip!” Doc concluded.

Clambering down from his lofty perch, Doc approached the plane. He was not molested. Kar probably had no more than three men surviving. At least, only three had captured Doc's friends. As for that capture—how had a mere three thugs managed to get the upper hand on Doc's men?

Doc had his suspicions. They were far from pleasant!

Doc investigated the craft. He found a few boxed supplies in the cabin. These proved to be canned goods and dried fruit. Although Doc was hungry, having had nothing but meat since entering the crater, he did not touch the grub. He knew in just what subtle forms poison can be administered.

Doc quitted the strange hangar. Tall grass outside the massive timber gates absorbed his bronze figure.

Kar's headquarters should be somewhere near. Doc was hunting it. His men would be prisoners there, since they had not been in the hangar.

In the distance, faint spots in the moonlightlike day within the steam-covered crater, the fearsome bats of reptiles still circled. Probably they had not quitted the thorn patch where they had chased Doc. They were more tenacious of purpose than he had thought.

Somewhere, a prehistoric beast emitted a series of hideous cries. The echoes were taken up by another reptile. For a moment, a bedlam, remindful of the awful night sounds reigned. Then comparative quiet fell.

It was a ghastly spot—this lost land of terror which reposed within the cone of Thunder Island.

Doc came suddenly upon his imprisoned friends. They were being held within another natural cave resulting from the massive blocks of stone piling together. Doc heard voices first.

“You guys just make one move—you’re finished!” A strange tone. It must be one of Kar’s men.

With no noise at all, Doc’s bronzed, giant figure floated nearer. His golden eyes watched the cave mouth—and all the surrounding terrain.

“I’ll rush him!” Monk’s big, amiable voice offered. “He can’t get us all!”

Evidently only one man watched the prisoners within the cavern!

“No need of that, yet,” rumbled Renny. Thunder gobbling out of a barrel would have had a close resemblance to Renny’s vast voice.

“Let him be a hero!” clipped Ham. The quick-thinking lawyer seldom got in a spot so tight that he neglected to razz Monk.

“Can’t you see what they’re doing?” Long Tom demanded. “They’re holding us as a bait to get Doc!”

“Bait or no bait,” Johnny, the geologist, put in, “Doc will take care of himself. And if we went and got ourselves shot, we’d still be bait. I’m in favor of stringing along for a while to see what happens.”

“That’s a wise guy!” snarled the coarse voice of Kar’s gunman. “You birds behave, an’ we’ll do the white thing by you, see! We’ll let you keep on livin’! We’ll leave you behind in the crater when we take off in our plane!”

He laughed uproariously at this. He knew life in the crater would be one long living hell! A more perilous domicile would be hard to imagine.

“I gotta notion to rush ’im!” Monk rumbled.

“You have no such idea—you’re just working that noisy mouth!” Ham sneered. “I wonder what they’re doing to Oliver Wording Bittman?”

“Hard to tell,” said Renny. “They took him away shortly after we reached here. I can’t imagine why.”

Monk made an angry hur-r-rum of a sound. “What’s still puzzlin’ me is how they got us! We had Ham, Long Tom and Johnny on guard. If they’d have sneaked up on Ham, I could understand how they got near enough to cover us before we could put up a fight. But the way it was——”

“Pipe down!” rasped their guard, tired of the talk.

Monk continued, “—but the way it was we——”

“Pipe down, you funny-lookin’ baboon!” the guard snarled. “I’m gettin’ so I don’t like to watch that ugly phiz of yours when you jabber!”

At this, Ham laughed.

“And the muffler goes on you, too!” gritted the guard. “You cocky shyster mouthpiece!”

Silence fell within the cave.

Doc waited a while. His keen brain worked. His five friends were here in the cave. But Oliver Wording Bittman was somewhere else.

Doc decided to find Bittman. Monk, Ham, Renny, Long Tom, and Johnny were in no immediate danger.

Away from the cavern entrance, Doc crept. The tall grass, coarse as the leaves of cattails growing on a pond bank, concealed him.

He encountered a tiny mound. Starting to go around it, he stopped.

It was a grave! The tombstone was a stone slab. A name and brief inscription had been painted upon it. Doc read:

Here Lies
GABE YUDER
Trampled to death by a Tyrannosaurus

Doc examined the grave. It was months old!

For quite an interval, the mighty bronze man did not move, but remained as quiescent as a statue of the solid metal he resembled.

Men approaching drew Doc Savage’s attention from the grass-grown burial mound. Although his mind had been elsewhere, his full faculties had never deserted the business at hand. He had not relaxed his alertness to danger.

“He probably ain’t had time to get here yet,” said a coarse voice.

“You don’t know that bronze guy!” growled the other. “I tell you, he may already be hangin’ around here. He may be waitin’ to jump onto us like a cat onto a mouse.”

“Listen!” sneered the first speaker. “He never made it past them traps we left! Especially the poisoned thorns! That was good! And the machine gun we left with a vine hooked to the trigger! That wasn’t bad, either.”

“But supposin’——”

“Supposin’ nothin’! If he gets here, we’re gonna have our eyes open!”

“He may be too smart to even try to trail us. He may decide to let his men take care of themselves. What then?”

“So much the better! We’ll go off an’ leave him here! He’ll be where he’ll never bother Kar again.”

“But he might find where we mined the ingredients for our fresh supply of the Smoke of Eternity. They say the bronze guy is quite a chemist. Even a second-rate

chemist like you was able to make' up a fresh batch of the Smoke of Eternity after Kar told you how!"

"Who's a second-rater?" snarled the other man. "I don't like that crack! Next to Kar, I'm the fair-haired boy in this scatter! Damn you, I won't have——"

"Aw—don't get on fire! I know you're a great guy in certain lines, but only a fair chemist. Supposin' the bronze guy figured out how the Smoke of Eternity was made? With enough of the stuff, he could open a tunnel right through the side of this crater. He might get out——"

"What if he did? Kar would have a new gang together. There'd be no slips like there was this last time. Doc Savage wouldn't have a chance against Kar."

"Maybe," the skeptical one mumbled. "But I'd rest easier if I had the bronze guy in front of a machine gun for about a minute. I just wish I had that chance!"

He got it almost before the words were off his lips. Doc stood up!

But did the Kar gunman shoot? He didn't!

He gave a squawk of surprise and terror and fell on his face in the grass.

Doc Savage never shot a man except in actual defense of his own life, or that of some one else. Hence, he waited for the loud-mouthed one to lift the submachine gun he was carrying. But the man whipped down.

Coarse grass shook as the fellow crawled away. He was taking to his heels!

The second gunman was sterner stuff. He tilted his rapid-firer. *Bur-r-r-rip!* It was spewing lead long before it came level. The slugs chopped grass to bits halfway to Doc.

The big bronze man's pistol spoke once. The report was like that given off by the popper of a hard-snapped bull whip.

The gunman melted down as though all the stiffening had been drawn from his body. On his forehead, exactly between his eyes, was a blue spot that suddenly trickled red. The man fell on top of his weapon and it continued to rip off shots until the drum magazine had emptied.

Doc Savage flashed for the cave where his friends were held. He must not let the guard kill them in his excitement.

"What is it?" the guard in the cave was bellowing. "What's goin' on out there? What——"

Doc reached a spot a yard from the cave mouth. He stopped there. Off his lips came a changed voice—a voice exactly like that of the Kar gunman who had just died.

"The bronze guy!" Doc's altered voice called. "We got 'im! Come out an' watch 'im croak!"

"Sure!" barked the fellow in the cavern. "Here I come——"

He crashed headlong into a set of mighty bronze hands. He saw them closing over his face. They looked bigger, more terrible than the whole crater of Thunder Island. The golden eyes behind them were even worse. They radiated death.

The man sought to use his gun. He got a few wild bullets out of it.

Then his neck unjointed! He died quickly. His actual going was painless, whatever the terror of the moments before might have been. For Doc's sinewy hands had brought a merciful end.

Renny, Ham, Monk, Johnny, and Long Tom—all five howling their pleasure—piled out of the cavern prison in a hurry.

“Did you get Kar?” Ham clipped.

“No.” Doc put a sharp question. “Have you seen Kar yet?”

“Not yet. They took poor Bittman off to Kar. Or that's what they said. I don't know _____”

Doc's uplifted arm stopped Ham's flow of words.

Then, as they all heard what Doc's sensitive ears had been first to detect, horror seized them.

Kar's plane was starting. The engines were already tossing salvos of sound against the gigantic cliff wall of the crater.

Doc Savage left the spot as from a catapult. No word did he speak. None was needed. His men knew that, should the plane get off, their lot would be very hard indeed. It might take them years to escape the innards of Thunder Island.

Renny, Ham, Monk, Long Tom, Johnny—all five trailed in his wake. But from the way they were left behind, they might have been at a standstill in the rear of the bronze master of speed.

Seemingly gifted with unseen wings, such fabulous leaps did he take over boulders, Doc bore down on the makeshift hangar between the two masses of stone that were larger than skyscrapers. He caught sight of the plane.

It was in motion.

Already, the tail was lifting. Another two hundred yards for speed, and the craft would be off. Doc could see the features of the man in the control cockpit.

Kar was handling the plane!

Doc veered left. He put on speed—although he had been traveling faster than it seemed a human could.

He was trying to intercept the plane! Kar saw his purpose. He kicked rudder. The ship veered a little. But it couldn't turn enough to evade Doc. The runway was rather narrow. Great rocks spotted the sides. The plane could easily crash among these.

For a moment, though, it did seem the ship would escape the mighty bronze man. But a great leap sent his herculean figure sailing upward.

Doc seized a strut which braced the empennage—the rudder and elevators. The plane must have been going forty miles an hour. The wrench would have torn loose the grip of lesser fingers. But the bronze giant held on.

Kar now began to shoot with an automatic pistol. He was excited. He had to aim from a very difficult position. He missed with all his slugs—then had to devote his attention to getting the plane off the crater floor, before it reached the runway end.

The craft lurched. With a moan, it took the air!

Chapter 22

A LOST LAND DESTROYED

The plane climbed over the great boulders and the high fern trees. It circled once. Then Kar lifted his pistol to shoot at Doc Savage once more. The plane could fly itself for a time.

Doc had been making good use of the respite. He had mounted to the main tail struts, which extended to the upper wing. He was swinging with a simian ease along these.

Kar's first bullet missed. His second also—for Doc had twisted in a miraculous fashion and gotten atop the wing.

A hollow *clack* came from Kar's automatic. He jacked the slide back. The weapon was empty. Wildly, he started reloading the clip.

The roof hatch whipped open. A mighty bronze form dropped inside. It towered toward Kar.

In a frenzy, the master villain sought to get just one bullet into his empty gun. But the weapon was flicked from his shaking fingers. It was flung through the plane windows.

Kar's voice lifted a screech, "Please—I did not know——"

"Talk will do you no good!" Doc Savage's remarkable voice, although not loud, was perfectly audible amid the engine roar. "Talk will never save you! Nothing can save you!"

Kar looked at the plane windows, longingly.

He had donned a parachute before taking off.

Next, the master villain stared at a large leather suitcase which stood in the rear of the cabin. But he dared not make a move to jump out of the plane or reach the suitcase. He feared those bronze hands that were more terrible than steel.

"I was deceived for a time," Doc Savage's vast voice said grimly. "Your method of deception was clever. It was bold. It worked because you hit me in one of my soft spots. Perhaps I should say in one of my blind spots."

Kar began, "You got me all wrong about——"

"Silence! Your lies will serve you nothing! I have too much proof. I suspected who you were last night, when I saw you signaling from the top of a tree fern with a lighted cigarette.

"You were ordering your men to decoy the big prehistoric beavers to the attack. You had carefully chosen a tree from which you could reach safety."

Doc's face was set as metal; his golden eyes ablaze with cold, flaky gleamings.

"I became suspicious before that," the bronze man continued. "When I was shot at! When you pretended to faint! Actually, you hoped I would come to your motionless body and your man would shoot me."

“I didn’t——”

“You did! After the prehistoric beavers had been frightened away last night, I climbed your tree and removed the skinning scalpel you carried on your watch-chain. That scalpel was poisoned. I put it on a spear tip and tested it on the ancestor of a common porcupine. The animal was killed by a scratch. You hoped to use that weapon on me, but could not muster the courage, and failed at the last minute.”

Kar was now trembling from head to foot. He quailed from each word as from a knife stab.

The plane, no hand at the controls, was flying itself—proof it was excellently made. Straight across the crater, it boomed.

“You had many chances to slay me,” Doc continued. “But you did not have the nerve to do it with your own hand. Like all criminals, however clever, you are a coward. You are like a rat. You remained with me, cannily checkmating my moves when you could, and seeking always to have your men kill me. But you dared not to do the deed yourself.

“Your craven nature was shown when we landed in the crater. You became a sniveling coward.”

Kar was a sniveling coward again now—probably to a greater degree than ever before.

“Your lies were ingenious!” Doc’s relentless voice went on. “It was not alone Jerome Coffern who came to Thunder Island with Gabe Yuder. You came also. You and Gabe Yuder found this crater. Jerome Coffern never knew of its existence.”

“You got me wrong!” whined the craven before Doc. “Kar is Gabe Yuder——”

“Gabe Yuder is dead! He found the unknown element or substance from which the Smoke of Eternity is made. He probably perfected the Smoke of Eternity. You saw it could be turned to criminal purposes. So you killed Gabe Yuder, and took his chemical formula. I found his grave!”

“You can’t prove——”

“Granted. I am merely guessing what happened on your first visit to Thunder Island. It does not matter how near I come to the truth. But I cannot be missing the facts far.

“Jerome Coffern saw something suspicious about your actions. He must have remarked on it. So you tried to kill him. The first time, you shot at him and missed. He suspected you of the deed. He wrote a statement, which you searched his apartment and found. I discovered a few lines of that statement upon a fresh typewriter ribbon in Jerome Coffern’s apartment. But the important part was illegible—the part which named you!

“The part which said you, Oliver Wording Bittman, were Kar!”

Kar—or Bittman—quailed as though this were the greatest blow of all.

“Yes, you are Kar, Bittman!” Doc continued. “You are a skilled actor, one of the best I ever encountered. And you had aroused my blind confidence in you by exhibiting that letter from my father showing you had saved his life.

“You listened in on an extension phone when I called Monk from your New York apartment, and promptly sent your men after Monk. You also sent one of your gang, a flyer, to kill me as I walked. I recall I told you I was going to walk after I left your place.

“You ordered your men to get the specimens from Thunder Island out of my safe. You ordered the elevator death trap which nearly got Monk, Ham, Johnny, Long Tom, and Renny—and you didn’t make a move to enter the cage that had been doctored. You tipped your men to get off the *Sea Star*, and probably hired the yacht which removed them, by telegraphing from New York.

“You even disappeared into the jungle on that coral atoll long enough to tell your man hidden there to bomb our plane. I could name other incidents when you checkmated us. You deceived us. But you did it by taking advantage of the most despicable means to get yourself into my confidence. You knew my affection for my father. So you showed me the letter which said you had saved his life.

“You knew my father—you knew the affection that existed between us. You were certain your trick would blind me to any faults you might have.”

Bittman whined, “It was no trick! I saved his life——”

Doc Savage’s voice acquired a strange, terrible note, a note of strain.

“Did you? Or was that letter faked in some manner?”

“It was a genuine letter!” gulped Kar—or Bittman. “I saved his life! Honest, I did! I’m not such a bad guy! You read that letter! Your father wouldn’t be fooled in a man. I’m not——”

“You can’t talk yourself out of it!” Doc said savagely. “I do not think my father did make a mistake. Perhaps you were the man he thought you were—*then!* You have changed since. Perhaps some mental disease, or prolonged brooding, warped your outlook on life.

“There are many possible explanations for a hitherto honest man becoming a criminal. But we will not discuss that. You ordered my friend, Jerome Coffern, murdered. For that, there can be but one penalty!”

The plane was slowly careening off on a wing tip, threatening to crash. Doc’s powerful hand, floating out, stroked the controls and brought it level. A wall of the crater was ahead—perhaps five minutes flying away.

Directly in front of the plane, an eruption was occurring in the strange horseshoe-shaped lake of boiling mud which extended nearly around the crater, but high above the jungle-clothed floor.

Kar—or Bittman—suddenly made a frantic leap. He was seeking to reach the leather suitcase back in the plane cabin.

He brought up against Doc’s bronze arm as against a stone wall. He struck at Doc repeatedly. He missed each time, for the bronze form seemed to vanish under his fists, so quickly did it move.

Increased terror seized the man. His eyes rolled desperately.

“You’ll never kill me!” he snarled.

Strange lights glowed in Doc Savage’s golden eyes.

“You are right,” he agreed. “I could never kill with my bare hands a man who saved my father’s life. But do not think you shall escape with your crimes because of that! You will receive your punishment!”

Kar rolled his eyes again. He didn’t know what fate Doc planned for him. But it could be nothing pleasant.

Suddenly the master villain dived headlong through the plane window!

Two hundred feet below the ship, the man cracked his parachute. It bloomed wide, a clean white bulb in the sinister gray of the crater atmosphere.

Doc Savage gave the oncoming wall of the crater a glance. It was only two minutes away now. Back into the cabin, he flung. He got the leather suitcase at which Oliver Wording Bittman had glanced so longingly.

He did not open the suitcase. The contents might have interested him not at all, judging by his actions.

The speeding plane whipped over in a vertical bank under his mighty hand. It had been almost against the crater wall. The ship seemed to slam against the cliff, then leap away.

Doc’s golden eyes ranged downward. They were a cold gold now, determined. They judged accurately.

Doc dropped the suitcase overside.

The piece of luggage revolved slowly as it fell. It hit just below the lava dike which confined the great lake of boiling-hot mud. It burst.

It had contained Kar’s supply of the Smoke of Eternity! The crater wall below the lava dike began a swift dissolving. Vile, repulsive gray smoke climbed upward in growing volume. It was such a cloud as had arisen at the destruction of the sinister pirate ship, *Jolly Roger*, in the Hudson River.

The smoke pall hid what was happening beneath. The play of electrical sparks made a weird glow within the squirming mass.

Suddenly, from beneath the cloud crawled a brown, smoking torrent. The lava dike confining the lake of superheated mud had been destroyed. The molten liquid was running into the crater!

Banking, engine moaning, the plane kept clear of the foul gray cloud from the Smoke of Eternity. Doc’s golden eyes searched. They found what they sought.

Kar! The river of boiling mud overtook him swiftly. The man tried to run. He held his own for a time. Then one of the giant hopping horrors of the crater, the greatest killing machine nature ever made, confronted him. The tyrannosaurus started for Kar with great, bloodthirsty bounds.

Kar chose the easier of two deaths—he let the hideous reptilian giant snap his life out with a single bite.

But an instant later, the wall of hot mud rushed upon the prehistoric monster. The stupid thing took a gigantic leap—deeper into the cooking torrent. It went down. It rolled over slowly, kicking in a feeble way with its huge, three-toed feet.

Thus perished Kar—or Oliver Wording Bittman, the famous taxidermist—and the colossus of reptiles which had devoured him.

Doc held the plane wide open back across the crater. He landed on the narrow runway among the great lumps of stone which had, centuries ago, caved from the cliff.

Renny, Ham, Monk, Johnny, Long Tom—all five piled into the plane on the double-quick.

Doc took off again.

“Look!” Johnny muttered.

The ruptured lake seemed to contain an inexhaustible supply of boiling mud. It still poured forth. It was flooding the floor of the ghastly crater! The monsters existing there were being enveloped.

And the surviving Kar gunman would perish with them! Nothing could save him.

Steam poured upward. It was thickening in the mouth of the crater over their heads—forming a smudge which less and less sunlight penetrated. The growing darkness, the remorseless progress of the mud flood, the antics of the grisly reptilian giants, gave the tableau the aspect of another Judgment Day.

“Talk about your sights!” Monk muttered.

Then they fell silent. They were thinking of that archfiend, Oliver Wording Bittman, who had deceived them. The fellow was responsible for their recent capture. He had signaled his men where to attack.

From the very first, he had misled them. From the moment when he came to them with a scratch on his chest which he must have made himself and a clever story of being shot at!

They were amazed at the cunningness of Bittman’s acting. The man had been a master to deceive them as he had.

Even Doc had not seen through Bittman’s fiendish double-dealing until they had reached this crater. But that was understandable. The affection between Doc and his father was extremely great. And Bittman, as a man who had saved the life of Doc’s father, had received Doc’s gratitude. It had been hard for Doc to look to such a man as an evil villain.

“What about the Smoke of Eternity?” questioned Monk suddenly.

For answer, Doc leveled a bronze beam of an arm. They followed his gesture with their eyes.

The region of strange rocks, where Kar must have mined the unknown element or substance to make the Smoke of Eternity, had already been buried by the hot mud flow. It would never be mined now!

Monk looked curiously at Doc Savage.

“Do you know what that stuff—the Smoke of Eternity—was?” he inquired.

Doc did not answer immediately. But at length, “I have the theory which grew out of my analysis of the metal which was impervious to the dissolving substance. That theory, I am sure, is near the truth. And that is why I deliberately released the flood of mud.”

“Huh?” Monk was puzzled.

“The Smoke of Eternity can never be made without the rare substance which Kar mined here. And the supply of the stuff is now buried hopelessly. As for what the substance was, no one shall ever know. I intend to keep my theories to myself.”

Monk nodded. “Guess I see the reason for that.”

“The world can get along without the Smoke of Eternity!” Doc’s voice seemed to fill all the plane.

The ship rammed its howling propellers into steam. Up and up, it climbed. The heat nearly took off their skin. But only for a while; it became cooler at last.

So suddenly that it was like a gush of flame into their faces, they were in brilliant sunlight. Their eyes, becoming adapted to the glare, picked up the coral atoll some fifty miles distant.

“No need of even landing there!” Doc decided.

He banked the plane for New Zealand. Ample fuel for the flight sloshed in the gas tanks, thanks to Kar’s foresight.

“From New Zealand to San Francisco by steamer will just about give us time to get the prehistoric reptiles out of our hair!” grinned the irrepressible Monk. “And maybe somethin’ else will turn up soon.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Land of Terror* by Lester Dent (as Kenneth Robeson)]