

The Czar of Fear

A Doc Savage Adventure
#22

Kenneth Robeson
[Lester Dent]
1933

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Czar of Fear

Date of first publication: 1933

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

Date first posted: Jan. 9, 2020

Date last updated: Jan. 9, 2020

Faded Page eBook #20200117

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

DOC SAVAGE'S AMAZING CREW

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

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

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

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

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

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

Books by Kenneth Robeson

THE MAN OF BRONZE
THE THOUSAND-HEADED MAN
METEOR MENACE
THE POLAR TREASURE
BRAND OF THE WEREWOLF
THE LOST OASIS
THE MONSTERS
THE LAND OF TERROR
THE MYSTIC MULLAH
THE PHANTOM CITY
FEAR CAY
QUEST OF QUI
LAND OF ALWAYS-NIGHT
FANTASTIC ISLAND
MURDER MELODY
THE SPOOK LEGION
THE RED SKULL
THE SARGASSO OGRE
PIRATE OF THE PACIFIC
THE SECRET IN THE SKY
COLD DEATH
THE CZAR OF FEAR

THE CZAR OF FEAR

A DOC SAVAGE ADVENTURE

BY KENNETH ROBESON

THE CZAR OF FEAR

Originally published in DOC SAVAGE MAGAZINE November 1933

Copyright © 1933 by Street & Smith Publications, Inc.

CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. Green Bell	1
II. Visitors	8
III. The Comeback	16
IV. The Murder Witnesses	22
V. Peril's Path	29
VI. Fear's Domain	37
VII. Clements Sets a Trap	44
VIII. Voice from the Earth	52
IX. Plans	58
X. The Murder Snare	66
XI. Destroyed Clews	74
XII. The Body in the Vines	82
XIII. Piped Commands	93
XIV. The Suspicion Plant	101
XV. The Green Trap	110
XVI. The Man Who Vanished	117
XVII. The Touch That Yellowed	122
XVIII. Lull	129
XIX. Death Underground	135

Chapter I

GREEN BELL

THE midget radio squawked away noisily beside a cardboard sign which read: "Our Special To-day—Roast Beef Plate Lunch, Twenty-five Cents."

The man on the lunch-room stool sat sidewise, so he could watch the door. His eyes were staring; pale fright rode his face. He wolfed his sandwich as if it had no taste, and gulped at his fourth mug of scalding coffee. He was tall, light-haired, twentyish.

One of the two women beside him was also tall and light-haired, and in her twenties. She was some degrees more than pretty—hers was a striking beauty. A mud-freckled raincoat and a waterlogged felt hat seemed to enhance her charm.

Her eyes were dark-blue pools of fear.

The other woman was a pleasant-faced grandmother type. Around sixty was probably her age. She had a stout, efficient look. Her cheeks were ruddy as apples, and pleasant little wrinkles crow-tracked from her eyes.

Her jaw had a grim set, as if she expected trouble, and was steeled to meet it. She was not eating, and she was watching the door more intently than the man.

The young man and the girl were obviously brother and sister. The elderly woman was no relative, but they called her Aunt Nora.

"You had better eat, Aunt Nora," said the girl. Her voice was liquid, quiet, with a faint quaver that went with the terror in her eyes. "It is more than an hour's drive to New York. And we may be very busy for several hours, trying to find Doc Savage."

"Eat!" Aunt Nora snorted. "How can I, Alice? The way you and Jim are acting takes a body's appetite away. Bless your Aunt Nora, honey! You children are acting like two rabbits about to be caught!"

The girl forced a faint smile, reached over impulsively, and gripped the older woman's arm.

"You're a brick, Aunt Nora," she said gratefully. "You are just as scared as we are. But you have control enough not to show it."

"Humph!" Sniffing, Aunt Nora grabbed her sandwich. Squaring both elbows on the white counter, she began to eat.

Rain purred on the lunch-room roof. It crawled like pale jelly down the windows. It fogged the street of the little New Jersey town. The gutters flowed water the color of lead.

The little radio made steady noise. It was picking up canned music from Prosper City, a manufacturing town in the Allegheny Mountains. Aunt Nora had tuned it to the Prosper City station when they first entered the lunch-room.

"Good little set," she said, nodding at the instrument. "Prosper City is quite a ways off, and the set brings in——"

She stood up suddenly, splayed both hands tightly to her cheeks, and screamed.

The young man whipped off his stool and spun to face the radio. His face was distorted; his eyes bulged.

His sister also leaped erect, crying out shrilly. Her coffee cup, knocked to the concrete floor, broke with a hollow crackle.

EVEN the noise of the breaking cup was not enough to drown the strange sound which had come abruptly from the radio.

It was a tolling, like the slow note of a big, listless bell. Mixed with the reverberations was an unearthly dirge of moaning and wailing. The din might have been the frenzied crying of some harpy horde of the ether, shepherded by the moribund clangor of the hideous bell.

The lunch-room proprietor got off his stool behind the cash register. He was startled, but more by the terrified actions of his three customers than by the hideous uproar from the radio. However, the bewildered stare he directed at the set showed he had never heard this sound before.

The fanfare in the radio ended as unexpectedly as it had arisen. The lunch-room owner smiled, evidently from relief at the thought that he would not have to pay a repair bill. The three customers stood in a sort of white-faced, frozen immobility.

Rain strings washed moistly on the roof and swept the street like the semi-transparent straws of a great broom.

Aunt Nora was first to break the rigid silence.

“Prosper City is around three hundred miles from here,” she said hoarsely. “It’s not likely the Green Bell was tolling for us—that time!”

“I suppose—not,” blond Alice shuddered violently. “But that sound was the Green Bell, and it always means death!”

Jim made his voice harsh to hide a quaver. “Let’s get out of here!”

They paid a puzzled, curious proprietor for their lunch, and also for the broken cup. He watched them leave, then shrugged, winked at his cook, and tapped his forehead. He had decided his three late customers had been slightly touched with insanity.

A somewhat ancient touring car stood at the curb, forlorn in the rain. The side curtains were up, but the windows were cracked, some entirely gone, and the car interior was almost as damp as the drizzling dusk.

“Got plenty of gas, son?” Aunt Nora asked with gruff kindness.

Jim roved his fear-ridden eyes alertly. “Sure. You remember we had her filled at the last town. The gauge isn’t working, but the tank should be nearly full.”

Starter gears gritted worn teeth. Sobbing, the motor pulled the old car away in the streaming gloom, in the direction of New York.

A few seconds after the elderly machine had gone, a blot stirred under the trees which lined the village street. In the dripping murk, it seemed to possess neither substance nor form.

Down the street, a lighted window made pale luminance across the walk. The moving black blotch entered this glow. It suddenly became a thing of grisly reality.

There was, however, little of a human being about its appearance.

It was tall, tubular, and black. It might have been a flexible cylinder of black rubber standing on end, had an observer chanced to glimpse it in the fitful light.

On the front of the thing, standing out lividly, was the likeness of a bell. The design was done in a vile green.

Close against the sepia form hung a tin pail of ten gallons capacity. It was full to the brim with gasoline. Gripped in the same indistinguishable black tentacles which held the pail was a long rubber siphon hose of the type used to draw fuel from automobile tanks.

The dusk and the rain sucked the eerie figure into a wet black maw.

A moment later, a moist slosh denoted the bucket being emptied. Smell of gasoline seeped along the street, arising from the gutters where the stuff was flowing away.

Silence now enwrapped the small town, broken only by the sound of the rain and the occasional moan of a car down the main street, which was traversed by one of the main highways leading to New York.

THE ancient touring car was laboring along at perhaps forty miles an hour. Jim drove, hunched far over the wheel, wan face close to a small arc the swiping windshield wiper kept clear of water.

The two women huddled in the rear, raincoats drawn tight against the spray which sheeted through the broken side curtains.

"I guess—that belling—couldn't have been meant for us," the girl, Alice, said jerkily.

"I wouldn't be too sure of that!" Jim called back sharply.

Aunt Nora leaned forward, jaw out, arms akimbo.

"Jim Cash, you know something you haven't been telling us women!" she said, almost screaming to get her voice above the roar of car and rain. "I can see it in your actions! You know more about the Green Bell than you let on—what the thing is, or something! You can't fool me! You do know!"

Jim Cash replied nothing.

Aunt Nora snapped: "Answer me, boy!"

"You're a good guesser, Aunt Nora," Jim managed a gray smile.

"What is it?" Aunt Nora bounced forward anxiously. "What do you know?"

"I'm not going to tell you."

"Why?"

"For the good and simple reason that it would mark you for death! Alice, too! The Green Bell would kill you so you couldn't tell what you know!"

"Rubbish!" Aunt Nora tried to sound as if she meant it. "They would have no way of telling——"

"Yes, they would, aunty. It looks like they know everything."

Aunt Nora whitened. The tendons stood out on her plump hands.

"Listen, sonny—is the Green Bell aware that you know what you do?"

Jim Cash squirmed, almost losing control of the car.

“I don’t know!” he cried shrilly, wildly. “Maybe he does! I’m not sure! The suspense—expecting death any instant, and in the same breath wondering if I’m not safe enough—has been getting me! It’s driving me crazy!”

Aunt Nora settled back on the wet cushions. “You’re silly not to tell us, Jimmy. But that’s just like a man, trying to keep women out of trouble. It don’t show good gumption, but I respect you for it. Anyway we’ll soon be talking to Doc Savage and you can get it off your chest.”

JIM CASH muttered doubtfully: “You seem to have a lot of faith in this Doc Savage.”

“I have!” Aunt Nora sounded vehement.

“But you admit you don’t even know him.”

Aunt Nora snorted like a race horse. “I don’t have to know him! I’ve heard of him! That’s enough.”

“I’ve heard a little talk of him, too.” Jim Cash admitted. “That’s the only reason I let you and Alice talk me into going to him.”

“A little talk!” Aunt Nora sniffed. “If you would have kept your ears open you would have heard more than a little talk about him! Doc Savage specializes in things like this. He makes a life work out of going around getting other people out of trouble and punishing lads who need it.”

Jim Cash began skeptically: “I don’t think any man can——”

“Doc Savage can! Take the word of an old woman who knows enough to discount half of what she hears. Doc Savage is a man who was trained from the cradle for the one purpose in life of righting wrongs. They say he’s a physical marvel, probably the strongest man who ever lived. And moreover he’s studied until he knows just about everything worth knowing from electricity and astronomy to how to bake a decent batch of biscuits.”

“Maybe you’ve been putting too much stock in wild talk Aunt Nora?”

“Didn’t I tell you I only believe half of what I ever hear?” Aunt Nora demanded.

Jim Cash smiled. The elderly lady’s optimism seemed to cheer him.

“I hope Doc Savage is up to expectations,” he said grimly. “Not only for our sake but for those other poor devils back at Prosper City.”

“You said a mouthful!” Aunt Nora agreed. “If Doc Savage isn’t able to help us and Prosper City I hate to think what’ll happen!”

The touring car rooted on through the rain and gloom for nearly a mile. Then the engine gave a few pneumatic coughs, died, coughed a few more times and silenced completely.

“You’re out of gas!” Aunt Nora snapped.

Jim Cash shook his head. “But I just got gas. It must be water on the distributor
_____”

“Out of gas!” repeated Aunt Nora firmly. “I know how these old wrecks act!”

Easing into the drizzle Jim Cash got a measuring stick from under the seat, walked to the rear and thrust it into the tank. His gasp was startled.

“Empty! I don’t understand how that could happen!”

“Maybe that filling station was a gyp!” called blond pretty Alice Cash. “They might not have put in any gas.”

“I guess that was it honey,” Aunt Nora agreed. She opened a road map, peered at it by the glare of a flashlight. “There’s a little jumping-off place down the road about two miles. You’d better walk to it Jim.”

Jim Cash hesitated. “I don’t like to leave you two.”

Aunt Nora opened a capacious leather hand bag. She produced two big, businesslike blue revolvers. She gave one of them to Alice Cash, and the blond young woman handled it in a way that showed she could use it.

“Anybody who monkeys with us won’t find it healthy!” Aunt Nora said dryly. “You go on, Jim. We’ll be all right.”

Relieved at sight of the weapons, Jim Cash slopped off through the rain. He walked on the left side of the pavement, where he could see the lights of oncoming cars and evade them.

A few machines passed him, going in both directions. He did not attempt to flag them, knowing it would be useless. Motorists who pick up strange pedestrians late at night are few and far between.

He descended a small hill. At the bottom, he crossed two bridges—one over a stream, the other spanning the line of an electric railroad.

He had barely crossed the second bridge when several flashlights gushed brilliant white upon him. In the back glow of the flashes, he could discern the figures holding them.

Each was a tall cylinder of black. And upon every figure was the green likeness of a bell.

THERE was something hideous in the way the raven figures stood there, saying nothing, not moving. The rain, streaking down their forms, gave them a shiny look.

Jim Cash stood as if blocked in ice. He had been pale before, now he became positively white.

“Green Bells!” he said thickly. “That radio—the tolling was meant for us as a——”

His own words seemed to snap the chill spell which held him. He exploded in action. His right hand dived into his raincoat pocket like a frightened animal. He wrenched wildly at a pistol which he carried there.

Another eerie black form glided out of the murk behind Cash. It whipped convulsively upon him. Taken by surprise, he was carried down.

The flashlights now went out, as if directed by some occult signal. The cavernous gloom which followed was filled with swishings and slappings, as the ebony-cloaked, green-belled figures charged.

Cash’s gun was dislodged, and went *clank-clanking* across the pavement.

His raincoat tore. He tried to scream. The yell was throttled, and ended in a sound which might have been two rough rocks rubbing together.

The fight noises trailed off. Several moments of ominous quiet followed. Then the entire group moved back to the bridge spanning the railroad.

They turned off and came to a high fence. There was another short, terrific fight while Cash was being put over the fence. Then they descended to the railway tracks.

Once a light came on briefly. This disclosed the darksome figures in a compact wad, with Cash helpless among them.

The railroad was electrified. The current, instead of being carried by an overhead line, was conducted by a third rail which ran close alongside the track. Use of such third rails was common in the vicinity of New York, where the presence of numerous switches and sidings made overhead wiring too intricate. The charged rail was protected by a shedlike wooden shield.

A light came on. A wad of black cloth between Cash's jaws kept him from crying out.

He was thrown headlong at the electrified rail. With a frenzied contortion of his muscles, he managed to avoid landing upon it.

The somber figures pounced upon him, and again hurled him at the rail. Again he saved himself. He was fighting madly for his life. The shed protector over the rail helped him.

But one touch upon the strip of metal beneath, which bore a high voltage, would mean instant death.

The third time, Cash got an arm across the wooden shed and preserved his life. He tore the gag from his jaws with a desperate grasp and emitted a piercing bleat for help!

The Green Bells swarmed upon him, silent, murderous. This time, they pitched him at the rail feet first. One of his legs fell across the highpowered conductor.

There was a tiny hissing play of electric flame. Cash's body seemed to bounce up and down. It convulsed, tying itself in a tight knot around the rail of death.

It stayed there, rigid and still. A wispy plume of brownish smoke curling upward might have been the spirit departing from his body.

The Green Bells eased away in the rain-moist night like dread, voiceless ghouls from another existence.

Chapter II

VISITORS

THE TRIPLEX was New York's newest, gaudiest, and most expensive hotel. It catered to its guests with every comfort and convenience.

Guests arriving by taxi, for instance, did not find it necessary to alight at the sidewalks and enter before the stares of *hoi polloi*. There was an inclosed private drive for the cabs.

This drive was a semicircular tunnel done in bright metals and dark stone, after the modernistic fashion. In it, a taxi was disgorging a passenger.

The newcomer was a tall snake of a man. The serpentine aspect was lent by the fact that his body was so flexible as to seem boneless. His hair was carefully curled, and had an enameled shine. His eyes were ratty; his mouth was a crack; his clothes were flashy enough to be in bad taste.

He paid the taxi with a bill peeled from a fat roll. Entering the lobby, trailed by a bell boy bearing two bags, he leaned elbows on the desk.

"I'm Mr. Cooley," he said shortly. "I wired you for a reservation from Prosper City."

The man was conducted to his room. The bell boy was hardly out of hearing when he picked up the telephone.

"Gimme Judborn Tugg's room," he requested. Then, when he had the connection: "That you, Tugg? . . . This is Slick. What room you got? . . . O. K. I'll be right up."

The man rode an elevator up six floors, made his sinuous way down a corridor, and knocked at a door. The panel opened, and he said familiarly: "Howzza boy, Tugg!"

Judborn Tugg looked somewhat as if he had found a wolf in front of his door—a wolf with which he must, of necessity, associate.

"Come in," he said haughtily.

Tugg was a small, prosperous-appearing mountain. His dark pin-stripe suit, if a bit loud, was well tailored over his ample middle. His chins, big mouth and pale eyes rode on a cone of fat. A gold watch chain bridged his midriff, and formed a support for several lodge emblems.

"Slick" Cooley entered, closed the door, and said: "We don't have to worry any more about Jim Cash."

Judborn Tugg recoiled as if slapped. His head rotated on its foundation of fat as he glanced about nervously.

Slick quickly folded his arms, both hands inside his coat, where he carried automatic pistols. "What's the matter? Somebody here?"

"Oh, my, no! It would be too bad if there was! You should be more careful!" Tugg whipped out a silk handkerchief, and blotted at his forehead. "It is just that I cannot get used to the cold way you fellows have of handling things."

“What you mean is the Green Bell’s way of handling things.” Slick leered.

“Yes, yes; of course.” Judborn Tugg ground his handkerchief in uneasy hands. “The Green Bell will be glad to know young Cash is satisfactorily disposed of.”

Slick took his hands away from his armpits, and straightened his coat. “I didn’t get any time alone with Cash, so I couldn’t question him before he was tossed on that third rail.”

“Your orders were not to question him,” Judborn Tugg said smugly.

Slick sneered slightly. “You don’t need to pretend to be so damned holy with me, Tugg. We understand each other. We’d both like to know who the Green Bell is. Jim Cash knew. By questioning him, I might have gotten the low-down. But I didn’t dare. There was too many guys around.”

“Ahem!” Judborn Tugg cleared his throat and glanced about nervously.

“One of these days, we’re gonna find out who the Green Bell is!” Slick said grimly. “When that happens, we’ll rub him out, see! And, presto, we’ve got the gravy.”

Judborn Tugg shuddered violently.

“Oh, goodness, Slick!” he wailed. “Suppose the Green Bell—suppose some one should overhear us! Let us not talk about it!”

“O. K.,” Slick leered. “What’re me and you to do now?”

JUDBORN TUGG put his handkerchief away, and fiddled with the ornaments on his watch chain. “Have you ever heard of a gentleman by the name of Doc Savage?”

“Kinda seems like I have.” Slick smoothed his coat lapels. “New York is not my stompin’ ground, and this Savage bird hangs out here. I don’t know much about him. Kind of a trouble buster, ain’t he?”

“Exactly! I understand he is a very fierce and competent fighting man, who has a group of five aids.”

“A muscle man with a gang, eh?”

“In your vernacular, I believe that is how you express it. The Green Bell had me investigate Doc Savage. I did not learn a great deal about him, except that he is a man who fights other people’s battles.”

“Yeah? And what about this guy?”

“The Green Bell has ordered me to hire Doc Savage. I am to obtain the services of the man and his five aids for our organization.”

Slick swore wildly. He stamped around the room, fists hard, mean face twisted with rage.

“I won’t stand for it!” he gritted. “I was to have charge of the rough stuff in this business! I was to be third in command—takin’ orders only from the Green Bell and you! Now the Green Bell is fixin’ to bring this Doc Savage in!”

Judborn Tugg patted the air with both hands.

“My dear Slick, you misunderstand,” he soothed. “You are to retain your position. Doc Savage is to work under you! The Green Bell made that very clear.”

“He did, eh?” Slick scowled, but seemed mollified. “Well, that’s different. But that Doc Savage has gotta savvy that his orders come from me!”

“Of course. That will be made clear.”

Slick lighted an expensive cigarette. “Supposin’ Doc Savage considers himself a big shot, and don’t want to take my orders.”

“Any man will take commands, if the pay is sufficient,” Judborn Tugg said, with the certainty of a man who has money and knows its power.

But Slick was still uncertain. “What if Doc Savage ain’t the kind of a guy who hires out for our kind of work?”

“There, again, my statement about payment applies. Every man has his price. The Green Bell needs more men, needs them badly. He does not want ordinary gunmen. Therefore, I am to approach Doc Savage.”

“O. K. Where’ll we find ’im?”

Judborn Tugg shrugged. “I do not know. We shall see if the telephone information girl can tell us.”

He put in a call. The swiftness with which he was given Doc Savage’s address seemed to daze him. He blinked his pale eyes and hung up.

“Doc Savage must be rather well known!” he muttered. “The phone operator had his whereabouts on the tip of her tongue. Come, Slick. We shall go see this man.”

The two quitted the hotel room.

THE skyscraper before which Slick Cooley and Judborn Tugg eventually alighted was one of the most resplendent in the city. It towered nearly a hundred stories.

“What a joint!” Slick muttered in awe. “Doc Savage ain’t no cheap skate if he hangs out here!”

“These surroundings show Savage is good at his business,” Judborn Tugg replied stiffly. “That is the kind of a man we want. You, Slick, will wait in the lobby.”

“Why?” Slick demanded suspiciously. “How do I know but that you’ll pay this Savage more money than I’m gettin’?”

“Nothing of the sort, Slick. You will stay here in case Alice Cash and Aunt Nora should put in an appearance. They were coming here to hire this Savage to do their fighting. They cannot pay Savage as much as we can, but it would be better if they did not see him.”

“Yeah,” Slick agreed with bad grace. “I’ll stick below, then.”

An express elevator which ran noiselessly and with great speed, lifted Judborn Tugg to the eighty-sixth floor. He strutted pompously down a richly decorated corridor.

Sighting a mirror, Tugg halted and carefully surveyed his appearance. He wanted to overawe this Doc Savage. That was the way to handle these common thugs who hired themselves out for money.

Tugg lighted a dollar cigar. He had another just like it which he intended to offer Savage. The fine weeds would be the final touch. Doc Savage would be bowled over by the grandeur of Judborn Tugg.

Tugg did not know it, but he was headed for one of the big shocks of his career.

He knocked on a door, puffed out his chest, and cocked his cigar in the air.

The door opened.

Judborn Tugg's chest collapsed, his cigar fell to the floor, and his eyes bulged out!

A mighty giant of bronze stood in the door. The effect of this metallic figure was amazing. Marvelously symmetrical proportions absorbed the true size of the man. Viewed from a distance, and away from anything to which his stature might have been compared, he would not have seemed as big.

The remarkably high forehead, the muscular and strong mouth, the lean and corded cheeks, denoted a rare power of character. His bronze hair was a shade darker than his bronze skin, and it lay straight and smooth as a skullcap of metal.

The thing which really took the wind out of Judborn Tugg, though, was the bronze man's eyes. They were like pools of fine flake gold, alive with tiny glistenings. They possessed a strange, hypnotic quality. They made Judborn Tugg want to pull his coat over his head, so that the innermost secrets of his brain would not be searched out.

"Are—are—you Doc Savage?" stuttered Judborn Tugg.

The bronze giant nodded. The simple gesture caused great cables of muscle to writhe about his neck.

Tugg felt an impulse to shiver at the sight. This bronze man must possess incredible strength.

In a quiet, powerful voice, Doc Savage invited Tugg inside. Then he gave him a cigar, explaining quietly: "I hope you'll excuse me, since I never smoke."

That cigar was the final shock to Judborn Tugg. It was a long, fine custom weed in an individual vacuum container. Tugg happened to know that cigars such as this could not be obtained for less than ten dollars each.

Judborn Tugg was a pricked balloon. Instead of overawing Doc Savage, he was himself practically stunned.

SEVERAL moments were required before Judborn Tugg recovered sufficient aplomb to get down to business.

"I have heard you are an—er—a trouble buster," he said, in a small voice, very unlike his usual overbearing tone.

"You might call it that," Doc Savage agreed politely. "More properly, my five companions and myself have a purpose in life. That purpose is to go here and there, from one end of the world to the other, looking for excitement and adventure, striving to help those in need of help, and punishing those who deserve it."

Judborn Tugg did not know that it was a very rare occasion when Doc Savage gave out even this much information about himself.

Tugg did not like the speech at all. He mulled it over, and reached a conclusion—the wrong one. He decided this was Doc Savage's way of hinting that he and his men hired out their services. The man, of course, could not come right out and say he was a professional thug.

“My case is right in your line,” Tugg said, managing a faint smirk. “There are people who need help, and some others who need punishing.”

Doc Savage nodded politely. “Suppose you tell me the situation.”

“It’s this way,” said Tugg, lighting the costly cigar. “I am one of the leading business men in Prosper City. I own Tugg & Co., the largest cotton-milling concern in the town.”

Tugg folded his hands and looked pious. “Some months ago, because of terrible business conditions, we were forced to cut the wages of our employees. Much against our wishes, of course.”

“I thought business was picking up,” Doc remarked.

Tugg acquired the expression of a man who had been served a bad egg unexpectedly.

“Business is terrible!” he said emphatically. “It’s worse now, too, because all of my employees went out on a strike! And the workmen in the other factories and mines went on strikes. It’s awful! Conditions are frightful!”

Doc Savage asked gently: “Did the other concerns cut wages before or after you did?”

Judborn Tugg swallowed a few times. He was startled. With that one question, Doc Savage had grabbed the kernel of the whole situation in Prosper City.

The truth was that Tugg & Co. had cut wages first, and the other concerns had been forced to do the same in order to meet the low prices at which their competitor was offering goods for sale. Tugg & Co. had turned itself into a sweatshop, paying their employees starvation wages.

When this had happened, there had been no necessity for it. Business had indeed been picking up. The whole thing was part of a plot conceived by that mysterious, unknown being, the Green Bell.

Other concerns in Prosper City had been forced to cut wages, although not as much as Tugg & Co. But the cuts had been enough to give agitators hired by Tugg & Co. an argument with which to cause numerous strikes. The hired agitators had even been directed to urge the strike at Tugg & Co. who paid them.

For months now, the agitators, under the direction of Slick Cooley, had kept all business at a standstill. Any factory which tried to open up was bombed, burned, or its machinery ruined. Every workman who sought to take a job was threatened or beaten, or if that failed, the Green Bell had a final and most horrible form of death, which was in itself an object lesson to other stubborn ones.

The whole thing was part of the scheme of the unknown master mind, the Green Bell. No one knew what was behind it. Judborn Tugg, if he knew, was not telling anybody.

Tugg carefully avoided Doc Savage’s weird eyes, and decided to handle the bronze man warily.

“We were all forced to cut wages about the same time,” he lied uneasily. “But the salary whacks were not at the bottom of the trouble. It is all the fault of the agitators.”

WHEN TUGG paused, Doc Savage said nothing. He had settled in a comfortable chair. Several of these were in the outer office. There was also an expensive inlaid table and a massive safe. A costly rug was underfoot.

Adjoining, was a library containing one of the most complete collections of scientific tomes in existence, and another room which held an experimental laboratory so advanced in its equipment that scientists had come from foreign countries, just to examine it. The presence of these rooms was masked by a closed door, however.

“Conditions in Prosper City are pitiful,” continued Judborn Tugg, secretly wondering if he might not be entirely mistaken about this bronze man. “People are starving. There have been bombings, beatings, killings. It is all the fault of these agitators.”

Doc Savage maintained a disquieting silence.

“Aunt Nora Boston is the leader of the agitators,” Tugg said, telling an enormous lie without blinking.

Doc might have been a figure done in the bronze which he resembled, for all the signs of interest he showed. But that did not mean he was missing anything. Doc rarely showed emotion.

Tugg sucked in a full breath and went on: “Aunt Nora Boston is aided by Jim Cash, his sister Alice, and a young man named Ole Slater, who is hanging around Prosper City, pretending to be a play writer gathering local color for a manufacturing-town drama. Those four are the ring leaders. They’re the head of a gang they call the Prosper City Benevolent Society. That organization is back of all the trouble. They’re just low-down trouble-makers. I’ll bet they’re paid by some foreign country.”

This was so much more falsehood.

Judborn Tugg had not intended for his talk to follow these lines. But he was afraid to broach the truth. It was those eyes of the bronze man’s. Tugg would have been glad to get up and walk out, but he feared the wrath of the Green Bell.

“I want to hire you to—er—punish Aunt Nora Boston and her gang,” he said bluntly. “I’ll pay you plenty!”

“My services are not for sale,” Doc Savage said quietly. “They never are.”

Judborn Tugg’s head seemed to sink in his fat cone of a neck. What manner of man was this?

Doc went on: “Usually, individuals who are assisted by my five men and myself are generous enough to contribute a gift to worthy causes which I name.”

Tugg stifled a smile. So this was the dodge the bronze man used to make it seem he was not a hired thug. Tugg thought he saw the light. This Doc Savage could be hired, all right!

“Just how big a gift would you want?” he asked cannily.

“In your case, and provided conditions are just as you have outlined,” Doc replied promptly, “the gift would be a million dollars.”

Judborn Tugg narrowly escaped heart failure.

DOWN in the skyscraper lobby, Slick Cooley was also experiencing a shock; but from a different cause.

Slick had caught sight of Alice Cash and Aunt Nora Boston.

The two women were mud-spattered, bedraggled, and sodden from the rain. They left wet tracks across the polished lobby tiling. Their faces were pale, frightened, and they seemed overawed by the magnificence of the giant building.

They trudged for the elevators, Aunt Nora in the lead, strong jaw thrust out.

Slick gave his brain a mental whipping. He had best do something! Should the two women get upstairs, they might complicate things. Aunt Nora would do that, at least. She was an old war horse when she got mad. A brilliant idea hit Slick. He dashed forward. Before the two women saw him, he grabbed them savagely and jerked.

Aunt Nora's big purse sailed to the floor.

Slick pounced upon the bag. He had his roll of bills concealed in one hand. Furtively, he got the purse open. He slipped the money inside. In doing this, he saw the two revolvers.

He now seized the women. A violent tussle ensued.

"Robbers!" Slick bellowed. "These two dames held me up!"

Aunt Nora gave him a poke in the eye which made him bawl in real agony. Pretty Alice Cash administered a few blows of her own.

A policeman dived in from the street. In a moment, he had stopped the fight.

Slick jabbed a hand at the two women. "These women held me up to-night! I recognize 'em! Search 'em officer! I'll bet they've got the rods they used, and my coin!"

The officer opened Aunt Nora's bag, found the guns and the money. He counted the latter.

"How much did you lose?" he asked.

Slick gave him the exact amount of the roll.

"This is it!" the patrolman said grimly. He collared the two women.

Alice Cash shrieked angrily: "We did not rob him!"

"Evidence says you did!" rumbled the officer. "Even if you didn't, you're carryin' guns, and that's against the law in New York."

"You scut!" Aunt Nora flared at the smirking Slick. "You framed us! You low-lifed, slippery-haired sneak! I'll wring your snaky neck!"

She jumped for Slick, who back-pedaled hastily.

"None of that!" shouted the officer. "It's into the jug for you!"

He propelled his prisoners for the door.

Chapter III

THE COMEBACK

AS the women were leaving, the gorilla ambled upon the scene.

This personage had, to give him his due, some man-like qualities. His finger nails were manicured, even if the job had been done with a pocketknife. His little eyes glistened with keen intelligence in their pits of gristle. His face attained that rare quality of being so homely that it was pleasant to look upon.

His clothing was expensive, although it did look like it had been slept in. He would weigh every ounce of two hundred and sixty pounds, and his hairy arms were some inches longer than his bandy legs.

He ambled up and stopped in front of Slick.

"I saw you slip the money in that purse," he said in a voice so mild that it might have been a child's.

Then he hit Slick. Hit him on the nose!

Slick's curly hair was varnished straight back on his head. The blow was so hard that it made the hair stand out suddenly in front, as if blown by a wind from behind.

Describing a parabola, Slick lit on his shoulders and skidded a score of feet. His nose had been spread over most of his weasel face.

Aunt Nora began to bounce up and down in ribald delight, and to shout: "Glory be! Just what I wanted to hand him!"

Entrancing Alice Cash bestowed a grateful smile on the fellow who looked like a furry gorilla.

The cop shouted: "You say this squirt planted that roll of bills?"

"He sure did," said the hairy man.

Growling, the officer rushed for Slick.

Slick shoved up dizzily from the floor. He sprinted for the door. Glancing around, he saw the policeman was sure to overhaul him. He spaded his hands inside his coat, and brought out two revolvers. Each was fitted with a compact silencer.

The guns began to *chung* out deadly reports. The bullets missed the fast-traveling patrolman. But he veered for shelter, tugging at his own weapon.

Slick hurtled through the door. A taxi chanced to be cruising past. With a wild spring, the fleeing gunman got into it. He jammed the hot silencer of a revolver against the shivering driver's neck.

The cab jumped down the street as if dynamite had exploded behind it.

The officer raced out, but did not shoot because of the traffic. He sped back into the skyscraper and put in a call to headquarters, advising them to spread a radio alarm for the taxi.

“The guy as good as got away!” he advised the huge, furry man and the two women, when he rejoined them. “Now—you two ladies! We’ve still got to settle about them guns you were carryin’!”

“The ladies tell me they were on their way to see Doc Savage,” the hairy fellow advised in his babylike voice.

The cop blinked. Then he grinned from ear to ear.

“That makes it different,” he chuckled. Then he walked away, acting as if he had never seen the two women.

Alice Cash looked prettily incredulous at the magic which mention of Doc Savage’s name had accomplished.

Aunt Nora gulped several times, then smiled. “Bless you, you homely monkey! How’d you get us out of that? I know they’re very strict about people packin’ guns here in New York.”

The human gorilla laughed. “The fact that you were goin’ to Doc Savage made it all right.”

“Doc Savage must have a big reputation in this town,” Aunt Nora said wonderingly. “You ain’t him, are you?”

“Who, me? Hell—I mean, oh, my—no! I’m just one of Doc Savage’s five helpers.”

“What’s your name?”

“Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Mayfair.”

Aunt Nora snorted. “I’ll bet you’re not called that much!”

“Not enough for me to know who’s bein’ wanted when I hear it!” the hairy fellow grinned. “Call me Monk.”

“Monk” might have added that he was a chemist whose name was mentioned with reverence in scientific circles of both America and Europe. But he was not addicted to blowing his own horn.

THE speedy elevator lifted them to the eighty-sixth floor. When they were near the door of Doc Savage’s office, the murmur of a voice within was distinguishable.

Aunt Nora gave a start of angry surprise. “I’d know that voice anywhere!” she gasped. “It’s Judborn Tugg!”

Monk’s little eyes showed interest. “Who’s he?”

“A fat, conceited jaybird! He’s no friend of ours! Slick Cooley—the fellow you pasted downstairs—follows Judborn Tugg around like a Man Friday. They’re tarred with the same brush—both crooked!”

Monk considered this, then waved the women back. He opened the office door, and stood in the aperture. His big, hirsute hands moved nervously, as if he were embarrassed.

“Oh, excuse me! I didn’t know you had company.” He started to back out.

No one, other than Doc, had noticed that the apparently aimless movements of Monk’s hands had spelled out a message in the deaf-and-dumb sign language.

“*Come out here without alarming your visitor,*” Monk had signaled.

Doc arose, saying to Judborn Tugg: "If you will excuse me—I wish to speak with this man!" He strode rapidly to the door.

For all of his great weight and swiftness of stride, he made no appreciable sound. There was an uncanny silence about his movements, a natural lightness which indicated enormously developed leg muscles.

Fat Judborn Tugg, instead of suspecting anything, was rather glad to have Doc step outside for a moment. Tugg had not yet recovered from the shock of having Doc suggest that his services would call for a million-dollar donation. He welcomed the chance to regain his balance.

Doc closed the corridor door. Shortly later, he was in the presence of the two women.

Aunt Nora let her mouth hang open in unashamed astonishment at sight of the giant bronze man. Then she cocked her arms akimbo and smiled, wrinkles corrugating every inch of her motherly face.

"Glory be!" she chuckled. "You're the answer to this old girl's prayers!"

Alice Cash did not exactly let her jaw drop, but her lips parted slightly, and her blue eyes became round with amazement. Her next act was to glance down disgustedly at her muddy, disheveled raiment.

Doc Savage usually affected pretty young women like that—set them wondering about their appearance. Feminine eyes were inclined to be quick to note that Doc was unusually handsome, a fact which escaped men after they saw his amazing muscular development.

Monk performed the introductions.

"What has Judborn Tugg been tellin' you?" Aunt Nora questioned anxiously.

"A great deal," Doc replied quietly. "He is one of the most profuse liars I have ever encountered."

This would have pained Judborn Tugg exceedingly, had he overheard it. It was his belief that he could tell a falsehood as smoothly as the truth. He would have been shocked to know that Doc Savage, by close attention to his voice tones, had spotted almost every lie.

Aunt Nora clenched her work-toughened hands, and gave Doc a look of genuine appeal.

"I need your help!" she said earnestly. "But I haven't got a cent with which to pay you!"

DOC'S strange golden eyes studied Aunt Nora and attractive Alice Cash. His bronze features remained as expressionless as metal.

Without speaking, he turned. He entered his office.

"I do not think I am interested in your proposition," he told Judborn Tugg.

Tugg picked the costly cigar from his pursy mouth, as if it had suddenly turned bitter.

"I can pay you plenty," he pointed out. "I might even pay you that million, provided you can do the work that I want done."

“No!”

Judborn Tugg purpled. To him, it was inconceivable that any man would dismiss a million so abruptly. He would probably have keeled over had he known that Doc intended to help Aunt Nora Boston, who had admitted she could not pay him a copper cent.

“If you change your mind, you’ll find me at the Hotel Triplex!” Tugg said in a loud, angry tone.

“There will be no change of mind,” Doc said, reaching out and grasping Tugg by the coat collar.

Before Tugg knew what had happened, he was hoisted off the floor. His coat tore in two or three places, but held.

Helpless as a worm on a stick, Tugg was carried into the corridor and deposited urgently in an elevator.

“If you want to retain your health, you had better not let me see you again!” Doc advised him in the tone of a physician prescribing for a patient with dangerous symptoms.

The elevator carried Tugg from view.

Monk, an innocent expression on his homely face, ambled up and asked: “Didn’t I hear that bird say he was staying at the Hotel Triplex?”

Doc nodded; then invited Aunt Nora and Alice Cash into his office.

Grinning, Monk ambled to a public telephone in the corridor. He got the number of the Hotel Triplex from the phone book, then called the hostelry. He asked the hotel operator for the night manager.

“You have a guest named Judborn Tugg,” Monk informed the hotel man. “Doc Savage just threw this fellow out of his office.”

“In that case, we’ll throw him out of the Hotel Triplex, too,” Monk was advised.

Hanging up, Monk fished an envelope out of his pocket and addressed it to the Unemployment Relief Fund.

From another pocket, he produced Slick Cooley’s fat roll of bills. Monk had managed to harvest this in the excitement downstairs. He sealed the money in the envelope, applied stamps, then put it in a mail box. The envelope was so bulky that he had to insert it in the lid marked for packages.

Whistling cheerfully, Monk tramped for Doc’s office.

WHEN JUDBORN TUGG reached the Hotel Triplex, he found his bags waiting for him on the sidewalk. The night manager in person was watching over the valises.

“I am sorry,” the manager said coldly. “We do not want you here.”

Judborn Tugg, after nearly choking, yelled and cursed and waved his arms. He threatened to sue the Triplex for a million dollars.

“Get away from here, or I’ll have you arrested for disturbing the peace!” snapped the manager. Then he walked inside.

A moment later, a dark limousine rolled up to the curb. The rear was heavily curtained.

The driver leaned from behind the wheel and advised: "Get in!"

It was Slick Cooley, partially disguised by a raincoat and a low-pulled hat.

Judborn Tugg placed his bags in the front, then got in the back. At this point, his hair almost stood on end.

The rear seat held a figure incased from head to foot in a black sack of a garment. On the front of the raven gown was painted a big green bell.

The unholy apparition in black held two silenced revolvers in dark-gloved hands.

"Do not mind the guns," said a hollow, inhuman voice from the murky form. "I am the Green Bell, and the weapons are merely to remind you not to snatch at my hood in an effort to learn my identity."

The limousine now rolled out into traffic.

"I was walkin' down the street when *he* called to me from the back of this car," Slick advised. "There wasn't any driver——"

"I simply parked the car ahead of you, before donning my hood," interposed the sepulchral tones of the Green Bell. "Incidentally, this machine is stolen. But I do not think the owner will miss it for some hours. Tugg—what happened to you?"

Judborn Tugg started. He had been cudgeling his brain in an effort to identify the Green Bell's voice. But there was nothing the least familiar about the disguised tones.

Rapidly, Judborn Tugg explained the unhappy outcome of his visit to Doc Savage.

"You have served me very inefficiently!" Anger had come into the booming voice of the Green Bell. "This Doc Savage is not at all the type of man you thought him to be!"

Tugg, still smarting from his reception at the hotel, said angrily: "This is my first mistake!"

The Green Bell gazed levelly at him. The eye holes in the jet hood were backed by goggles which had deep-green lenses. The effect was that of a big, green-orbed cat.

"I do not care for your angry tone!" said the dark being. "You are fully aware, Tugg, that I can get along without those who do not cooperate fully with me. You are no exception! You are of service to me only as an agent, a figurehead through which I can work. You pretend to be Prosper City's leading citizen, and I choose to let you. Your milling concern, Tugg & Co., was ready to fail when I came upon the scene, thanks to your bad management. You have retained control of the company only because I have furnished you money with which to pay the interest on your loans. You are but a cog in my great plan."

Judborn Tugg collapsed like an automobile tire which had picked up a nail.

"I did not mean to offend you," he mumbled. "I was excited because of the treatment Doc Savage gave me."

"I am going to take care of Doc Savage!" the Green Bell said ominously.

Tugg shivered. "The man is dangerous—especially if he has the brains to match his unbelievable physical strength!"

“We do not want Savage against us,” replied the Green Bell. “I have already put a plan in operation which will keep Savage so busy that he will have no time to stick a finger in our pie.”

“I’d like to see him dead!” said Judborn Tugg savagely.

“You may get your wish!” tolled the Green Bell. “My little scheme will undoubtedly result in Doc Savage dying in the electric chair!”

Ordering Slick down a dark street, the Green Bell eased out of the car, and was swallowed by the drizzling darkness. A bit farther on, Judborn Tugg and Slick Cooley abandoned the stolen limousine.

Walking away from the car, they could see in the distance what appeared to be a tower of gray freckles in the wet gloom. This was the skyscraper which housed Doc Savage’s aerie.

Chapter IV

THE MURDER WITNESSES

IN his eighty-sixth-floor headquarters, Doc was listening to Aunt Nora Boston and Alice Cash tell their story. The homely Monk lingered in the background, furtively admiring Alice Cash's loveliness.

"My brother!" Alice said, white-faced. "He has vanished! We ran out of gas in New Jersey, and Jim walked ahead to find a filling station. That was the last we saw of him!"

"We thought we heard Jim scream," Aunt Nora amended grimly. "But we couldn't find him."

Alice put her fingers over her pale lips and said between them: "And just before that, we heard the Green Bell from the radio!"

Aunt Nora grimaced. "The sound of the Green Bell over the radio nearly always means some innocent person is to die!"

Alice shuddered, wailed: "Poor Jimmy! I have a feeling something terrible happened to him!"

Doc Savage could do remarkable things with his powerful voice. He now made it calm and soothing, a tone calculated to quiet the excited women.

"Your story is a bit disconnected," he told them. "Suppose you start at the first."

Aunt Nora clenched her hands and stared steadily at them as she talked.

"The trouble in Prosper City started many months ago, when Tugg & Co. cut wages. That caused the first of a series of strikes——"

"Judborn Tugg told me about that," Doc interposed. "All business in Prosper City is at a standstill. A gang of men, pretending to be agitators, bomb or burn every factory and mine which attempts to start operations, and terrorize all men who want to go back to work. Tugg said you were the chief of the agitators."

"The liar!" Aunt Nora flared, "All I have done is organize my Benevolent Society to help some of the poor souls who are out of work."

"Aunt Nora has kept lots of people from starving!" Alice Cash put in. "She has spent all of her money, and all she can borrow, in feeding those unfortunates."

"You shut up!" Aunt Nora directed gruffly.

"I will not!" Alice snapped, "I think Mr. Savage should know the truth! You're an angel!"

Aunt Nora blushed and stared at her big, muddy shoes. "I ain't no angel—not with them feet."

"What about these agitators back of the trouble?" Doc asked.

"They're hired thugs, of course!" Aunt Nora declared. "But just who they are, nobody knows. When they appear they're always in robes that look like black sacks, with green bells painted on the front."

“Their leader is not known?”

“No!” Aunt Nora made a fierce mouth. “Alice and her brother and Ole Slater have been helping me try to find out who the Green Bell is.”

“Who is Ole Slater?” Doc Savage wanted to know.

“A nice young lad who thinks he can write plays. He’s stricken with the charms of Alice, here. He’s gathering material for a play, and he stays at my rooming house. I forgot to tell you that I run a boarding house.”

Doc asked: “And you think Judborn Tugg and Slick Cooley are in the Green Bell’s gang?”

“I ain’t got no proof!” asserted Aunt Nora. “But they could be! One of them might be the Green Bell, himself.”

MONK entered the conference, asking gently: “Hasn’t the police chief of Prosper City done anything about all this?”

“That old numbskull!” Aunt Nora sniffed. “His name is Clem Clements, and he thinks Judborn Tugg is the greatest man alive and the soul of honor. I don’t think Chief Clements is crooked. He’s just plain downright dumb!”

“How come Tugg exerts such a sway?” Monk wanted to know.

“Judborn Tugg tries to make himself out as the leading business man of Prosper City!” snorted Aunt Nora. “He’s fooled a lot of nitwits, including Chief Clements. Tugg has been spreading the story that I am behind the Green Bell. He has made Chief Clements and plenty of others believe it. I’ve thought several times they were going to throw me in jail!”

“They haven’t quite dared do that!” Alice Cash explained. “The poor people Aunt Nora has been helping would tear down the jail if she was in it. I don’t think they’ve dared harm Aunt Nora for the same reason.”

Aunt Nora laughed grimly. “I’ve told everybody that if anything happens to me, it’ll be Judborn Tugg’s doing! If the Green Bells should murder me, or drive me insane, my friends would lynch Tugg. That’s why I haven’t been harmed.”

“What’s this about insanity?” Doc interrupted.

Alice Cash shivered. “It’s something that happens to workmen who are persistent about going back to their jobs. No one knows how it is done. The men simply—go crazy. It’s happened to more than a dozen of them.”

For a few moments Doc and Monk mulled over what they had been hearing. It was an amazing story, the more so because the motive behind the affair was unclear.

“Why hasn’t martial law been declared?” Monk demanded.

“Chief Clements claims he has the situation in hand!” Alice Cash replied. “The distressing situation in Prosper City has come about gradually. To an outsider, it merely looks like strike trouble.”

Aunt Nora had maintained a short, tense silence. Now she exploded.

“Jim Cash as much as admitted he had found out who the Green Bell is!” she announced. “And that very thing makes me think he has been killed!”

Alice Cash gave a soft, grief-stricken moan, and buried her face in her hands.

Monk got up as if to comfort her.

There was a loud interruption from the corridor outside. Blows chugged. Men grunted and gasped.

Doc glided over and whipped the door open.

Two men stood in the hall, hands lifted, facing a third man who held a flat automatic.

The hands which one of the men held up were so huge it seemed a wonder they did not overbalance him. Each was composed of considerably more than a quart of bone and gristle. He had a somber, puritanical face.

This man of enormous fists was Colonel John Renwick, known more often as "Renny." Among other things, he was a world-renowned engineer, a millionaire, and loved to knock panels out of doors with his big fists.

The other fellow with upraised arms was slender, with a somewhat unhealthy complexion. He had pale hair and eyes. Alongside his big-fisted, rusty-skinned companion, he seemed a weakling.

He was "Long Tom." The electrical profession knew him as Major Thomas J. Roberts, a wizard with the juice.

RENNY and Long Tom were two more of Doc Savage's five aids.

The man with the gun was a chap Doc had never seen before. He was tall, athletic, and not unhandsome.

The fellow backed to an elevator, sprang inside, and the cage sank.

RENNY and Long Tom looked sheepishly at Doc.

"We came upon that bird listenin' outside the door!" Renny said, in a roaring voice, suggestive of an angry lion in a cave. "We tried to grab him, but he flashed his hardware on us!"

Doc was gliding down the corridor as these words came. He reached the endmost elevator. His sinew-wrapped hand tapped a secret button. Sliding doors whistled back.

This lift was a private one, which Doc maintained for his own use. It was fitted with special machinery, which operated at terrific speed. The ordinary express elevators were fast, but compared to this one, they were slow.

The floor dropped some inches below Doc's feet, so swiftly did the descent start. For fully sixty stories, he hardly touched the floor. Then came the slow, tremendous shock of the stop. Doc's five aids, all strong men, were usually forced to their knees when this happened.

So powerful were the bronze man's thews that he withstood the shock without apparent effort.

He flashed out into the lobby of the towering building. The cage bearing the young man with the gun had not yet arrived.

But it came within a few moments. The young man got out, backing so as to menace the elevator operator with his weapon.

Doc grasped the fellow's arms. Bronze fingers all but sank from view as they tightened.

An agonized wail was forced through the man's teeth. He dropped his gun. The excruciating pressure on his arm muscles caused his fingers to distend like talons.

He tried to kick backward. But pain had rendered him as limp as a big rag. His head drooped; his eyes glazed. He was on the verge of fainting from the torture.

Doc tucked the slack figure under an arm, entered the speed elevator, and rode back to the eighty-sixth floor.

Aunt Nora, Alice Cash, and the others were waiting in the corridor.

Doc's prisoner was hardly able to stand. His knees buckled. Doc grasped him by an arm, not too tightly, and held him erect.

Aunt Nora stared at the captive, popeyed.

Amazement also engulfed Alice Cash's attractive features as she gazed at the young man.

"Know him?" Doc asked quietly.

"He is Ole Slater!" Alice exclaimed. "My—er—the boy who likes me!"

HALF carried into the office, and deposited in a deep chair, Ole Slater found his tongue.

"I got worried and followed you to New York," he told Alice and Aunt Nora.

"You should not have been sneaking around that door," Aunt Nora informed him severely.

"Don't I know it!" Ole Slater touched his arms gingerly, then eyed Doc Savage's metallic hands as if wondering how they could have inflicted such torment. "I stopped outside the door a minute to listen. I was just being cautious. Then these men jumped me. I guess I lost my head—I thought they were Green Bells!"

Aunt Nora smiled at Doc. "This young man is our friend. I'm sure he didn't mean any harm."

"Of course he didn't!" Alice Cash added her defense.

"I'm terribly sorry about this," Ole Slater said meekly. "I was, well—worried about Aunt Nora and Jim and Alice."

Grief returned to Alice Cash's refined features. "Jim has vanished, Ole."

Ole Slater now received the story of what had happened on the New Jersey road, beginning with the awesome belling sound which had come unexpectedly from the radio.

Aunt Nora Boston added a few more details about conditions in Prosper City. Although Doc questioned her closely, he learned little that had not been brought out already.

Alice Cash, it developed, was private secretary to Collison McAlter, a man who owned the Little Grand Cotton Mills. The Little Grand was the main competitor of

Tugg & Co., in Prosper City, but was now closed down, like all the rest of the industries.

The master mind, the Green Bell, for some reason as yet unclear, was keeping all Prosper City business at a standstill by use of a reign of terror. That was what it amounted to.

They had been talking the situation over for about half an hour when two men dashed excitedly into the office.

One gesticulated with a slender black cane, and barked: "Doc! You're in a frightful jam!"

THE cane which the man waved looked innocent, but it was in reality a sword cane with a blade of fine Damascus steel. The gentleman who carried it was slender, with sharp features and a high forehead. His clothing was of the latest style and finest cloth.

He was Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks—"Ham" to Doc's group, of which he was a member. He was by way of being the most astute lawyer Harvard ever turned out. He was also such a snappy dresser that tailors sometimes followed him down the street, just to observe clothes being worn as they should be worn.

"You've been accused of a murder, Doc!" exclaimed the second of the newcomers.

This man was tall, and so thin he seemed nothing more than a structure of skin-coated bones. He wore glasses, the left lens of which was much thicker than the right. The left lens was a powerful magnifying glass. The bony man had lost the use of his left eye in the War, and since he needed a magnifier in his profession of archæology and geology, he carried it in the left side of his spectacles, for convenience.

He was "Johnny"—William Harper Littlejohn, one-time head of the natural science research department of a famous university, and possessor of an almost universal reputation for proficiency in his line.

The addition of these two completed Doc Savage's group of five unusual aids. Each was a man with few equals at his trade. They were men who loved excitement and adventure. They found that aplenty with Doc Savage. The strange bronze man seemed to walk always on paths of peril.

Undoubtedly the most amazing fact about this remarkable company of trouble busters was the ability of Doc, himself, to excel any one of his helpers at his own profession. Doc's fund of knowledge about electricity was greater than that of Long Tom, the wizard of the juice; the same supremacy applied to the others in their fields of chemistry, geology, law, and engineering.

"What's this about me being a murderer?" Doc asked sharply.

"The New Jersey police have a warrant for you!" declared Ham, still flourishing his sword cane. "They have four witnesses who say they saw you throw a man against the third rail of an interurban line and electrocute him!"

"And they're bringing the witnesses over here to identify you!" Johnny added. Excitedly, he jerked off his spectacles which had the magnifier on the left side. "They'll be here any time, now!"

Ham nodded vehemently. “They will! A police officer in New Jersey, knowing I usually take care of the law angles in our troubles, called me and tipped me off about the thing.”

“Who am I supposed to have murdered?” Doc queried dryly.

Ham tapped his sword cane thoughtfully. “A fellow I never heard of. His name was Jim Cash!”

Alice Cash sank soundlessly into a chair and buried her face in her arms. Her shoulders began to convulse.

Monk, who had prowled over to the window, and stood looking down, called abruptly: “Look at this!”

Doc flashed to his side.

Far below, a car was sweeping in to the curb. Men got out. In the darkness and rain, it was impossible to identify them. They numbered nine.

Faint light spilled from the front of the skyscraper, revealing, painted on top of the car for easy identification from airplanes, the lettered symbols of New Jersey State Police.

“The New Jersey officers with their witnesses!” Monk muttered.

Chapter V

PERIL'S PATH

DOC backed from the window. Without apparent haste, but none the less with deceptive speed, he crossed to the massive table and touched several inlaid segments. These depressed under his fingers, but immediately sprang back into place, so as to conceal the fact that the table top was one great cluster of push buttons.

“Monk, you and Ham stay here and stall these fellows!” Doc directed.

Monk surveyed the sartorially perfect Ham and made an awful grimace. “O. K. I’ll try to put up with this shyster!”

At that, Ham glared and hefted his sword cane suggestively. His expression said that nothing would give him more pleasure than to stick the blade into Monk’s anthropoid frame.

“Some of these days, I’m gonna take that hairy hide of yours home for a rug!” he promised.

This exchange, accompanied by fierce looks, was nothing unusual. Ham and Monk were always riding each other. Their good-natured quarrel dated back to the Great War—to an incident which had given Ham his nickname. To have some fun, Ham had taught Monk some highly insulting French words, telling him they were the proper adjectives with which to curry the favor of a French general. Monk had used them—and landed in the guardhouse.

Shortly after his release from the military calaboose, the dapper Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks had been hailed upon a charge of stealing hams. Somebody had planted the evidence. The nickname of Ham had stuck from that day.

What irked Ham especially, was the fact that he had never been able to prove it was Monk who had framed him.

Monk only leered nastily at Ham, and asked Doc: “Where are you goin’?”

“If you do not know, you can tell the truth when those fellows ask you where we are,” Doc informed him dryly.

Every one but Monk and Ham now left the office. They entered the high-speed elevator. A breath-taking drop followed. Doc sent the cage to the basement level.

The New Jersey officers and their four witnesses had undoubtedly been passed somewhere en route.

Doc led his party along a white passage. They entered a private garage which the bronze man maintained in the basement. This held several cars, all excellent machines, but none in the least flashy.

Doc stepped to a large limousine. He produced two objects from a door pocket. One of these resembled a greatly overgrown wrist-watch. The other was a flat box with numerous dials and switches, and a harness by which it could be carried under a coat, out of view.

The two objects were joined by a flexible conduit.

Doc flicked switches. On the glass dial of the oversize wrist-watch contrivance appeared a picture of the office upstairs.

Aunt Nora looked at this picture, noting the presence of the big, furry Monk and the dapper Ham. Her eyes threatened to jump out of her head when she saw the two go to the door and admit a string of men.

“Land sakes!” she gasped. “A television machine! I didn’t know they made ’em that small!”

“The only ones of that size are in Doc’s possession,” Long Tom advised her, with the natural pride of an electrical expert discussing a remarkable accomplishment in his profession. “Doc made them. The transmitter is concealed in the wall of the room upstairs.”

“But I didn’t see it turned on!”

“Doc did that when he pressed the inlaid table top.”

There was a radio set in the limousine. Doc spun the dials. The words which came from the loud-speaker showed the set was tuned to a transmitter relaying sounds picked up by secret microphones in the office room above.

Between the televisor and the radio, Doc and the others were able to follow what went on above almost as perfectly as if they had been present.

FOUR of the men who had just arrived wore uniforms of New Jersey State Troopers. A New York detective was also with them. If an arrest was to be made, he would have to make it, jailing the prisoners until they were extradited to New Jersey.

Any water-front dive might have been combed to get the other four. They were attired in suits, neckties, and hats which looked brand-new. This was productive of a suspicion that they had been dressed up for the occasion.

“Where is Doc Savage?” demanded one of the troopers.

Monk’s homely face was very innocent. “Search me, officer.”

“This is a regretful mission for us,” said another of the policemen. “Knowing Doc Savage to be a man of fine character——”

“He ain’t so damn fine!” sneered one of the four somewhat sinister witnesses. “We saw ’im murder a man!”

Ham beetled his brows and bent a hard stare on the quartet. This was Ham’s element. As a lawyer, he had handled many lying witnesses.

“You saw the murder?” he challenged.

“Yeah!” they chorused sullenly.

“And you are sure it was Doc Savage?” Ham’s tone of voice called them frauds as plainly as words could have.

“Yeah! We’ve seen the bronze guy’s picture in the newspapers! It was ’im!”

Ham leveled his sword cane dramatically at the four. “The Green Bell showed you Doc Savage’s picture, and gave you money to swear that he murdered Jim Cash! Isn’t that right?”

This blunt accusation failed to have the desired effect. The spokesman of the quartet winked elaborately at one of the troopers.

“This guy must be nuts!” he said. “We don’t know anything about any Green Bell. We saw Doc Savage push that poor feller onto that third rail. Like honest citizens should do, we told the police!”

“That’s right!” snarled another of the four. “We don’t have to stand here and listen to this little snort of a mouthpiece razz us, either!”

“Shut up!” growled one of the officers. Then, to Ham: “Can you tell us where we can find Doc Savage?”

“I do not know where he is,” Ham said. This was the truth to a letter.

Ham now stepped into the library. He came back, bearing a large group picture. He held the print up before the four men who claimed they had seen the murder.

“Let’s see you pick out Doc,” he invited.

Doc Savage was not in the picture at all. Ham hoped to trick the men into a false identification.

It failed to work.

“What d’you think we are!” jeered one of the men. “Savage ain’t there!”

Ham wondered if he looked as worried as he felt. These charlatans, he was now sure, had been shown a picture from which they could identify Doc.

This meant that Doc was certain to face a murder charge.

The police of both New York and New Jersey held the bronze man in great esteem. But that would not keep Doc out of jail—not with four witnesses saying he had committed a murder.

There was no such thing as bail on a murder charge.

“Can you tell us whether or not Doc Savage will give himself up?” asked one of the officers.

“Naw—he won’t!” Monk rumbled. “Not to get himself throwed in jail on a fake charge!”

The officers became somewhat grim at this. “Then we’ll have to spread a general alarm for him.”

“Don’t pay any attention to what this hairy dope says!” Ham interpolated, glaring at Monk. “He hasn’t got good sense, so he don’t know what Doc will do. I am sure Doc will take every measure to help the police.”

The troopers showed plainly that they were distressed about the whole thing.

“This is—a case of murder, you know,” the New York detective said reluctantly. “I am afraid we shall have to issue an immediate pick-up order for Doc.”

The officers and the quartet of mountebank witnesses now took their departure.

“You had better watch those four closely!” Ham warned the police.

“Don’t worry,” replied the trooper. “We’re going to pop ’em in the can an’ keep ’em there!”

DOC SAVAGE gave the officers an interval in which to get out of the building. Then he went to a telephone in the garage and called the office upstairs.

“The thing looks pretty bad!” he advised Ham. “If I surrender myself now, I’ll have to go to jail. I couldn’t get bail on a charge that serious.”

“That’s right,” Ham groaned.

“The thing to do is to get out of town. So we’re leaving for Prosper City at once.”

“Great!” Ham brightened. “We’ll go and clean up on this Green Bell right in his own belfry!”

“*You* are not going!” Doc advised.

Ham squawked in disappointment. “But listen, Doc——”

“Some one must stay in New York and fight this murder charge,” Doc pointed out. “You’re elected.”

Ham was groaning loudly when Doc hung up. The thought that he might miss out on some excitement was a big blow to Ham. He was the logical one to remain behind, however, because of his profession.

It was Doc’s custom to assign his men tasks for which their particular profession fitted them. This was an emergency calling for a lawyer, which happened to be Ham’s specialty. It was his hard luck if he was forced to remain behind and miss anything.

Monk soon entered the basement garage. His homely grin was so wide that it threatened to jam his little ears together on the back of his head. He was well aware of Ham’s disappointment—and tickled in proportion.

“We shall leave for Prosper City in half an hour,” Doc stated. “Can you make it?”

The query was directed at Aunt Nora, Alice Cash, and Ole Slater. As for his own men, Doc knew they would have no trouble getting away in that interval.

“Our bags are in our old car in a parking lot near here,” Aunt Nora told him. “When we get our grips, we’ll be ready to hike.”

“It will not take me long to get my Gladstone from the railway station check room, where I left it!” Ole Slater offered.

As guards to accompany Aunt Nora and Alice Cash, Doc dispatched Renny and Monk—much to Monk’s pleasure. A pretty girl always took Monk’s eye.

Ole Slater declared he would need no protection. “I doubt if they know I am in New York, anyway.”

It was noticeable that Ole favored Monk with a faint scowl when the homely fellow offered the attractive young lady a gallant arm.

Each of Doc’s men assembled equipment which they might need. This was their usual procedure.

Monk, for instance, had a marvelously compact little chemical laboratory which he took. Long Tom had an assortment of parts from which he could assemble an almost unbelievable number of electrical devices. Big-fisted Renny had a few engineering instruments.

Johnny, the archæologist and geologist, carried most of his equipment in his head in the form of knowledge. So he burdened himself with machine guns, ammunition, and

grenades, as well as a set of bullet-proof vests.

The machine guns which Johnny packed were remarkable weapons. They resembled slightly oversized automatics, with big curled magazines. Doc had perfected them. They fired shots so swiftly that they sounded like gigantic bull fiddles when they went into operation.

These weapons were carried more for the terror they caused foes, than for lethal use. Doc and his aids never took human life if they could help it.

However, Doc's enemies had a way of perishing in traps which they themselves had set for the bronze man.

THE group gathered in the skyscraper basement and entered the large limousine. A special lift carried the car to street level. Few persons, other than the building attendants, knew of the presence of the garage.

Ham, tapping his sword cane disconsolately against a polished toe, saw them off from the curb. He figured he was in for a dull time.

As a usual thing, when there was danger, Doc rode either in an open car or outside, clinging to the running board. He did this as a matter of safety. The manner in which his strange golden eyes could detect a lurking enemy was uncanny.

Doc broke his rule this time, and ensconced himself on the rear seat. To ride outside, where he could be seen, would mean difficulties with the police.

With Renny at the wheel, the car rolled toward the Hudson River.

Except for an occasional lonely drop, the rain had ceased. The streets glistened wetly. Out on the wide Hudson, two tugboats were hooting deep bass whistles, each stubbornly contesting for the right of way.

Warehouses loomed—flat, monster hulks.

Renny drove directly toward one of these. The headlights brought out a name on the front of the structure.

THE HIDALGO TRADING CO.

If one had taken the trouble to investigate, he would have learned the Hidalgo Trading Co. owned nothing but this one warehouse. Also, Doc Savage was the whole concern.

At Doc's quiet warning, no one got out of the limousine. By now, they had all noted that the windows were bullet-proof glass, more than an inch thick, and the body of the machine itself was armor-plate steel.

Renny depressed a switch on the instrument board. This produced no visible phenomena. But big doors in the front of the warehouse opened silently.

Actually, Renny had turned on a lantern which projected ultra-violet rays invisible to the human eye. These had operated a special photo-electric cell concealed in the front of the great barn of a building. This cell had set the door mechanism in action.

As the car glided forward, the lights illuminated the warehouse interior. Aunt Nora, Alice Cash, and Ole Slater emitted three gasps of surprise which blended as one.

The place held several planes. These ranged from a vast, tri-motored craft which was streamlined to an ultra degree, to various small gyros and auto-gyros. Every ship was an amphibian—capable of descending on land or water.

The automobile heaved gently over the threshold, and rolled several yards into the vast warehouse hangar. Every one alighted and began unloading the duffel.

“Hey!” Monk ripped. “Lookit what’s comin’!”

Seven ominous figures materialized soundlessly from the darkness outside. There was barely room for them to come abreast through the large door. They resembled a charge of crows.

Each was mantled from crown to toe in a black sack of a garment. The bells, painted on the fronts of the gowns, had a green hue which seemed particularly vile.

Three figures held automatics; the others gripped sub-machine guns. Extra ammunition drums for the rapid-firers were suspended around their necks by thin strings which could be broken with a jerk.

THE seven sinister figures ran a few feet within the warehouse.

“Give it to ’em!” snarled one.

Automatics and machine guns opened up in a hideous roar! Empty cartridges chased each other from the breeches of the automatics, and poured in brassy streams from the ejectors of the rapid-firers. Powder noise cascaded through the capacious warehouse in a deafening salvo.

Alice Cash shrieked, and shoved Aunt Nora into the shelter of the sedan. Quick thinking, that! Ole Slater followed them with a leap.

Doc Savage and his four friends merely stood there empty-handed, and watched the exhibition of murderous fury.

Something mysterious was happening to the bullets. A few feet from Doc and his men, the slugs seemed to stop in mid-air and splatter like raindrops. Some halted and hung in space, strangely distorted.

None of the bullets were reaching Doc’s group.

The truth dawned on the gang of Green Bells. They ceased shooting as abruptly as they had started. They goggled at the bullets which seemed suspended in the air.

Their leader tried to yell a command. Amazement had gripped him so strongly that he made several unintelligible choking noises before he could get words out.

“Beat it!” he gulped. “This joint is hoodooed, or somethin’!”

As one man, the seven veered around and pitched for the outer darkness. What had just occurred was startling. But what happened now was far worse—at least to the Green Bells.

They seemed to smash headlong into an invisible wall. Bruised, noses spouting crimson, they bounced back. Two piled down on the floor, stunned.

The survivors now realized what had happened. Walls of glass—thick, transparent, and bullet-proof—had arisen in front and behind.

The one in front must have been up when they entered; the rear panel had arisen after their feet had operated a hidden trip in the floor.

Howling in terror, they flung themselves against the transparent barricade. They shot at it. The bullets only splattered, or stuck. They could see tiny cracks radiating like cobwebs from points where the bullets made contact. This fact had escaped their notice before.

They skittered their hands along the cold, vertical expanse, seeking an escape.

Doc Savage glanced at his companions, and said quietly: "Hold your breath—at least a minute, if you can."

Drawing several small glass globes from his clothing, Doc advanced. The bulbs were thin-walled, and held a liquid.

Before the almost invisible barrier, Doc sprang high into the air and flung a fistful of the glass balls over the top. The tiny squashing noises as they broke was lost in the frightened wailing of the trapped Green Bells.

Doc waited. He was holding his breath; his friends were doing likewise. The two women and Ole Slater had followed suit, without knowing what it was all about.

The Green Bells began to act like men who had gone to sleep on their feet. They collapsed in quick succession. Some fell heavily; others reclined with more care, as if tired. The two who had dazed themselves by butting the glass wall, ceased their nervous twitchings.

Perhaps a minute elapsed.

Then Doc gave a signal, and his companions began to breathe.

Chapter VI

FEAR'S DOMAIN

“LAND sakes!” Aunt Nora sputtered. “What happened? I don’t mean the glass walls! What put ’em to sleep like that?”

The homely Monk took it on himself to explain, probably for the benefit of pretty Alice Cash.

“There was an anæsthetic gas in the glass balls. It spreads quickly, and produces instant unconsciousness if breathed. After mixing with the air for something less than a minute, the stuff becomes ineffective.”

Working rapidly, Doc Savage operated small levers at one side of the warehouse. The glass walls sank noiselessly.

“Put the Green Bells in the big plane,” he directed. “The police will be drawn by those shots, and we want to get out of here before they arrive.”

This order was carried out with swift efficiency.

Aunt Nora bounced about, highly excited by the lightning speed of recent events.

“This disguised hangar—these planes—that office of yours!” She waved her arms. “These things have cost a lot of money! You must be rich as sin!”

The bronze man only gave her one of his rare smiles.

The somewhat fantastic truth about Doc’s wealth was destined to remain a mystery to Aunt Nora, just as it was an enigma to the rest of the world.

Doc possessed a fabulous hoard of gold. The trove lay in a lost valley in the remote mountain fastness of a Central American republic. Descendants of the ancient Mayan race lived in this valley and mined the treasure.

When Doc was in need of funds, he had merely to broadcast, at a certain hour, a few words in the Mayan language. This was picked up by a sensitive radio receiver in the lost valley. A few days later, a burro train laden with gold would appear in the capital of the Central American republic.

The cargo was always deposited to Doc’s credit in a bank. It was a slim trip when one of these burro trains did not bring out a treasure of four or five million dollars.

The warehouse floor sloped downward. The outer end, a concrete apron, was under water. The big plane was quickly rolled down and set afloat. Electric motors pulled great doors back on oiled tracks.

Doc took the controls. The motors started. They were equipped with efficient silencers, and made only shrill hissings.

A few minutes later, the giant plane was streaking over the surface of the Hudson; it cocked its nose up in a steep climb.

Looking backward, using binoculars, Doc’s men could see red lights crawling about in the vicinity of the warehouse. These were police cars putting in a tardy arrival.

Prosper City lay to the westward, but Doc flew north. He soon turned the controls over to Renny. All of the bronze man's aids were expert airmen.

MOVING to the seven sleeping prisoners, Doc stripped off the green-belled black gowns.

Aunt Nora eyed the faces which were disclosed, and snapped: "I've seen those rats loafing around Prosper City!"

Alice Cash nodded, then relapsed into a white-faced silence. She was grieving over her brother's murder, and saying very little.

Ole Slater scowled, causing his features to lose some of their handsomeness. "I've seen them around town, too!"

Doc now used a hypodermic needle and administered a stimulant to one of the captives. This soon revived the fellow.

The man quailed from the bronze giant and began to whimper in terror. "It was all a mistake——"

Doc grasped the craven's face between muscular palms and began to stare steadily into the wavering eyes.

The onlookers soon understood what he was doing. Using hypnotism! But the victim was too frightened to realize what was occurring, or to combat the effects of the weird golden eyes.

The fellow finally became still, staring at Doc like a bird at a big serpent.

"Who is the Green Bell?" Doc demanded in a compelling tone.

"I dunno," the man mumbled tonelessly. "None of us knows."

Under normal conditions, Doc would not have believed a word the man told him. But now he knew he was hearing the truth.

"Who told you to spring that trap at the warehouse?" he persisted.

"The Green Bell telephoned us," was the droned answer. "He just said for us to follow you and kill you and your men when we got a chance. We were not to harm the two women and Ole Slater."

"Glory be!" exploded Aunt Nora. "Why didn't he want Alice and Ole and me done away with?"

Doc relayed this query to his source of information.

"It was on account of the effect their death would have on their friends in Prosper City," mumbled the Green Bell hireling. "They'd lynch Judborn Tugg. Tugg is important in the big scheme, whatever it is!"

Doc queried: "Do Judborn Tugg and Slick Cooley belong to the Green Bell's gang?"

"I dunno—I guess so. I don't know much. I'm a new man."

Doc tried one more question. "Did the Green Bell send you to New York, in the first place, to murder me?"

"I don't think so. He just sent us so we'd be handy in case something went wrong. His first idea was to get you on his pay roll. He thought you were a common muscle

man.”

“Did you and this gang here murder Jim Cash?”

“No. Some more of the Green Bell’s men done that.”

This summed up the information Doc was able to secure from the man. He awakened the other six, and put questions to them, but learned little more. Nothing, in fact, that was valuable.

RENNY veered the giant plane inland, toward the mountainous, thinly populated up-State portion of New York.

The huge speed-cowled motors were almost wide open. The ship was making a speed considerably in excess of two hundred and fifty miles an hour. It was one of the fastest craft for its size to be found.

Doc went to the radio transmitter and sent a brief message.

Later in the night, when they landed in a clearing in the northern wilderness, three ghostly ambulances were waiting. These had been summoned by Doc’s radio message.

White-clad men, their faces lost in the shadows beneath their cap brims, loaded the seven prisoners into the ambulances. Few words were exchanged.

The ambulances departed. Doc took his plane off. The whole incident had been grim and spectral.

Aunt Nora was bewildered. “What’ll happen to those seven men?”

“They will be taken care of,” Doc said, and did not clarify the thing further.

Doc did not advertise what happened to wrongdoers whom he captured. The bronze man maintained a strange institution in this mountain wilderness. There, the seven men would undergo brain operations which would cause them to completely forget their pasts.

Next, they would be taught upright citizenship and a trade. They would be turned loose—honest men, unaware of their past criminal careers.

No crook, once treated in this manner, had ever returned to evil ways.

Doc’s institution would have caused a world-wide sensation, had its existence become public.

A hissing meteor, the plane hurtled through the night, bearing the remarkable bronze man, his four unusual aids, and the three unfortunates whom he intended to help.

PROSPER CITY—CRISSCROSSED strings of street lamps far below—appeared some time before dawn.

“The airport is north of town!” Alice Cash advised.

The drome was unlighted. It was situated in the middle of an area of ripening grain which looked yellow in the moonlight—there was a moon shining on Prosper City. The flying field was turfed with grass, which was very dark as seen from the air.

Three rusty hangars were hunched at the edge of the tarmac. A junked plane stood behind one shed. Faded pennants of fabric clung to its naked skeleton.

As far as could be seen, there was no one about.

Doc cranked the landing wheels down out of the wells, into which they had disappeared for greater streamlining. He planted the big ship on the ground as lightly as if it had been a glider. They coasted to a stop perhaps two hundred feet from one of the hangars.

The sliding door of this hangar scooted back and let out a flood of men. They wore police uniforms.

An incredibly tall, rawboned man led the policemen. He had an enormous mustache, and a small red face. The combination was remindful of a cherry with a large brown caterpillar on it.

“The police chief—Clem Clements!” Aunt Nora snapped. “I’ll bet some one has told him we’re criminals, and Clem has believed ’em! Clem is sure pin-headed!”

Chief Clements was flourishing an official-looking document.

Doc Savage needed no close inspection to tell him what this paper was—a warrant for his arrest, perhaps, or a wire from New York, requesting the bronze man’s apprehension.

A deduction that Doc would head for Prosper City would call for no great thinking on the mysterious Green Bell’s part. But the master mind had moved quickly to give more trouble to Doc and his friends.

Doc did a bit of fast thinking, and decided the simplest thing he could do was to avoid Chief Clements for the present.

Turning in the pilot’s seat, Doc glanced backward. There had been no rain in Prosper City recently. The prop stream was pulling dust from the grass roots, and squirting it back in a funnel. There was much more dust around the hangars.

Doc locked one wheel brake, and slapped the throttles open. This pivoted the plane. A dusty hurricane slapped the faces of Chief Clements and his men.

They were blinded. They yelled angrily, and fired warning shots in the air.

Doc dropped out of the ship. He seemed to flatten and vanish in the scrubby grass. He left the vicinity like a startled ghost.

CHIEF CLEMENTS dashed up to the plane, rubbing his eyes and blowing dust out of his big mustache.

“You done that on purpose!” he declared irately. He had a metallic, whanging voice.

Renny put his sober face out of a window. The twanging voice of Chief Clements reminded him of a taut barbed wire being plucked.

“We didn’t think of the dust!” he said meekly. This was not a prevarication—Doc had thought of the dust.

“We’re lookin’ for a murderer named Doc Savage!” snapped Chief Clements.

Renny heaved a relieved sigh. The policemen had been blinded by the dust so effectively that Doc’s departure had escaped their notice.

“Who put you up to this, Clem Clements?” Aunt Nora shouted wrathfully.

Chief Clements glared at Aunt Nora as if the motherly old lady had horns.

“None of your business!” he retorted, somewhat childishly.

Aunt Nora jumped out of the plane. “Was it Judborn Tugg?”

Chief Clements pulled the ends of his mustache down in a scowl, giving the impression that the caterpillar on the cherry had bowed its back.

“Now don’t you start running down Judborn Tugg!” he twanged. “He’s an upright man, and the best citizen this town’s got! What if he did wire me from New York that you was mixed up with a murderer named Doc Savage, and might show up here? He was doin’ the decent thing!”

“Tugg never did a decent thing in his whole evil life!” Aunt Nora said scathingly.

Chief Clements thrust his little red head forward. “I think you’re behind this trouble, Aunt Nora Boston! I’ve just been waitin’ to get some proof, so I could throw you in jail!”

Aunt Nora cocked her arms akimbo. “That sounds like some of Judborn Tugg’s advice!”

“If I find Doc Savage in that plane, you’re gonna be locked up on a charge of helpin’ a murderer escape!” Chief Clements yelled.

“If you find Doc Savage in the ship, I’ll go to jail willingly!” Aunt Nora snapped.

Chief Clements and his men now searched the giant tri-motor. Their faces registered a great deal of disappointment when they found no bronze man.

“We’ll hang around the airport!” the Prosper City police chief whanged. “Savage may show up in another plane. I’ve got a guard around your house, too, Aunt Nora! And you’re gonna be shadowed, every move you make. If Doc Savage tries to get in touch with you, we’ll nab ’im!”

Aunt Nora sniffed loudly. But her wrinkled face showed concern.

“I suppose it’s all right to call a car to take us into town?” she snapped.

“I’ll send you in my car!” offered Chief Clements, figuring this would make it simpler for his men to keep track of Aunt Nora and her companions.

“I wouldn’t ride in it!” Aunt Nora informed him. “I’ll telephone for a hack!”

THE cab which Aunt Nora summoned arrived something over half an hour later.

The driver was a shabby individual, who slouched low behind the wheel. He had a purple nose, bulging cheeks, and he seemed half asleep. He did not offer to open the door for his fares.

The luggage was piled in front with the chauffeur. The two women and Ole Slater got in the rear. Johnny and Long Tom turned down the drop seats. Monk and Renny, the giants of the group, rode clinging to the running board.

The taxi had not rolled far when it passed a pitiful little camp beside the road. There was a ragged tent and a litter of house furnishings which had been virtually ruined by the weather. It was a scene of utter poverty, even when seen in the mellow glow of the moonlight.

“There’s a sample,” Aunt Nora muttered. “A year ago, that family was happy and buying their own home. The husband was one who wouldn’t go out on strike. Driver—

stop the car! I want these people to hear something!”

The machine halted; the motor silenced. A sound which came steadily from the ragged tent could now be heard. It was a low, frightful gibbering. It kept up without end.

“That’s the poor husband,” Aunt Nora said brokenly. “He is insane! The Green Bell made him that way in some horrible fashion! As I told you, there’s more than a dozen others like him. They’re all men who wanted to stay at work, and keep the mills and mines operating. The Green Bell is tryin’ to break every factory in this town.”

Every one was silent as the car got under way again. To Doc’s four men, this incident had been an appalling sample of what they were up against. It brought home to them the sinister power of this mysterious master, the Green Bell.

They soon saw other evidence of the terrible conditions in Prosper City. In more than one alley, there were furtive, slinking figures. These individuals were looking for scraps of food.

“The poor souls are starving!” Aunt Nora explained.

“It’s ghastly!” Ole Slater groaned. “If I should put conditions such as these in the play I am writing, people in other cities would say it couldn’t happen! And no one knows what’s behind it all!”

Johnny, the gaunt geologist, took off his spectacles with the magnifying left lens. “Isn’t there a community chest, or some kind of a charity fund?”

“All of those were exhausted long ago,” Alice Cash told him quietly. “Nine out of every ten men in Prosper City are out of work. That seems inconceivable. But it is true!”

The car rolled on. It turned several corners, behaving somewhat uncertainly, as if the driver did not know where he was going.

“You’re not going toward my house!” Aunt Nora rapped.

The driver shrugged. “Which way is it?”

“You don’t know?” Aunt Nora asked incredulously.

“No!” said the driver with the purple nose and fat cheeks.

“Humph! It looks like you have never been in Prosper City before!”

“I haven’t!”

Aunt Nora suddenly stood up and thrust her face close to that of the driver. She stared.

“Glory be!” she ejaculated. “You’re Doc Savage!”

Chapter VII

CLEMENTS SETS A TRAP

THE discovery that the chauffeur was Doc Savage surprised Monk and Renny so greatly that they almost fell off the running board. Ole Slater jumped as if he had been slapped. Alice Cash made silent whistling lips of wonder.

Long Tom and Johnny both chuckled. This was not the first time the bronze man had donned a remarkable disguise. He was a master of make-up, just as he was a master of innumerable other things.

"I was hanging around, and heard you phone for the cab," Doc enlightened Aunt Nora. "It was a simple matter to stop the machine and bribe the driver to let me take his place."

"Where's the driver?" Aunt Nora wanted to know.

"He is going to sneak past the guards, and be waiting in your house to take the car away. That will get me into your house without the knowledge of the watching policemen."

Aunt Nora settled back with a sigh which almost attained happiness. "If you ask this old girl, I'm betting Prosper City is soon going to see the end of its streak of hard luck."

The rooming house operated by Aunt Nora Boston was a large, rambling white structure of two stories and a set of garret bedrooms. Much neatly trimmed shrubbery surrounded it. Doc and his men thought the old-fashioned place rather attractive.

Doc's ruse for gaining admission to the house was carried to a successful completion. The real driver drove the taxi away, leaving Doc behind.

Chief Clements's cops, stationed just outside Aunt Nora's grounds, did not smell a mouse.

Aunt Nora's house stood on the outskirts of Prosper City, at the foot of a range of high, wooded hills, which the local citizens called mountains.

Coal mines were located in the mountains, Doc soon learned. Long galleries from these mines underlaid much of Prosper City itself.

Alice Cash grasped an opportunity to impart the information that Aunt Nora had secured a small fortune from the sale of this coal. The kindly old lady had expended all of her funds in providing for the needy, however.

The sun flushed up redly. With dawn, a fresh shift of policemen went on duty. There were four of the officers observing the house.

Doc was careful to keep out of sight.

The bronze man took his first steps aimed at improving conditions in Prosper City. From a pocket, he produced a sheaf of bank notes.

Aunt Nora rubbed her eyes when she saw the size of the bills. Some were hundreds, but most were of thousand-dollar denomination.

Doc passed the small fortune to Aunt Nora, along with instructions.

Aunt Nora paid a visit to the Prosper City merchants who had been most generous in contributing to charity. Each received a tremendous order for food and clothing, with cash on the line.

The delight with which the merchants greeted this business was moving. One old groceryman, who had been carrying his whole neighborhood on credit because he could not bear to see former customers in want, sat down and cried.

Before noon, arrangements were completed for the delivery of more than a score of truck loads of food and clothing to Aunt Nora's capacious yard. "By night," was the time insisted upon.

There were a few skinflint merchants who had given credit to none of the impoverished, and who had not contributed to charity. These fellows did not get a penny of Doc's business.

A circus was stranded in town. Aunt Nora leased the big top and the menagerie tent, and ordered them erected in her yard to shelter the supplies.

Working under Doc's directions, Ole Slater rented several open cars. These rolled through the streets. Slater, Alice Cash and Doc's four men stood in the back seats with megaphones, broadcasting the fact that there would be a food distribution and a meeting at Aunt Nora's place that night.

"Tell them," Doc directed, "that at this gathering a plan will be presented which will put every man in Prosper City back to work within the next two weeks."

To say this information created a sensation in Prosper City was putting it mildly. Few believed the thing could be done. But every man, his family, and his dog would attend the meeting to see what it was all about.

THE mysterious master mind, the Green Bell, was not dormant. Hardfaced men—the agitators who had been prominent in the trouble from the first—mounted soap boxes at street corners, and began to label Aunt Nora as a sinister woman, and Doc Savage a murderer and worse.

The elderly lady, they said, was in league with "The Interests." Just who The Interests were, they neglected to mention explicitly, but included mill and mine owners in a general way. Aunt Nora was going to try to persuade men to go back to work at starvation wages, they declared. Why go to work and starve anyway, while the pockets of the rich were lined?

This argument would have been good, had it had any foundation in truth. These fellows did not give a hoot about the welfare of the workmen, although they claimed they did.

They were on the pay roll of the Green Bell. Their purpose was to keep the factories and mines closed. Why? Only the Green Bell knew.

The hired agitators held themselves up as protectors of the workers. They voiced threats against all who attended Aunt Nora's meeting.

"We ain't gonna go to work until we get decent wages!" one orator proclaimed. "You're fools if you listen to the soft-soaping words of that lying old lady——"

At this point, one of Aunt Nora's admirers knocked the spieler off his soap box. A dozen policemen were required to break up the fight which followed.

This was not the only incident of its kind. The day was marked by a dribble of bruised and battered agitators into the hospitals.

Chief of Police Clements appeared at Aunt Nora's house. His big mustache was a-bristle with rage.

"I forbid this meeting to-night!" he yelled. "You're just fixing to start more trouble! Even now, there's fightin' all over town!"

"Judborn Tugg must be back home!" Aunt Nora jeered.

Chief Clements became purple. It was a fact that Judborn Tugg and Slick Cooley had alighted from the noon train.

"What's that got to do with it?" he gritted.

"Didn't Tugg tell you to stop my meeting?" Aunt Nora countered.

This was the truth, and Chief Clements was not ashamed to admit it. Chief Clements was an honest soul, if a dumb one, and pompous Judborn Tugg was an idol in his eyes.

"Mr. Tugg is the best citizen this town has!" he declared with the firmness of an ignorant man with one firmly fixed idea. "It is true that he thinks your powwow will only cause trouble. I think so, too! And I'm going to break it up!"

"You're going to get your head broke if you try it!" retorted Aunt Nora.

This was hardly the argument to use on a bullheaded man such as Chief Clements. It only made his determination the firmer.

Pretty Alice Cash came forward with the argument which really swayed the boss of the Prosper City police.

"We are going to distribute food to the starving to-night," she said gently. "Surely, you are not going to be coldblooded enough to stop that?"

Chief Clements squirmed uncomfortably. He might be thick-headed and a worshiper of Judborn Tugg, but he was also a kindly man. If any hungry person was to be fed, he would be the last one to stand in the way.

The upshot was that he agreed to let the meeting be held.

"But I'm gonna have plenty of cops here," he warned.

DOC SAVAGE had eavesdropped from the concealment of another room. He complimented attractive Alice Cash when she joined him.

"You were clever enough to avoid what might have been a nasty bit of trouble!" he told her.

Alice gave Doc a ravishing smile of thanks. She was, it could be seen plainly, experiencing a great attraction for the giant bronze man. Signs already indicated that, once grief over her brother's death was dulled by the passing of a little time, she was going to fall for Doc in a big way.

Ole Slater could see this. He failed to conceal a worried look. He was obviously enraptured with the entrancing Alice.

He might have been relieved to know that Doc Savage made it a policy to steer far wide of feminine entanglements. His perilous, active career made that necessary. Should he encumber himself with a wife, she would not only be always in danger of becoming a widow, but enemies would strike at Doc through her. He could let no woman lead a life like that.

Late in the afternoon, Ham telephoned from New York. He reported that he was investigating the past lives of the four men who had sworn falsely that they had seen Doc murder Jim Cash.

“I may be able to get something on them that will make them tell the truth,” he said hopefully. “But, frankly, I’m not doing so hot.”

Since Doc was forced to keep under cover, his four aids in Prosper City handled preparations for the night’s conclave.

Big-fisted Renny, who had superintended construction of skyscrapers and bridges as an engineer, directed raising of the circus tents. Long Tom, the electrical wizard, installed a public-address system, so that every word spoken from a rostrum at one end of the big top could be heard. He also erected powerful flood lights.

Gorillalike Monk, who had learned to command men as a lieutenant colonel in the army, organized a score of Aunt Nora’s friends into a corps to handle the distribution of food and clothing.

Two banks remained open in Prosper City. The gaunt Johnny visited one of them, after ascertaining Judborn Tugg was a director in the other. The one Johnny entered was the smaller one.

When Johnny departed, he left a stunned set of bank officials behind. They held a check deposited in Doc Savage’s name. The amount of this check crowded the space providing for writing in the figures. The bankers telephoned New York before they would believe the draft was good.

A rumor of this enormous deposit got out. The Prosper City *News* telephoned New York newspapers, asking who this Doc Savage was. They were informed that he was a bronze man of mystery, who possessed an unknown source of fabulous wealth, and who devoted his life to fighting other people’s battles. They also learned that Doc now stood accused of murdering Jim Cash.

The *News* carried both stories on its front page that evening. The paper also printed an editorial, beginning:

Who is Doc Savage—Midas or murderer? Is he a being whose might and wealth is to save Prosper City? Or is he a charlatan and a killer with a sinister purpose?

Indications were that almost every one in Prosper City was going to attend Aunt Nora Boston’s meeting in hopes of learning the answer.

LONG before sundown, men, women, and children began trickling into Aunt Nora’s great yard. The first comers were ragged, pitiful figures with pinched faces. Hunger had drawn them.

Some of the Green Bell’s hired agitators appeared and started voicing threats. Monk’s corps of trained helpers lit into these fellows with clubs. A pitched battle

ensued.

An agitator drew a pistol and tried to kill Monk. The first shot missed.

Renny lunged in and flung a fist that was as big and hard as half a concrete block.

The gun wielder dropped, his jaw broken like so much gravel.

Chief Clements appeared magically, leading a squad of at least thirty officers. The latter had long billies, tear-gas bombs, and gas masks.

“I knew there was gonna be trouble here!” Chief Clements howled. “Every blasted one of you are under arrest!”

Monk waved at the agitators. “You mean those clucks are pulled, don’t you?”

“I don’t mean them! They’re within their rights in makin’ speeches! This is a free country! I mean *you*!”

Ole Slater was in none too good a temper, probably because he had been worrying all day over the unmistakable signs charming Alice Cash gave of falling for Doc Savage. Rage got the better of Slater.

He drew back and patted the handiest cop.

Two policemen sprang upon Slater and belabored him with their clubs.

“Everybody’s under arrest!” Chief Clements repeated shrilly. “Then we’re gonna search the house! We got a tip that Doc Savage is in there!”

Monk rammed his homely face forward. “You what?”

“Judborn Tugg said one of his friends saw a bronze man hidin’ in the house!” growled the police leader.

Doc Savage was stationed near an open window in the house, where he could listen. His strange golden eyes betrayed no emotion at Chief Clements’s words.

The report that Doc was concealed in Aunt Nora’s home was a puzzling angle, however. Indirectly, it had emanated from the mysterious Green Bell, of course. But how had he known Doc was there? Or had he only made a wild guess?

Doc glided to a rear window. Darkness had now fallen, but the grounds were brilliantly lighted by Long Tom’s floodlamps.

Police were stationed in a cordon around the house. They stood close together. It was doubtful if a mosquito could escape past them without being discovered.

Doc was in a trap!

BACK to the open front window, Doc moved. The wall of one circus tent was not many yards distant. He faced this. The remarkable muscles in his throat knotted into strange positions.

He spoke loudly, using ventriloquism. His words seemed to come from the tent wall. They were strange words—a not unmusical stream of gutturals.

It was the language of the ancient Mayans. Doc’s men had learned it on their adventurous visit to the lost Central American valley which held Doc’s golden trove. It was one of the least-known tongues on earth. Certainly Chief Clements did not understand it.

“Face the tent wall!” was Doc’s first advice.

Monk and the other four instantly began staring at the tent. This enhanced the impression that the voice was emanating from that source. Doc knew very well that half the success of ventriloquism lies in getting the hearer's attention on something he *thinks* the voice is coming from.

Doc now added further commands, speaking rapidly. He got them all out before the policemen came to life.

Chief Clements dashed to the tent, lifted the wall, then looked baffled when he found no one. He spun on Monk and the others.

"Put your hands up!" he twanged. "You're carryin' them funny-lookin' little guns! We don't allow gun totin' in Prosper City!"

The "funny-lookin' " guns which he referred to were the tiny machine guns which would fire with such terrific speed.

Monk ignored the order.

"I gotta talk this over with my friends," he said in his small voice.

"You ain't gonna do nothin' of the kind!"

Monk and the others now drew their weapons. "Oh, yes, we are! If you don't let us talk, there's gonna be plenty of trouble!"

Chief Clements hedged angrily, eyeing the weapons. Finally he gave in.

"All right. But you gotta stay in plain sight!"

Monk and the rest did not follow this order to the letter. They retired within the tent. Monk entered the house and came back with hands empty, but with a suspicious package bulging his coat.

The conference lasted perhaps another minute. Then every one came out of the tent. They threw down their weapons.

"That satisfy you?" Monk demanded.

"We're gonna search you!" whanged Chief Slater.

The officers advanced. Counting Doc's four aids and the score of recruits for the food distribution, there came near being one prisoner for every policeman.

The search got under way. Monk coughed loudly. Instantly, every captive brought his right hand in contact with the face or hands of the lawman who was frisking him.

The policemen toppled over like mown bluegrass. They lay where they fell, snoring loudly.

Highly elated, Monk and the rest removed tiny metal thimbles from their fingers. These were fashioned to blend closely with finger tips. Only an intent inspection would disclose them, and the unsuspecting officers had failed to note the things.

Each thimble held a tiny hypodermic needle, which, upon contact with the skin, injected a drug producing a sleep of several hours' duration.

Doc, when he had spoken Mayan, had directed this operation to overpower the police. These thimbles were devices of his own invention.

Chief Clements and his men were carried to their parked cars and dumped on the cushions. Onlookers, vastly puzzled, agreed to drive them away.

"We're shut of that guy until midnight, anyway!" Monk grinned.

THE crowd gathered with increasing speed. Among those coming now were substantial citizens—owners of mills and mines which were being thrown into bankruptcy by the enforced idleness.

It was a strange situation. The owners were anxious to operate their plants; the workmen wanted jobs badly. But the odious organization of the Green Bell was holding both at a standstill. To open a factory meant it would be bombed or burned. For a workman to take a job meant he was in danger of beatings or—worst of all—the weird, horrible insanity.

That there was some cold, relentless purpose behind it all, many realized. But they could not fathom the reason.

Why was the Green Bell trying to bankrupt every industry in Prosper City? Was he a fiend with a mad hate for the town? No one knew.

The crowd seemed reluctant to enter the tents. More than one man there had felt the vengeance of the Green Bell. They gathered in knots outside and talked. A few became frightened and left.

The agitators on the Green Bell's pay roll had not spoken entirely without effect.

In order to quiet fears, Long Tom tuned in a portable radio set and stood the loud-speaker near the microphone of the public-address system.

Dance music was now audible all over the grounds, and for some distance along the suburban roads in either direction. The tune came from the local Prosper City station.

Unexpectedly, an unearthly wail burst in upon the lilting of fiddles and the muted moaning of saxophones. The sound rose and fell, changing its tone. It was like the death cries of a monster, pouring from the loud-speakers.

A deep-throated, reverberating boom lifted over the bedlam of wailing. The throbbing sound seemed to fill all the night, magnified a thousand times by the address-system speakers. More of the weird notes came. A death-walk procession!

It might have been the tolling of some cataclysmic dirge.

The sound ended, and the jazzy dance tune poured from the loud-speakers as if nothing happened.

On the grounds men milled, grim of eye and pale of face. Women clung to their husbands, or mothered their children. The hideous tolling had stricken stark terror.

"The Green Bell!" a man mumbled.

"It means death or insanity to somebody! It nearly always does!"

Doc Savage, a motionless statue of bronze, surveyed the scene from the house. He had seen savage tribesmen in far countries, living in apprehension of something they did not understand. He had seen passengers on a great ocean liner aghast at approaching disaster.

He had never seen quite the depth of fear which was here before his eyes, induced by the gonging sound with which the Green Bell had associated himself.

The unknown brain back of this strange trouble—the being who was reducing a city to poverty for some secret reason of his own—had progressed far toward accomplishing his aims. Prosper City was a realm of fear, and he was its czar.

Chapter VIII

VOICE FROM THE EARTH

SOME two hundred yards from Aunt Nora Boston's house, a man perched in a tree, laughing heartily. He was getting great glee out of the terror which the Green Bell's sound had wrought.

Slick Cooley held his side with one hand, and a limb with the other. He finally stifled his unholy mirth.

"That'll hold 'em!" he chuckled.

He pocketed a pair of binoculars and clambered out of the tree. Carefully avoiding the road, he strode northward. On his right, the low mountains frowned in the pale moonlight. He paralleled them.

When he had covered some distance, he veered over to the road, where walking was easier. A dog ran out and barked at him. Slick threw clods at the dog.

He went on. The dog had come from the last house; ahead was a large area of marsh land. A wealthy farmer had once tried to drain this swampy section to cultivate it, but had been forced to give the task up as a bad job. Great weeds and brush had overgrown the waste land.

A car came up behind Slick, and stopped when it was alongside him. The machine was Judborn Tugg's flashy roadster. Tugg in person sat back of the wheel. He inquired: "Lift?"

Slick got in.

"The bellin' noise scared that crowd plenty!" he boasted.

"I cannot understand what happened to Chief Clements!" Tugg snapped. "I visited the man at the hospital! He seems only to be asleep. But they can't wake him up!"

"If I was you, I'd lay off Chief Clements!" Slick leered.

"Why?"

"Some day he's gonna wake up to the fact that you ain't the goody-goody he thinks you are. When them knothheaded guys turn on a man, they can be just as strong agin' him as they were for him!"

"Nonsense!" Tugg retorted grandly. "Chief Clements is too dumb to ever suspect anything. And he is very valuable to me."

Slick squinted curiously at Judborn Tugg.

Noting the glance, Tugg added hastily: "Valuable to the Green Bell, I mean!"

The roadster pulled into a narrow lane through the brush. They soon parked the machine and went on afoot.

Slick walked in silence. He was wondering if Judborn Tugg could be the Green Bell. True, there were occasions when a hooded man appeared before them both and said he was the Green Bell. This had happened in the car in New York.

But such appearances might be made by members of the gang. Slick himself had once been ordered to don a black gown and play the part of the Green Bell. Tugg might be the master mind, Slick reasoned.

Suddenly, he recalled the remark he had made in New York about slaying the Green Bell, once he learned the fellow's identity, and substituting himself as the unknown leader.

Slick was serious about that. But he wished now that he had been more reticent with his words. He shivered several times. If Tugg was the Green Bell, Slick had a feeling he was as good as a dead man.

A ramshackle old barn appeared in the moonlight. They rapped on the door, giving a peculiar, drumming signal.

"Come in!" said a weirdly hollow, booming voice.

They entered.

THE ancient barn was concrete-floored. A black, ominous figure sat cross-legged in the shadows at the rear. The smoky robe sheathed it from head to foot. Although the form was seated, it also leaned back slightly against the rear wall. Through cracks in this wall, strings of moonlight were visible.

Most of the luminance within the structure came from two candles a few feet in front of the seated apparition. These candles were green, and their flame was sputtering and green. They cast a bilious light on the green-bell design of the seated one's robe, and on the green goggles which masked the eyes. The effect was eerie.

No other word was spoken.

Slick Cooley and Judborn Tugg both drew black hoods from within their clothing and donned them.

In the distance, a crashing of brush denoted men approaching. They filed in—eight in the first group, then by twos and threes and fours. Every man was draped in a sepien masquerade.

No word was spoken. They stood in a half circle, keeping their distance from the strange seated figure. The latter did not move in the slightest, or speak. Nor did the arrivals voice anything. They had come, these followers of the Green Bell, in answer to the summons tolled over the radio. The sound had warned them to gather here for orders.

"Are all present?" asked a voice from the seated form. It was hollowly booming, that tone! It seemed incredible that it could come from a human throat.

Slick counted the assembled men.

"All but about half a dozen," he said. "I guess they didn't hear the call."

"Speak louder!" commanded the sepulchral voice.

Slick fairly yelled a repetition of his statement.

"Very well!" came the croaked reply. "Judborn Tugg—are you there?"

Tugg came forward and shouted: "Yes!"

Slick backed away. It was always like this—the Green Bell pretending he was partially deaf.

The gloomy figure might not be the Green Bell, either, Slick reflected. It could conceivably be some member of the gang who had been ordered to serve in the Green Bell's place.

"I am far from satisfied with certain work done to-day!" tolled the seated form. "Chief Clements, for instance, was to have been persuaded to seize Doc Savage."

"Could I help that?" Tugg protested. "I did my part. But Chief Clements is so stupid that he let Savage run a whizzer on him!"

"I am not sure that Clements being stupid is entirely to blame," came the dull voice. "I sent seven men to get Savage in New York, and they vanished completely. They were not dumb fellows. Savage is a very dangerous foe!"

Tugg wiped at his fat forehead. His features were, of course mantled in the black hood, and the wiping gesture upon the cloth was somewhat ludicrous. Savage dangerous! Did he not know it?

"I been doing my best!" he yelled.

"And that was not good! Slick Cooley—I'll talk to you now."

"Sure!" Slick shouted.

He scuttled forward, a spooky vision in the green-belled hood. He did not mind the mention of his name. He knew every one here, anyway. Many of those present, however, were unacquainted with one another.

The seated figure had not moved perceptibly at any time.

"You did good work in noting Savage's reflection in a mirror in Aunt Nora Boston's house, when you were watching with binoculars!" said the fantastic voice.

Slick was slightly shocked. It was the first time he had heard the Green Bell bestow praise. It made him uneasy.

"I was just doin' my best!" he bellowed.

A SHORT silence ensued. Uncanny quiet lay in the old wreck of a barn. No one moved. The creamy strips of moonlight in the cracks had a spectral quality.

"I need a trustworthy man for the work ahead!" tolled the Green Bell. "So I am selecting you. For this work, if you complete it successfully, you will receive a bonus, over and above your regular pay, of fifty thousand dollars."

Slick's startled gasp puffed out his hood like a small balloon.

"Concealed in the weeds beside the door of this barn you will find my device which produces insanity!" continued the Green Bell. "You will place this where Doc Savage will come close to it, preferably near the head of his bed."

"But I dunno how to work the contraption," Slick muttered.

"What?"

Slick had forgotten to yell. He did so now. "How d'you work it?"

"That is very simple. There is only one switch upon the box. You throw it. Be careful that the switch is not operated accidentally while you are carrying the container.

And once you do work it, get away quickly. It takes only a few seconds for the thing to disrupt the functions of a human brain!”

“O. K.!” Slick bellowed.

“With the box, you will find a package of money—ten thousand dollars,” continued the voice. “You will take the sum to Chief Clements’s office after you plant the box. Wait for Chief Clements to appear; then post the ten thousand dollars as a reward for Doc Savage—dead or alive. This precaution is in case you fail.”

“O. K. to that, too!” Slick barked. “I won’t slip up!”

“That will be all, then. You other men remain in close touch with Slick or Judborn Tugg, so that you can receive orders quickly.”

The men bobbed their hoods in understanding, then departed. They went swiftly, as if eager to quit the ghostly presence.

Slick Cooley remained behind, making a pretense at examining the box which he found in the weeds beside the door. The box was not large. It was shiny and black, with a tiny single-pole switch on the top.

There was also a bundle of money, which Slick pocketed.

He carried the box to the near-by brush and waited, eyes fixed on the barn door. He was watching for the Green Bell to appear. Slick intended to follow the master mind and learn who he was.

Minutes dragged by. No one put in an appearance. Almost half an hour passed.

Impatient, Slick crept to the door and peered in. The eerie black form had not moved. The sputtering green candles had burned quite low.

Slick debated, then decided to stake all on a desperate chance. He fished the two silenced guns from his armpits and shoved through the door.

“Put ’em up!” he gritted.

The seated figure did not stir.

Slick ripped another command. No response! He became excited. Both his guns coughed bullets!

The slugs hit the black form and the wall with smacking reports which were much louder than the *chung!* of the silenced weapons.

The apparition in black still remained motionless.

Frankly terrified, Slick pitched forward and brought a gun crashing down on the hooded head.

The whole figure collapsed, amid a loud cracking! It was nothing but a framework of sticks!

CURSING feverishly, Slick bent to examine the thing. A hole in the concrete floor came to view. This had been partially concealed by the black gown.

Slick lighted a match and held it over the hole. He saw the moldy red walls of tile.

Comprehension dawned on Slick. The farmer who had once tried to cultivate this marsh land had put in an intricate system of tile drains. The hole in the floor admitted to one of these underground pipes. Or so Slick had decided.

Doubtless there were many other exits. The Green Bell might have been speaking from anywhere in the vicinity.

This, then, accounted for the necessity of yelling. It took a loud tone to carry through the tile labyrinth.

Using his flashlight, Slick carefully rebuilt the framework which supported the black gown. It was just as well, he realized, that his treachery should not be discovered.

SOME time later, Slick appeared in the vicinity of Aunt Nora Boston's home.

Distribution of food and clothing to the needy was well under way, from the looks of the situation. There was a multitude in the two big tents and on the grounds.

Those who had received an allotment of necessities were not departing. They wanted to attend the meeting which was to follow. Especially did they want to see and hear this remarkable bronze man, Doc Savage.

The food in their hands was concrete evidence that the mystery man meant business. Doc had known the distribution would have this effect, hence he had ordered it to be made before the speeches. He needed every ounce of cooperation and confidence from these people.

The battle against the insidious forces of the Green Bell was just starting.

Presence of the crowd made it simple for Slick to snap his hat brim over his eyes and mingle among them. He worked to Aunt Nora's house. All attention was directed on the tent. It proved easy for Slick to enter the house, unobserved.

He made his furtive way to the room where, during the day, he had been lucky enough to observe Doc Savage's reflection in a mirror. He reasoned this was Doc's quarters.

Certain articles of the bronze man's attire hanging in a closet told Slick he was correct.

Numerous intricate mechanical and electrical devices stood about the room. Of these, Slick identified only a portable radio outfit. The other stuff was too complex for his rather limited understanding.

Slick disturbed nothing. He was too canny for that. Nor did he show a light. The moon furnished sufficient illumination.

Behind the head of the bed stood a large, dilapidated cabinet. To all appearances, this was not used. The front had no doors, but was masked by a gaudy print curtain.

"Just the place!" Slick whispered to himself. "I'll plant my toy there, then go to Chief Clements's office and wait for him to turn up!"

He placed the black box behind the curtain, and threw the deadly switch; then all but ran from the room.

Much to his relief, Slick was able to leave the house without being observed.

Just before he faded away into the night, he glanced at the circus tent. The canvas sides had been tied up because of the warmth.

Doc Savage was taking the speaking rostrum.

“That guy will be a gibberin’ nut before mornin’!” Slick leered. Then he crept out of the neighborhood. Somehow, even a distant look at that bronze man made him feel like having a good shiver.

Chapter IX

PLANS

THERE was a great deal of talk in the big top, but it snapped into the silence of a graveyard when Doc appeared. In two spots, babies cried. The night breeze puffed the tent top and sucked it down with a hollow booming.

The quiet was a tribute to Doc's appearance. The giant bronze man, in the glare of a spotlight, was an arresting figure.

Alice Cash, also occupying a chair on the rostrum, seemed unable to take her eyes off his figure.

"This is not going to be a longwinded discussion," Doc announced, speaking in a modulated tone which the public-address system could handle with most efficiency. "You people who have received food and clothing here, to-night, do not need to embarrass yourselves with the idea that you are taking charity. Your names have been filed, and the stuff charged against you."

"Fat chance you have of collecting!" some one called grimly. "We haven't any jobs!"

"There'll be plenty of jobs!" Doc retorted.

"How soon?"

"I set the time limit at two weeks; but we should be able to beat that. Probably most of you will be drawing pay by to-morrow."

In the rear, a man jumped up and shrieked: "That's just wild talk! You're only a crazy murderer from New York!"

This fellow was one of the Green Bell's agitators who had managed to slip inside. He fled wildly when a dozen angry men charged him.

After the excitement subsided, Doc resumed speaking.

"Will the following individuals please come forward," he requested.

He now read a list of names which Aunt Nora had furnished him. It included practically every factory and mine owner in Prosper City.

The designated men seemed reluctant to assume the limelight—until the lead was taken by a sparse, gray-haired man who had a determined face.

"That is Collison McAlter, my employer," Alice Cash whispered to Doc. "That is—he was my employer when there was a job."

Other men followed Collison McAlter's example. They were quietly dressed, substantial-looking fellows, all of middle age.

The desperate situation in Prosper City was mirrored on their faces. Some were pale, nervous, openly worried. Others carefully masked their concern.

Doc Savage counted them. About two thirds of the list he had called were present. But he had not expected unanimous attendance. That even this many had attended Aunt

Nora's meeting was remarkable.

"Will each of you sell me your factory or mine holdings?" Doc asked bluntly. "Provided I give you the right to buy them back at the same price any time within a year."

Jaws sagged among the worried industrialists. The proposition was a bit sudden for them. They were incredulous.

The idea that they should be recipients of an offer so strange was too much for their mental digestions.

"Understand me," Doc told them; "I am not taking any man's plant off his hands at a handsome profit. The purchase price must be what is fair in the judgment of an impartial board."

Collison McAlter ran fingers through his graying hair. "I should like to know what your purpose is in making this offer."

"Your plants are simply being taken off your hands," Doc told him. "We intend to start every one working. If they are damaged, or we fail, you don't stand to lose anything."

"You mean that you're going to buy them, get them operating profitably, then let us have them back at what we sold for? Why, that's not good business! You won't make any profit!"

Aunt Nora Boston sprang up and said loudly: "You men get this through your heads: Doc Savage don't go around trying to make money! He goes around helping people! You fellows never met anybody like him before! He's probably the most remarkable man in the world!"

"THIS is too good to be true!" Collison McAlter smiled widely. "There must be a string tied to it."

"The only string is an agreement that the wages and working hours in effect, when you take the plants off my hands, must be maintained," Doc replied.

"The kind of a deal you are proposing will take millions!" Collison McAlter muttered doubtfully.

Doc now summoned the banker with whom Johnny had deposited the check for such an enormous sum.

"I want you to advise these gentlemen the size of my account with you," Doc requested of him.

The banker, more than glad to please the largest depositor his institution had ever seen, complied with the request.

The owner's of Prosper City's inoperative factories and mines were becoming a bit dizzy. They looked like men who were having a pleasant walk in their sleep.

But they were hard-headed, conservative individuals. They began discussing the matter among themselves. Some wanted time to think it over. A week! Thirty days! Two months!

Doc's powerful voice stilled the babble of words.

“This requires swift action!” he announced. “You men know very well that a mysterious master mind known only as the Green Bell is behind this trouble! We must begin fighting him without delay!”

Doc knew human nature. If they got to talking about the thing, they might hem and haw for months.

For the second time that night, it was Collison McAlter who took decisive action. This might have been due largely to the persuasive nod given him by his pretty secretary, Alice Cash.

“I’ll take you up, Mr. Savage!” he declared. “I’d be foolish not to. I don’t stand to lose anything. I shall give you a bargain price on my concern, the Little Grand Cotton Mills.”

Doc Savage stepped down and shook hands heartily. Getting the Little Grand concern was half his battle. It was second in size only to Tugg & Co. among Prosper City’s industries.

Most of the other owners now came forward with oral agreements to surrender their properties. A few men, still suspicious, were reticent. But Doc had no fear that they would fail to come around, once public opinion was aroused.

This entire discussion had been picked up by the sensitive microphones of the public-address system. The vast throng within the tents and upon the grounds had heard each word.

Doc now addressed the crowd. “You have just heard an agreement entered into which will put most of the industrial plants in Prosper City in my possession. It will be two or three days before these sales are completed and money changes hands. Opening of the plants will have to wait that long. How many of you are ex-service men?”

All over the tents and the grounds a surprising number of hands shot into the air.

“Fine!” Doc called. “How many of you fellows are willing to go to work right now?”

Practically every hand stayed up.

“That’s still better!” Doc told them. “You’ve got jobs. You’ll draw pay for to-day. The salary is ten dollars a day.”

Mention of the rate of remuneration called forth several pleased howls. The sum was well over the prevailing scale for labor in that section of the State.

“You fellows are going to earn that money,” Doc told them. “You are going to form an armed guard to protect the plants as we open them. Some of you may be killed. But the family of any man who dies in the line of duty will receive a trust-fund income of two hundred dollars a month for the balance of life.”

Perpetual monthly payments was the kind of insurance that appealed to the men. It was something their widows could not be swindled out of.

A VISIBLE change had swept over the crowd as developments chased each other. Earlier, the attitude had been the dull hopelessness of beings who felt themselves helpless victims of some Gargantuan monster which they could not understand. That was now changed entirely.

The concern of each man was naturally for himself. Where was the next meal for himself and his family coming from? What had caused the factories and mines to close down was something too vast, too vague and abstract, for them to grasp, unused as they were to thinking in large terms. Nobody, for that matter, understood the reason for this trouble.

They were like cattle caught in a hailstorm. They could feel the hail pelting them, but what had caused the clouds to form and the hail to fall, they did not comprehend clearly. What they wanted was a shed or something for protection.

Jobs which Doc was offering were figurative sheds. The men were overjoyed.

Doc had more bounty to distribute.

Four armored trucks lumbered into Aunt Nora's great yard. These were the type of vehicles used to convey factory pay rolls. Each had a grilled pay window.

Lines were formed, the ex-service men superintending operations. Each person to pass a barred window received a moderate sum of money. In return, they signed vouchers saying the amount was advance salary on jobs they were to get.

Through Johnny and the banker, Doc had summoned the money trucks, some of which had come from neighboring cities.

Distribution of this money was the climaxing sensation. Charity to the tune of a few dollars was one thing; philanthropy on such a stupendous scale as this was something else again. Such a thing had never before been heard of here.

Reporters from the Prosper City *Star* ran around like chickens with their heads off. Down at the newspaper plant, an extra press was dusted off. It was decided to double the size of the paper, and fill it all with news about Doc Savage. Stories about Congress, European troubles, and the murder of a big gangster were consigned to the wastebasket.

The insidious master mind, the Green Bell, whoever he was and wherever he was, had something to think about. The pall of fear which he had built up so painstakingly was being, in a single night, almost completely wiped away by the remarkable power of this man of bronze.

Doc knew very well, though, that the battle was just starting. The Green Bell's organization was still intact. The sinister czar's followers were now certain to concentrate on their bronze Nemesis.

This was as Doc wanted it. The innocent workmen of Prosper City would not suffer.

The night was far along when Doc went up to his room to get a few hours of sleep.

Doc's eyes roved the room as he stood in the door. Nothing suspicious met his eye—there was no detail to show that the little black box of insanity was concealed near the head of his bed!

Doc strode over, seated himself on the edge of the bed, and started to kick off his shoes.

He became rigid; his mighty body seemed to solidify into the metal it resembled. He brought both corded hands to his ears.

Then he leaped erect and whipped out of the room.

He stopped in the hall and waited there, tense. He shook his head a time or two. His expression was strange, curious, puzzled.

Through the open door, his eyes roved the room. They rested finally upon the curtained cabinet, near the head of the bed. This was the only logical hiding place.

Doc entered the room. He flashed to the cabinet, stripped back the curtain, and discovered the dark box. He clicked the switch off. His whole movement had taken but the flash part of a moment.

Curiously, Doc began examining the box. He loosened small screws and lifted the lid off.

Long Tom, the electrical wizard, came in.

“What in blazes is that, Doc?”

“The devil’s own machine! Take a look at it!”

Long Tom scrutinized the device closely.

“Huh!” he ejaculated. “This is a mechanism utilizing quartz crystals and high-frequency electric currents for making ultra-short sound waves.”

“Exactly,” Doc agreed. “Sound waves which have strange effects upon many substances. There is not the slightest doubt but that this is the explanation of the strange cases of insanity in Prosper City. The sonic waves affect certain centers of the brain, rendering them inoperative, I believe.”

Long Tom nodded. “But how’d you find the thing?”

“The waves are inaudible to a normal ear. Fortunately, I was able to detect certain sounds of peculiar nature. It is doubtful that these were the sonic waves themselves, but more probably they were heterodyne beats caused by some refracting phenomena.”

It was perfectly clear to Long Tom how this could happen, although a scientific discussion lasting for days could have been waged over the subject.

No doubt the main explanation of Doc’s escape was his remarkable hearing. From the cradle, Doc had each day taken certain sound exercises calculated to develop his auditory senses. For this purpose, he used a device which made sound waves inaudible to an ordinary ear. Through long practice, Doc was able to hear these notes.

Ole Slater, Aunt Nora, and the others soon arrived, anxious to see the hideous black box and hear how it worked.

Doc borrowed the magnifier in the left lens of the gaunt Johnny’s spectacles, and went over the interior of the brain-paralyzing device.

Strange little lights came into his golden eyes as he examined it.

INTO the room there came abruptly a low, fantastic sound. It was like the song of some exotic bird of the jungle, or the mellow trilling of a breeze filtering through a forest. It had no tune, though it was entirely melodious.

Those present stared. They looked frightened. Ole Slater backed nervously for the door, thinking the deadly sonic device was in operation. The weird sound was in all the room, seeming to emanate uncannily from no particular spot.

Doc's four friends showed no fear, however. They had heard this uncanny note before. They knew it was the sound which was a part of Doc—a small, unconscious thing which he did in moments of utter concentration. In the present case, they were sure it presaged an important discovery.

“What'd you find, Doc?” rumbled the big-fisted Renny.

“Finger prints,” Doc told him. “The fellow who made this thing might as well have signed his name.”

Collison McAlter came upstairs, along with some of the other Prosper City factory owners. He listened in amazement to Alice Cash, as she told him about the sonic device.

Doc Savage placed the black box on a table near the bedroom window. He walked to a rather bulky metal box which stood to one side of the chamber. This was decorated with various knobs and switches, together with circular glass lenses.

Doc opened it. Inside, mechanism was operating slowly. Two large magazines held a narrow movie film.

Collison McAlter's eyes popped. “A movie camera! And it's been operating in here all the time?”

“Doc had several of those,” volunteered the homely Monk. “They operate silently, and they're handy to leave standing around to photograph prowlers. I'm betting the fellow who planted that black box got his picture taken!”

Collison McAlter wiped his forehead. “But it was too dark to take pictures in here!”

“This movie camera operates on ultra-violet light,” Monk explained. “The rays are invisible to the human eye, but they affect photograph film of the type we use. In other words, that camera can take pictures in pitch darkness. And it carries enough film to run all day.”

Monk further announced that the film, immediately after passing the lens, ran through a tank which automatically developed it.

Doc now put the film through a tiny projector. The images were thrown on the white plaster of the wall. The pictures were not attractive to the eye, since highlights and shadows contrasted starkly.

As portrayed by the film, the room seemed unreal, horrible. The creeping figure of Slick Cooley appeared. Every detail of his features was plainly discernible.

He was facing the camera at the moment he whispered to himself; then he planted the box and fled.

“So he is the culprit!” barked Collison McAlter.

Doc stopped the projector. He indicated the black sonic box on the table. “Make sure no one carries that off. The finger prints in it are important.”

He glided for the door.

Collison McAlter gulped: “But where are you going?”

“To get Slick Cooley,” Doc said dryly.

“But how do you know where to find——” Collison McAlter fell silent, for Doc was gone.

Doc's four aids exchanged knowing glances. They had a good idea how Doc knew where to locate Slick Cooley.

Slick had been facing the camera when he whispered: "I'll plant my toy there, then go to Chief Clements's office and wait for him to turn up!"

Doc Savage was a proficient lip reader.

THE group now left Doc's room. Renny took up a position outside the door, armed with one of the tiny, high-speed machine guns. The room was on the second floor, and the grounds were flood-lighted.

Even if the Green Bell did know of the finger prints, it did not seem possible that he could get to the black box to destroy them.

Renny had not been on guard before the door for long, however, when certain portentous events transpired.

A tree, lifting between Doc's window and one of the floodlamps, cast a shadow over the portion of the house that was between the window and the roof.

Directly above Doc's room was the window of one of the garret chambers. This lifted silently.

A small package appeared, tied to the end of a string. This was lowered. A swinging movement caused the package to sweep in through the window of Doc's quarters. It was dropped within.

The string was permitted to hang between the two windows. It was small and dark and not likely to be noticed by any one.

In the garret cubicle, the murky figure which had lowered the package now made for the door. This being wore a long black gown, on the front of which was a bell design in bilious green.

The little room under the roof chanced to be the one which had formerly been occupied by unfortunate Jim Cash.

The black-hooded personage quitted the garret.

A few minutes later, the group of factory owners took leave of Aunt Nora's house, discussing Doc Savage and his men, and the things they had seen that night. Collison McAlter was with them. He seemed greatly pleased with the events of the night. His step was jaunty.

Chapter X

THE MURDER SNARE

THE PROSPER CITY police station was a dingy, red-brick building, constructed in the shape of a "T." The stem of the "T" contained the barred cells for prisoners. The crosspiece held offices, including the one used by Chief Clements.

Chief Clements did not keep a very sightly office. Circulars concerning wanted criminals stuck to the walls like stamps. There were metal filing cabinets, all large and rusty.

On top of the scarred flat-top desk stood a box of five-cent cigars. About two thirds of them had been smoked.

Slick Cooley occupied the swivel chair back of the desk. His weasel face was screwed into a grimace over the cigar. Slick considered five-centers below his station in life.

Back of Slick, a window was open. He did not worry. This was the second floor. A night breeze rushed softly in through the window and pulled strings of gray smoke off his cigar end.

Suddenly, the breeze seemed to bring in a great bronze cloud. This cloud tied around Slick and became as real and hard as banding steel cables.

Air tore loudly out of Slick's lungs as he was squeezed. He made no other sound. He was planted, helpless, upon the desk, and relieved of his two silenced guns.

Slick tried to struggle, but he might as well have been a mouse in the clutches of a big cat.

The brick wall of the police station had offered no great obstacle to Doc Savage. It was not the smooth type of wall, but one which had fairly deep grooves between the bricks. Doc, with his tremendous strength and agility, had come up it much as another man would climb stairs.

Doc maintained a purposeful silence, not speaking even after he had disarmed Slick.

Cabled bronze fingers seemed to flow over Slick's person. They administered a wrench here—pressure there. Slick found himself mysteriously relieved of the power of speech by some weird paralysis of nerve centers.

"You're going to die," Doc told him—but neglected to mention the mortal date.

Slick naturally presumed Doc meant immediately. Doc had no intention of slaying Slick. He had merely stated a natural truth, and let Slick draw his own conclusions.

For some seconds Doc worked on Slick's frame with incredibly strong hands. His manipulations produced excruciating agony. So great was the torture that Slick began to think he was actually dying.

"Who is the Green Bell?" Doc demanded.

The bronze fingers kneaded Slick's nerve centers again, and he found the use of his tongue had magically returned.

He tried to bluff. "Honest, mister, I don't know anything about any Green Bell!"

"A lie!" Doc told him quietly. "You are one of the Green Bell's hirelings. You might be the Green Bell himself—except that you don't show any signs of having that many brains."

"You're crazy!" Slick snarled.

"Not as crazy as you hoped I would be when you planted that sonic device in my room."

"I didn't——"

"A movie camera was hidden in the room! It registered your actions!"

SLICK did not doubt this. Remembering the intricate electrical apparatus standing in the bedroom, he wished he had investigated more closely.

"They won't hang a man for that," he mumbled.

"No!" Doc agreed. "They'll never hang you!"

Thinking this was a threat, Slick shivered. He changed his tactics.

"Now listen, Savage; maybe we can get together!"

"Who is the Green Bell?"

"I don't know! Honest, I don't!"

"But you are one of his men?"

Slick knew there was no use denying this. "Yeah!"

"You were one of the gang who murdered Jim Cash," Doc said.

That was merely a guess on Doc's part, stated as a fact. But Slick goggled at the bronze man's features, saw no expression there, and came to the mistaken conclusion that Doc had learned of the deed in some mysterious fashion.

"What if I did? You can't prove it!" Slick squirmed desperately. "You can't prove anything on me!"

"Judborn Tugg is one of the gang," Doc said calmly.

"Sure." Then it suddenly dawned on Slick that he was being tricked. He cried desperately: "You can't prove a thing I've been telling you!"

The door opened, and a twanging voice said: "He don't need to prove it."

Chief Clements of the Prosper City police stood on the threshold. His cherry of a face was somewhat pale, and his bristling caterpillar of a mustache drooped slightly, making it seem smaller. Otherwise, he appeared none the worse for the hours of sleep induced by Doc's drug.

No surprise showed on Doc's metallic face. A few moments ago he had heard some one approach the door. This had escaped Slick's notice.

"You should have stayed outside a while longer," Doc advised Chief Clements. "You might have learned other facts."

Chief Clements's face wore the expression of a man who had suddenly discovered that his house had burned down. Jerkily he mopped at his small features.

"I've been played for a sap," he mumbled.

"All of us are taken for a ride occasionally," Doc assured him without malice.

This did not seem to relieve Chief Clements. He knotted his bony hands, captured a part of his dark mustache with his lower lip, and nibbled it, goat fashion.

"I talked to some people on my way here, and read an extra edition of the News put out," he twanged. "I found out what you done at that meeting to-night—passing out food and clothing and money to them starving people. A lot of them poor devils you helped were my friends."

Chief Clements was an honest, stubborn man, who had learned he was wrong. He was trying to apologize.

Doc helped him out. "Forget it! You were doing what you thought was right. No man can do more than that."

Chief Clements smiled gratefully. His knobby shoulders lost their droop.

"From now on I'm working with you," he said grimly. "What I just heard proves you didn't murder Jim Cash. I'm not going to arrest you. And I'd like to see anybody from out of town pinch you. Furthermore, I'm going to arrest Judborn Tugg. Slick's talk proved Tugg is mixed up with the Green Bell."

"I'm afraid such slender evidence would not convict Tugg in court."

Chief Clements stared dismally at Doc. "You mean that we had better not throw Tugg into the can?"

"Tugg may be the Green Bell. Suppose we watch him closely. If he is not the Green Bell, he might still lead us to the master mind. With your very valuable help, we'll be sure to solve this."

The last statement was partly flattery. Undeniably, though, having Chief Clements on Doc's side would greatly facilitate matters.

"I'll slap this guy in the hoosegow, then we'll talk things over," Chief Clements said, and snapped handcuffs on Slick's wrists.

The lithe, snakelike Slick was led off in the direction of the cells in the rear.

DOC had been smiling in friendly fashion for Chief Clement's benefit. Left alone, his strong features now settled into repose. A warm light in his golden eyes indicated that he was well satisfied with the way things were going.

Chief Clements returned, stepping spryly.

"I wish you would tell me what you know about conditions here in Prosper City, Mr. Savage. I must confess I have been blinded by that flashy bluffer, Judborn Tugg."

"My facts are meager," Doc told him.

Then, without squandering words, he imparted his facts. He told of the capture of the Green Bell's seven thugs in New York City. But he made no mention of what had finally happened to them. No one, other than those connected with the place, knew of the strange institution in upstate New York.

“So Jim Cash was rubbed out because he got wise to who the Green Bell was!” muttered Chief Clements. “Cash was a good kid. I knew him. His sister is swell, too. That young Ole Slater has been rushing her lately.”

“Know anything about Slater?”

“He’s all right. I investigated him mighty close.”

“How come?”

“That was when Tugg had me thinkin’ Aunt Nora Boston was at the bottom of this trouble. I combed their records. I didn’t find nothin’ on Slater. He’s written a couple of plays that have been produced on Broadway.”

The discussion veered to plans for the future. Chief Clements suggested that the ex-service men guard for the mines and factories should be commissioned as members of the Prosper City police force.

This was an excellent idea, Doc agreed.

“I can supply most of them with guns!” Clements declared.

“I should like to have all the prisoners,” Doc requested.

“I don’t get you! What do you want with the Green Bell’s bunch, if we catch ’em? Why not let ’em go to the pen?”

“My treatment is more effective than penitentiary terms or the electric chair,” Doc said.

Chief Clements looked at the bronze man’s face and squirmed uneasily. He had received the impression that Doc meant to slay the prisoners.

“No one will be put to death,” Doc promised him.

“It’s irregular,” Clements said, “but if you want them, you can have them!”

BACK in the jail, a shot banged. The sound was hollow—like a single grain of popcorn letting loose in a popper.

Doc whipped for the door. His movements seemed easy, but were executed with a swiftness which caused Clements to stare in amazement. This phenomenon of a man moving with such unearthly speed all but made Clements forget the shot. He heaved out of his chair and followed Doc.

A long, bare, cold corridor ended at a sheet-steel door. Chief Clements unlocked the panel.

A concrete alley, barred cells on either side, stretched beyond. Faces were jammed against the bars; excited questions babbled.

An iron stairway sloped down to the first-floor cells.

“I put Slick below!” Chief Clements shouted, and hammered his heels on the stairs.

Halfway down the passage, a steel grid of a door hung open. Two turnkeys huddled before it, peering into the cell. Both were rigid, bent forward grotesquely.

Doc and Chief Clements raced the corridor’s length.

Light blazed in the passage, but not in the cells. The bars cast striped shadows on the cement floor. The shadow stripes seemed to crawl like black snakes over two figures in the dungeon.

One man was a jail flunky. He held an automatic. An empty cartridge glittered on the floor, and the place reeked of cordite.

The second man was a twisted pile. His position was so contorted that it seemed his body had been pulled apart, then dropped in a heap.

There was an ugly froth on his lips. His eyes were rolled in their sockets until they resembled white marbles. A bullet had knocked the top of his head out of shape. It was Slick Cooley.

The man with the automatic backed stiffly away from the body.

“Something went wrong with him!” he cried shrilly. “He was havin’ a fit. He grabbed my gun and got shot when we were fightin’ for it. He was stark, ravin’ crazy, if you ask me!”

Wheeling, Doc Savage sped back the length of the passage. He reached a metal door. A tiny, glittering tool appeared in his hand. He used this briefly on the door lock, and the panel opened as if he held a weird power over it.

Chief Clements ran to the door. His jaw was sagging. The door had been locked, and he would have sworn that it was burglar proof. He stepped out into the night, bobbing his small red head like a blinded chicken. It was a long minute before his eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom, and he could see Doc Savage.

The lots around the police station were vacant. On them some one had sown grass—and grown a profuse crop of weeds. Doc was wading through these, using a flashlight.

Rows of tiny windows, heavily barred, admitted to the cells. Doc Savage lingered under one from which came the low voices of the turnkeys gathered about Slick’s body.

The ground bore faint marks where feet had recently trod. The earth was too sunbaked to retain definite footprints, but weeds, crushed by a recent tread, were slowly straightening.

Doc joined Clements.

“The Green Bell got Slick with one of his sonic devices which produce insanity!” he imparted.

Clements wailed: “We’ve lost our only witness who could prove you didn’t kill Jim Cash.”

Doc seemed not to hear the statement. He started away, hesitated, turned back.

“I’m going to Judborn Tugg’s home! Want to drive me? You know the town.”

“You bet!” Clements ran for his car.

PROSPER CITY’S most pretentious residential district was located on a knoll known to the local wags as Plutocrat Knob. As befitted a man who was not backward in holding himself up as a leading citizen, Judborn Tugg occupied the most flashy dwelling in the section.

The mansion was white, after the Spanish style—a thing of tiled roofs, overhanging balconies, and wrought-iron railings. Shrubbery was plentiful.

Several blocks from the place, Chief Clements got up speed, kicked out the clutch, and cut off the ignition. He coasted to a silent stop two blocks from the white castle.

Doc lifted out.

“Thanks,” he said. “You might as well go back to the station.”

Chief Clements jerked at his bristling black mustache. “But listen——”

He clamped his teeth on the rest. The bronze man had faded away silently into the night!

Chief Clements stood up, intending to call loudly, then thought better of it. The sound might alarm Judborn Tugg. He sat there, blanketed in disgust. He had hoped to be in on whatever investigation Doc contemplated.

The bronze man fascinated Clements; he wanted to see more of him.

Clements fiddled with the ignition, then made an angry finger-snapping gesture. This was provoked by recollection of how he had fallen for Judborn Tugg’s trickery.

Clements suddenly decided to do some investigating on his own. If he could learn the identity of the Green Bell, his stupidity would be less reprehensible.

The thought occurred to him that he might interfere with some plan of the bronze man. Well, he would be careful not to do that.

Leaving his car, he eased through the shrubbery. He managed to make little noise.

The shadow of a manicured hedge led him close to a side door of the white palace. He crouched there, not ten feet from the door, wondering what he should do next.

The problem solved itself.

The door opened, and Judborn Tugg came out. Apparently he was getting a breath of the night air before turning in.

Tugg lit one of his dollar cigars and threw the match away. It landed beside Clements. Not extinguished by the fall, it flared up. The light disclosed the Prosper City chief of police.

Tugg dashed forward, drawing a pistol. Then he perceived the interloper’s identity.

“My good friend, Chief Clements!” he exclaimed pompously. “What on earth are you doing here?”

Chief Clements heaved up on his knees. Within the last hour, he had acquired a great hate for this flashy man.

Clements was not only a slow thinker; he had a temper.

“Don’t you call me a friend!” he snarled.

TUGG jumped as if kicked. His head seemed to dive down into his fat neck. He had been warned that Clements would be a deadly enemy if he ever learned the truth. And the police leader was now acting as if he had glimpsed light.

Armoring himself with dignity, Tugg began: “My dear man, what——”

“You damn murderer!” gritted Clements. “Don’t you try to soft-soap me!”

Tugg appeared to swell in girth and shrink in stature. A paleness bleached his pursy jowls.

Chief Clements had only spoken rashly in his rage, but Judborn Tugg thought the officer was stating a charge, which he could prove. Fear crawled in Tugg’s veins like red ants. He was desperate. He decided to try a trick.

“Call your other officers!” he snapped. “I surrender!”

“There’s nobody else with me,” rapped Chief Clements, falling neatly into the trap.

This was what Tugg had wanted to know. Jutting his gun at arm’s length, he worked the trigger. The reports banged thunder. The bullets sledged Clements backward, tunneling through his heart and lungs.

Tugg continued shooting until his gun was empty. Then, from the corner of an eye, he glimpsed what to him was a terrible sight. A giant man of bronze! The figure came volleying across the lawn toward him.

Tugg snapped his empty gun twice at Doc, then veered around into the house.

“Help!” he called.

Several men, aids of the Green Bell, were in the house. Some had attended the sinister meeting in the dilapidated barn. Others were merely agitators, who did not work in the Green Bell’s black robes, and, as a consequence, were paid less money. They were loafing in Tugg’s company.

Flourishing weapons, these men rushed to Tugg’s aid. When Doc Savage loomed in the door, their guns loosened a volley.

Lead gnashed splinters out of the door, or screamed on to slap into distant houses. None of the slugs touched Doc. He had seen the danger in time to twist away.

The Green Bell’s gunmen, weapons ready, sidled nervously through the door, or dropped from near-by windows. Their bronze quarry was not visible. But there was much shadow-matted shrubbery near by, which could hold him.

Inside the house, Tugg ran to a phone. He called the Prosper City police headquarters.

“Doc Savage has just murdered Chief Clements out at my place!” he screamed. “I got half a dozen witnesses to it!”

The words were loud enough to reach Doc Savage, where he lurked in the shrubs. He glided rapidly away from the vicinity.

Five minutes would see half of Prosper City’s police department on the spot.

The officers did not know Doc and Chief Clements had made their peace. They would be ripe to believe Judborn Tugg’s lie. A terrific man hunt was certain, with Doc Savage as the quarry.

Hardly a flicker appeared in Doc’s eyes when they caught the reflection of a street lamp. Their gold was dull. The charge of murdering Chief Clements was going to be a hard thing to combat.

At a rapid run he made for the outskirts of the town, where Aunt Nora Boston’s house stood.

Chapter XI

DESTROYED CLEWS

ROOSTERS were crowing four o'clock from distant farmhouses when Doc Savage neared Aunt Nora's rambling dwelling.

To one side of the house, Monk was drilling a determined squad of ex-service men.

On the other side of the house a score of individuals stood in a knot, staring upward. Their curious attention was centered on the window of Doc's room.

The window was wiped clean of glass. Part of the frame had been ripped out and hung dangling. Around the aperture, weather-boarding was splintered and torn until it looked furry.

Monk yelled, lumbering over to meet Doc. Monk's gorillalike face was hard and wrathful.

"There was an explosion in your room, Doc! The blast put the kibosh on a lot of your equipment."

"What about the Green Bell's sonic device?"

"Blown to smithereens!"

Doc received this news as expressionlessly as if it had been a comment on the weather. He had developed perfect control. He could take the greatest misfortune without emotion.

Why the black sonic box had been destroyed was perfectly clear. It had held the finger prints of the Green Bell, or some one who knew the evil czar's identity.

"The bomb was planted from inside the house," Monk grunted. "It was lowered on a string from an attic window and swung into the room. We found the string!"

Doc walked to the house, entered, and went upstairs.

The door was not only off its hinges, but lay in fragments along the hallway.

"Renny was on guard outside the door," Monk explained. "He got knocked head over heels!"

"Was he hurt?"

"That guy?" Monk snorted. "Nothin' can hurt him!"

Doc examined the room. Practically all his scientific devices had been ruined. This damage alone amounted to many thousands. Some of the mechanism was of such a complex nature that only Doc Savage's skilled hand and unique brain could recreate it.

Scummy brown stains smeared the floor, walls, bed—almost everything in the chamber. These seemed to be devouring whatever they covered. An acrid odor reeked in the place.

"Don't touch anything!" Doc warned.

"Yeah—I know!" Monk agreed. "The brown stuff is acid. It would eat the flesh right off a man. There must have been several bottles of it tied in with the bomb."

“It was intended to eat the finger prints off the sonic device in case the explosion failed to do the job,” Doc decided.

Doc sought pieces of the sonic apparatus. The only segment of any size was the split end of a coil mounting.

This trophy Doc carried into the bathroom and washed thoroughly to remove the acid. He also scoured the voracious liquid off his own shoes soles. It was dissolving the leather.

Some moments later, Doc’s hands abruptly became idle upon the towel he was using. He glided to a window and leaned out, listening.

In the distance, toward the center of town, he could hear spattering shots. The fusillade died in a banging series which might have been periods.

Monk lumbered over.

“That sounds bad!” he muttered. “It may mean Renny and the rest are in trouble!”

“Where did they go?”

“I forgot to tell you. Ham telephoned from New York that he had sent the body of poor Jim Cash by train. Renny and everybody else accompanied Alice Cash down to the station to get it. Everybody but me, that is. I didn’t care about seeing the girl’s grief.”

“Let’s get downtown!” Doc rapped.

THEY loaded into a touring car in front of the house. This was one of several fast machines which Doc had rented and was keeping on hand for general use.

Doc crouched out of sight on the rear floorboards. Monk drove.

Tire treads shrieked as the phaëton careened onto the road. The exhaust moaned; the rush of air popped the top fabric against the bows. Doc braced himself in position, watching street lights bat past like white eyes.

“Angle over a bit to the right,” he advised.

Keeness of hearing had enabled him to place the source of the shots.

A cop tweedled frantically on his whistle as the car went past like a meteor. Dwellings ceased; business blocks veered ahead.

Prosper City had erected a new Union Station when times were good. It was a lumpish gray building, with long train sheds radiating like fingers in the rear. The place resembled a mausoleum.

In the gloom in front of the station, Doc found a hearse, two cars, and an excited crowd. Blue uniforms of policemen freckled the assemblage.

Monk drew in close and stopped the car. Doc got out. He worked forward, almost brushing the elbow of a policeman, who was too occupied with craning his neck to notice.

Although dawn was threatening redly in the east, it was gloomy in the vicinity of the station. This, and the fact that all attention was focused on the hearse, aided Doc in avoiding discovery.

Big-fisted Renny and handsome Ole Slater stood near the rear of the hearse, talking to officers.

In one of the parked cars huddled Alice Cash, sobbing on Aunt Nora's ample shoulder.

Long Tom and Johnny were keeping the crowd from getting too near the two women.

Doc found a fat man, and did a good job of masking himself in the gentleman's shadow. He threw his voice in the direction of the hearse. Not wishing to betray his presence, he spoke in Mayan.

"What happened here, Renny?" he inquired in the lost language.

A tightening of Renny's big fist betrayed his surprise. He pondered briefly on how to give the explanation without it seeming suspicious. Then he got it.

"I want you fellows to get this straight," he told the officers loudly. "We came down here to receive the remains of young Jim Cash. They had been shipped down from New York, one of the railway officials accompanying them. We had no more than——"

"You told us all that, before!" snapped a policeman.

"Shut up!" Renny thundered. "We had no more than taken the coffin off the train when a gang attacked us. They all wore black hoods with the green, bell-like design on the front. They started shooting, and we had to hunt cover in a hurry!"

Renny made his voice even louder to emphasize the words which he particularly wanted to reach Doc. "The Green Bell's gang just examined the body. It didn't look to me like they took a thing."

This ended Renny's explanation.

Doc drifted a bronze hand into his clothing and brought out a bundle of small objects which might have been red sticks with strings sticking from the ends.

He touched a lighted match to one of the strings, and dropped them. So great was the crowd's interest in Renny and his story, no one noticed Doc's act.

Careful not to attract attention, Doc drifted nearer the hearse. A moment later, a series of loud explosions came from the spot which he had just quitted.

Doc always carried a few ordinary firecrackers with long fuses. These had proved convenient on many occasions.

A yelling hubbub arose over the fireworks. This hypnotized all eyes. No one observed a bronze figure which slipped into the hearse.

WITH a flashlight that spiked a white thread of a beam, Doc made an examination. His search was brief.

On Jim Cash's body, on the arm above the right elbow, were words.

From their metallic color, these letters might have been printed with the lead snout of a bullet. But Doc knew that they had been put there by a chemical—to remain unnoticed until the application of a second chemical brought them out.

They read:

IN MY FACTORY LOCKER

This, then, was what the Green Bell horde had sought.

Doc dropped out of the hearse. At that point, he lost the good luck which had attended his brazen efforts. A policeman saw him.

The officer gasped. Then he flashed his service pistol, and recklessly tried to put a bullet in Doc's bronze head.

The slug went a yard too high. Doc dropped to all fours. Keeping down, he torpedoed through the forest of legs.

A wake of yelling, overturned men marked his progress. Several individuals sought to seize him. They either missed their clutches entirely, or were shaken off. Some launched kicks, only to bruise their toes on a frame which was almost as solid as metal.

In the phaëton parked near by. Monk drew one of the tiny machine guns and began to rip bullets into the air.

Renny, Long Tom, and Johnny sent up deafening yells, and thrashed aimlessly about. These two disturbances were aimed at aiding Doc's escape.

Doc dived out of the crowd, raced for the station, and almost made it before a policeman saw him. It was necessary for the officers to fight clear of the crowd before they could use their guns. And long before they could do that, Doc was inside the depot.

The station was cleared of waiting travelers, porters, and loafers, thanks to the excitement outside. Doc crossed the colored tile floor and ran out under the train shed.

A line of Pullmans and day coaches stood under one of the shelters—evidently a train which was to depart at a later hour.

Doc crawled into one of the coaches. He ran between aisles of green plush seats incased in white protecting cloths. Through coach after coach he passed, shutting the intervening doors so the officers could not sight him by looking the length of the train.

At the far end he dropped off.

Although dawn was imminent, enough gloom remained to simplify the rest of the escape. Doc hurdled sidings, whipped under freight cars, and cleared a low concrete wall.

As if to climax recent ghoulish events, he found he had entered the stockyard of a monument concern. Grave markers of white marble, and more elaborately carved headstones, stood all about.

A long alley beyond the monument yard precipitated him into a side street.

UNTIL Collison McAlter's Little Grand Cotton Mill had been forced to close, Jim Cash had been an employee of the concern.

The strange words on Cash's arm undoubtedly referred to his locker at the Little Grand plant.

For the Little Grand Mills, Doc set his course. They were many blocks away on the south side of Prosper City. Doc ran, haunting alleys and side streets.

He made no effort to get a taxi, after noticing that policemen were stationed at prominent corners, stopping passing cars and examining the interiors.

Doc had been without sleep or rest for many hours, yet his stride lacked nothing in elasticity. Through a lifetime of intensive exercises—two hours of it each day—Doc had developed a strength and stamina which was almost superhuman, as compared to that of other men.

The Little Grand Mills were situated like a gaudy blossom on a sweeping stem of railroad sidings.

The buildings were gray, red-roofed, neat. Grass on the ground was cropped so close it might have been a coating of green paint.

A high fence, of wire as thick as a lead pencil, surrounded the plant. A barrier of barbed strands circled the top. There was a wide entrance, steel gated, flanked by a watchman's turret. This later structure had a small, barred window.

A man peered out of the watchman's box—a pale man who looked scared.

"Who are you?" he quavered. "What do you want?"

"Let me in!" Doc commanded. "It will be all right with Collison McAlter!"

The watchman hesitated.

"Mr. McAlter is here now," he muttered finally. "I'll go with you and find out if he wants you around."

The watchman stepped out of the box, closing the door behind him. He wore a white linen suit badly in need of laundering. He kept his hand in his coat pocket, and the bulge in his pocket was longer than his hand should have been.

He unlocked the gate.

Doc's gold-flake eyes seemed to give the man the briefest of glances.

Then he suddenly flashed a corded arm.

Like a hard cleaver, it descended between the man's arm and his side. The pocket tore open. The fellow's hand and a stubby pistol were forced out.

Doc's sinew-wrapped fist seemed to gulp the gun from the fingers which held it. The watchman tried to flee, but a shove—it made him think of the nudge of a locomotive—sent him reeling against the wall of his cubicle.

Doc opened the door, hurled the man inside, and followed after him.

Propped in a corner, where he had been invisible from the barred window, sat a man. He wore greasy coveralls. A time clock, suspended from his neck by a strap, proved him to be the genuine watchman. He was unconscious from a head blow, and would remain so for some time.

Doc's prisoner gritted: "This fellow is my buddy—the assistant watchman! Somebody beaned him——"

"Did you have on your Green Bell hood when you struck the watchman down?" Doc asked dryly.

The man began to sputter. "I don't know what——"

Doc sent a hand to the man's shoulder, plucked away a long black thread.

“This is not the kind of thread which would come from your suit,” he murmured. “It’s silk.”

“It’s from my necktie!” the other barked desperately.

“Your necktie is a particularly unlovely shade of yellow.” Doc reminded.

The man pitched backward, desperate to escape.

Doc started a swift gesture, aimed at recapturing him. His gaze, always alert and nearly all-seeing, went beyond the false watchman to the factory buildings. What he saw caused him to duck swiftly.

THE factory walls were largely of glass, after the modern fashion. The windows were great tilting panels. Three of these had opened silently since Doc’s last inspection. Ominous black rods were protruding.

The rods lipped flame. They were machine guns, and they trip-hammered mad strings of reports.

Bullets slashed completely through the thin walls of the watchman’s turret. They chopped the planks off. A drawer under the little inspection window was hit. It jumped out of its groove and spilled its contents on the floor.

Gloves, a lunch pail—stuff belonging to the watchman—and a Green Bell hood! Evidently this last had been hidden there when Doc was sighted.

The fake watchman was slain by the first storm of lead. The slugs doubled him up, spun him around and around, knocking him out of shape.

Doc grasped the feet of the genuine watchman, who was slumbering from the blow over the head, and jerked. The limp form skidded flat on the floor.

The floor was of painted concrete. Around it ran a foundation wall, also of concrete. It would turn bullets.

The machine guns continued a deadly chatter. The men using them were coldblooded, intent on ridding themselves of the bronze man. In their blood lust, they had coldly sacrificed their fellow crook.

From the walls chunks of wood fell. Shingles were scooped off the roof; gray dust spurted from the concrete foundation walls. The wall cracked at one point, then another. But it held, furnishing protection.

The barrage ended. Silence reeked for a moment. Then men could be heard leaving the factory.

Doc lifted his head. Two men were running forward to see what kind of work their fire had done; both were armed. Both wore the gloomy hoods of the Green Bell.

Doc reached for the pistol which he had taken from the fake watchman. He rarely carried a gun himself. He held the opinion that a man who carried a firearm would come to put too much dependence on it, and accordingly, would be the more helpless if disarmed.

An ear could barely divide the twin roar which his shots made. The charging pair seemed to go lopsided, reel, then topple down, two loose bundles of arms and legs.

It was not because of any lack of skill in their use that Doc did not carry firearms. He had winged both men in the legs.

Machine guns promptly opened up again from the factory. Doc threw himself close to the floor. It would be suicide to shoot back.

The gunfire kept up for what seemed an age. The concrete foundation wall was getting thinner and thinner. A bullet lunged through.

But once more the shooting stopped.

Chancing a look, Doc saw that the two men had been moved to safety under cover of the fire. He could hear one of them wailing faintly in agony.

Two or three mysterious volleys of shots soon sounded somewhere in the rear of the factory.

Doc exposed himself briefly. He was not fired on. Quitting the turret he ran for the factory. He reached it and veered around a corner.

It was as he had guessed: the men in the Green Bell hoods were retreating. They had used their rapid-firer to batter the lock off a small gate in the rear fence.

They fled, carrying the two wounded. Tall weeds and small brush received them. They were lost completely to view.

Motors came to hooting life in the brush. A car lunged out of a thicket like a frightened black hawk. Another followed. The two streaked down a side road, pursued by a tumbling snake of dust.

Doc entered the factory. He knew the general layout of such textile plants as this. It did not take him long to find the room which held the workmen's lockers.

The lockers were tall, green metal boxes. Each bore a small frame which held a name card. One of the lockers was upset.

Doc turned it over so that he could see the name plate:

JIM CASH

Whatever had been concealed under the locker was now gone.

A sharp, brittle voice somewhere behind Doc rasped. "You will put your hands up!"

Chapter XII

THE BODY IN THE VINES

THE lockers stood in a row, like drab metal teeth. The one which was upset left an opening.

Doc dived through.

The factory floors were rubber composition. This explained how the man had approached unnoticed. Too, the newcomer was not very close—at the end of the locker room, a good fifty feet away.

There was no shot. Light in the cavernous place was too dim to permit accurate marksmanship. It was even a bit too dark to identify faces. But Doc had recognized the new arrival's voice. It was Collison McAlter, owner of the plant.

Doc lighted one of the firecrackers and threw it. It was concealed from McAlter by the lockers. Striking the wall near him, the cracker exploded with a terrific report!

Collison McAlter cried out, fired his revolver—both at the same instant. Firecracker and gunshot were about of an equal loudness.

Doc Savage, big and bronze and grim, stood very silent. It was quite dark in the corner where the firecracker had loosened. Collison McAlter probably could not tell what he had shot at, or whether he had hit any one.

Doc was puzzled. Was Collison McAlter one of the Green Bell's men? Was he the Green Bell himself?

To determine the truth, Doc decided on a small ruse. He glided silently along the phalanx of lockers until he stood as close to McAlter as he could get, without being discovered. Using the voice which he employed in ordinary speech, but making it small, choking, and thin, Doc said: "McAlter—you wanted—to kill—me."

Collison McAlter's gun slipped from his fingers and planked on the floor.

He cried shrilly: "Doc Savage—good heavens! I thought you were one of the Green Bell's gang!"

Doc waited. If Collison McAlter was the Green Bell, this might be a sly trick to draw him into line for a bullet from another gun.

But McAlter came stumbling to the spot where he thought he had shot Doc. The bronze man drew his flashlight, gave the lens a twist to spread the beam widely, and splashed luminance.

Collison McAlter's hands were bare of weapons. He was trembling, pale. He looked worried.

Doc Savage showed himself. "It's all right; you didn't hit me."

McAlter spluttered. He swabbed a cold dew off his forehead, leaning flaccidly against the locker.

"What a horrible mistake I made!" he gulped.

“Did you just get here?” Doc demanded.

“I’ve been here at least two hours.”

McAlter paused, apparently waiting for Doc to make a remark. The result was a dead silence.

“You see, I must confess I’m not a very brave man when it comes to physical danger,” McAlter mumbled. “After I left the meeting at Aunt Nora Boston’s to-night I went home, but couldn’t sleep. So I came out here to the factory to look things over. I saw the Green Bell’s men arrive and overpower the watchman.”

He paused, shuddered violently, and drooped even more limply against the lockers.

“Frankly, I was afraid to show myself!” he groaned.

“I would hardly call that lack of nerve,” Doc told him. “There were too many of them for one man to handle.”

“Yes, that’s what I thought,” McAlter agreed. “Anyway, I don’t know why they were here. They started shooting, but I couldn’t see their target. I guess it was you! Even then I was afraid to open fire on them. I’ll never forgive myself for that!”

McAlter peered anxiously in the gloom, trying to ascertain from the expression on Doc’s bronze features whether or not his story had been accepted as true.

What he saw gave him little satisfaction one way or the other.

“What in the world could they have been after?” he asked.

“Jim Cash evidently had documentary proof of the Green Bell’s identity,” Doc replied. “He concealed the evidence under his locker here in the plant. He wrote the name of the hiding place in invisible ink on his arm. Just why he should follow that procedure is a mystery. How the Green Bell learned of the message is also unexplained.”

Both these enigmas were answered indirectly when Doc appeared at Aunt Nora Boston’s house.

COLLISON MCALTER used his limousine as a conveyance to Aunt Nora’s. Doc crouched on the rug in the ample tonneau. The police did not dare to stop a man of Collison McAlter’s prominence and search his car.

Ham was calling by long distance from New York, when Doc arrived at Aunt Nora’s.

“How’s it coming, Doc?” he asked.

“It could be a great deal better,” Doc assured him.

“I thought I’d report something queer!” Ham said rapidly. “It may be important. Our mail carrier here was kidnaped yesterday by men in black gowns. He managed to escape during the night. The object of the kidnaping seemed to be to get mail he was bringing us. He said there was only one letter. It was from Prosper City.”

“That explains what just happened here, Ham! Jim Cash hid his evidence against the Green Bell, and marked the hiding place on his arm! He must have written me a letter from Prosper City, suggesting that, in case he was killed, I should look on his arm for the information.”

“Confound it!” Ham gritted. “We’re sure having our setbacks in this mess.”

“Some of the Green Bell’s men may still be in New York,” Doc warned. “You’d better watch out for them!”

“Don’t worry, I’ve been doing that,” Ham said wryly. “I think I’m going to be able to scare those four lying witnesses into telling the truth, too.”

“When you get that done, you can come down here and clear me of the charge of murdering Prosper City’s chief of police!”

Ham snorted. “O. K. How is that hairy missing link, Monk, coming along?”

“He has his eye on Alice Cash,” Doc said, knowing this was exactly what Monk would wish him to tell Ham.

The conversation terminated with a loud groan from the distant lawyer. If there was anything that pained Ham, it was to see his sparring enemy, Monk, making a hit with an attractive young lady.

Monk himself soon arrived. Renny, Ole Slater, Aunt Nora and the others accompanied him. Alice Cash was quiet, and her eyes were continuously downcast.

They had consigned her brother’s body to a local funeral home.

MONK looked at Doc and shook his head slowly.

“The cops sure are combing this man’s town for you!” he declared. Then, in a low tone which did not reach Alice Cash, he added: “They even followed us into the funeral home and searched the coffin, thinking we might be pulling some kind of hocus-pocus! And they frisked our cars two times on the way here.”

“That’s not half of it!” Renny put in grimly. “They’re liable to show up here any minute!”

Renny stepped out. He came back with the latest extra edition of the Prosper City *News*. Through his spectacles with the magnifying lens, he stared owlishly at the headlines.

“They’ve got a decent crowd on that newspaper!” he grinned. “They carry a story saying Chief Clements was shot, but they don’t mention Doc’s name in connection with the affair! They simply say that there is not enough evidence to name the slayer.”

Absently, Renny knocked his big fists together. This made a sound as if bricks were colliding.

“What about the gun with which Tugg shot Clements?” he pondered.

“Tugg will be too wise to keep it,” Doc told him.

Ole Slater came dashing in from outdoors.

“Mr. Savage!” he ejaculated. “The police!”

Doc went to the door. Down the road somewhere, loud voices were making angry demands, and getting just as angry refusals. The gang of ex-service guards had evidently stopped the police.

Monk offered: “I told them to do that.”

Doc nodded. “Fine! That gives us a few moments to work which should be enough.”

Monk looked uneasy. "It's going to be plenty dangerous getting away from here!"

"I'm going to stay right on the grounds!"

"Holy cow!" exploded Renny, using an expression which came to his tongue whenever he was greatly surprised. "How're you going to manage that?"

Without answering, Doc stepped outdoors and circled the house. He did not know how he was going to remain without being ferreted out by the Prosper City lawmen.

He was looking for a hiding place which would not be suspected. Before he was halfway around the house, he discovered it.

A large galvanized iron tank stood at the rear of Aunt Nora's rambling old house. Eave spouts emptied into it. Aunt Nora Boston was a thrifty soul who did her own washing. She believed there was nothing like soft rain water for this.

The tank was two thirds full.

"Give us a shoulder!" Doc directed, and bent his efforts to moving the tank some distance away from the house. "Don't spill the water!"

A skeptical laugh escaped Ole Slater. "You can never avoid them by submerging yourself in the tank. The police are sure to prod around in the water with sticks."

"Dry up, sonny," Monk advised him. "Doc's scheme ain't anything as simple as that."

Ole Slater flushed angrily. He was not in a mood to take any cracks from Monk—piqued as he was because Monk had been giving charming Alice Cash marked attention.

DOC called Monk. They ran inside the house. Although Doc's equipment had been destroyed by the explosion in his room, Monk's chemical supplies were still intact. With a great clanking of test tubes and a fizzing of liquids, Monk went to work.

Doc entered Renny's quarters. Among other things the big-fisted engineer had brought from New York were compact diving "lungs." These consisted of little more than oxygen tanks with hoses running to a mouthpiece. The outfit included a clip like a clothespin for holding the nostrils shut.

Monk appeared. He was carrying two bottles—one small, one large. They held liquids of a widely different nature. He gave Doc the smaller bottle. They hurried outdoors.

The bronze man now picked up a large rock and immersed himself carefully in the tank. He sat on the bottom, the rock on his lap to hold himself down.

Monk dumped the chemical in the large bottle onto the water. Striking a match, he applied it. The stuff blazed up brilliantly, making a brownish smoke.

Homely Monk gave Ole Slater his best leer.

"This chemical burns without hardly any heat!" he chuckled. "The police will think we're burning trash in the tank. They won't know there's water in it. Now, do you believe they'll prod with sticks?"

Ole Slater looked sheepish. "No, of course not! But suppose Mr. Savage should want to get out of there? How could he do it without being burned?"

“Didn’t you see the small bottle I gave him?”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“It’s filled with an extinguishing fluid that floats. All Doc has to do is uncork the bottle—and the fire goes out.”

Ole Slater rubbed his strong jaws. “Isn’t there any limit to the number of tricks you fellows have up your sleeve?”

“Listen!” Monk grinned. “Nobody has ever put Doc in a jam he couldn’t get out of!”

Word was now dispatched to the ex-service men, advising them it was perfectly all right for the police to approach. When the officers arrived, Long Tom and Johnny were making a great show of dumping trash into the flaming tank. They ceased this before the cops came close enough to observe that the “trash” was only tin cans, which would not add to the heat of the chemical fire.

“We’re gonna search this joint!” a police sergeant declared loudly. “We’re gonna search it good!”

“Go ahead!” Monk told him. “Just one thing, though! Don’t start intimidating Alice Cash and Aunt Nora!”

“I’m gonna make damn sure they ain’t seen Doc Savage!”

Monk gave a signal. His three pals crowded up threateningly. They were a grim-faced fighting crew.

“You can ask all the questions you want to!” Monk grunted. “But whether anybody answers them or not is something else!”

“Where’s Doc Savage?”

“That’s one we’re not going to answer!”

The lawman glowered blackly. “You won’t answer because you’re afraid of givin’ your pal away!”

“I ain’t afraid of nothin’ or nobody!” Monk hammered his chest like a bull ape. “I just don’t feel like answering your damned question!”

At this point more policemen arrived. Three carloads! They bristled with sub-machine guns and double-barreled riot guns. A cordon was stretched around Aunt Nora’s grounds.

The officers pushed their search. Beginning at the circus tents, they tore into every bale and box. They even climbed to the top of the tents to see that there were no trick pockets.

They ignored the flaming barrel, except to toss an empty cigarette pack in the flames.

They reached the house. At front and rear doors guards were posted. The scrutiny started in the basement. Walls and floor were brick. The bricks were examined, literally one at a time, to make sure no trapdoor gave into a secret room.

Other officers scattered over the remainder of the house.

Approximately two dozen newcomers arrived. These were the men who owned the mills and the mines of Prosper City. They had evidently held a conference, and had come in a body to discuss measures which would give Doc control of their property.

When they found the bronze man was being sought by the police, they exploded indignantly. No one would entertain the idea that Doc Savage had shot Chief Clements.

They landed on the officers with a verbal barrage. For a few moments the house was a bedlam of angry shouting. The police perspired and their necks became red. They could not tell these men to shut up and clear out. They were Prosper City's powerful citizens.

"The suggestion that Savage murdered anybody is preposterous!" insisted a mine owner. "We've been investigating! Savage is known all over the world for his remarkable deeds!"

Pompous Judborn Tugg had come upon the scene from somewhere. He entered the argument.

"My dear fellow business men and comrades," he said bombastically. "This man Savage is twice a murderer—probably worse."

"We do not believe that!" some one advised.

"I saw Savage murder Chief Clements!" Tugg shouted. "Half a dozen others witnessed the horrible crime, too! Furthermore, Savage is trying to buy your properties for a fraction of what they are worth! Can't you see that? He's not only a killer—he's a gigantic swindler!"

Renny's great voice roared: "When the time comes, Tugg, we'll either prove that you're the Green Bell, or that you're on his pay roll."

Both fists up and clenched, Tugg started forward as if to strike Renny. However, he stopped well out of reach of the enormous blocks of gristle which Renny called hands.

"Your lying words won't hurt me!" he said, with the air of an injured man.

After this, Tugg subsided. He could see plainly that every one but the police was against him.

"Go ahead with the search," commanded the sergeant in charge of police. "We're going to scour this place from top——"

He never finished. Feet rapped the porch. A uniformed officer dived inside.

"One of our men!" he yelled. "Hanging in the vines under a window! A knife is sticking out of him!"

THERE was an excited rush around the house. Vines which the excited officer had mentioned were wistaria. The creepers draped over a lightly constructed trellis.

Under one second-story window there was a vertical streak where the leaves were wet with dull, thick red. The blue-clad body of a policeman was the mountain from which this streak of crimson spilled.

The cadaver hung from the window by a rope around the neck. The officer had been stabbed several times, judging from the places where he had leaked blood. The knife had been left protruding from his chest after the last blow.

One of Aunt Nora Boston's carving knives! It had a black stag-horn handle. From below, the hilt looked not unlike the head of a black serpent peeping from the vest pocket of the dead man's coat!

Homely Monk stared at the window—and began to feel as if he was standing in a pool of ice water. It was *his* room from which the body was dangling!

"Holy cow!" Renny breathed in Monk's ear. "Why on earth was he murdered? And right under our noses, too!"

Monk tied his furry hands into knots, then untied them. He was visioning the inside of the Prosper City Jail.

The chances were good that every one present would be arrested. It was only in detective-story books that a houseful of people were kept on the scene after a murder, in order that the detective hero might trap the villain. These hard-headed cops would throw every one in jail.

Made silent and grim by the presence of murder, the officers ran into the house and upstairs.

The rope which suspended the slain man was one Monk had used to tie around a case of chemicals which he had brought from New York. It was not long enough to lower the body to the ground.

They hauled the corpse in through the window.

There was nothing to indicate why the bluecoat had been slain; no bruises to indicate a struggle.

"There couldn't have been a fight, anyway," Monk pointed out. "We would have heard it from downstairs. The fellow has been dead only a few minutes."

"Whose room is this?" demanded the police sergeant.

"Mine," Monk admitted. His small voice was even more tiny than usual.

The officer yanked a pair of handcuffs from his pocket, and bore down on Monk.

"Listen, big hairy, you're under arrest for murder!" he snapped.

Monk beetled his brows angrily. "You're forgetting something."

"What!"

"I haven't been out of your sight a minute since you arrived. The slain man was one of the men who came with you, so I couldn't have killed him."

Marked disappointment was registered by the policeman. He wanted to put Monk under custody. But Monk was obviously not the guilty person.

"Bring everybody up here in the hall!" the cop shouted. "We'll get to the bottom of this!"

The group of men, who represented Prosper City's mines and factories, protested vociferously to being herded about by the police. This, however, had no effect.

"This is mighty serious!" the bluecoats growled. "We got to investigate everybody!"

"That is exactly right, officer!" Judborn Tugg agreed loudly. "I will gladly submit myself to any examination. Personally, I think any one reluctant to do that, under the circumstances, has something to conceal."

Numerous dark glares rewarded Tugg for his speech. He replied with a smug smile. He knew the words had lifted him in the estimation of the officers.

BETWEEN ten and fifteen minutes of catechizing now ensued. The servants of the law did a rather thorough job. The information they obtained, however, only added to their perplexity. Almost any one, it seemed, could be the killer. Indeed, Doc's four aids were almost the only men who had been continuously at the side of some officer during the time the slaying must have occurred.

Collison McAlter, Aunt Nora, Ole Slater, Alice Cash—all others, in fact—found difficulty in proving exactly where they had been.

The little flock of Prosper City business men became frankly worried. Their efforts to prove by one another that they were accounted for at all times, were almost frantic.

“All of you stick here in the hall!” commanded the sergeant. “We're gonna finish our search of the house. Doc Savage may be around, and may have murdered the cop!”

Tall, bony Johnny had been using his spectacle magnifier on the hilt of the knife which had slain the bluecoat.

“It has been wiped clean of finger prints,” he announced regretfully.

The police search progressed up from the basement. Plaster was scrutinized; walls were rapped; books and magazines were examined.

“You've got strange ideas of hidin' places!” Monk snorted.

“Don't get sassy!” he was ordered. “We're lookin' for the gun that shot Chief Clements!”

Monk gave a pronounced start. “Say, officer, did somebody suggest the gun might be here?”

“We don't broadcast the source of our tips!” snapped the sergeant. But a movement of his eyes toward Judborn Tugg was significant—the gun hint had come from Tugg.

A hoodoo seemed to have settled in Monk's room for it was there that the next unpleasant development occurred.

Monk had brought along a spare suit. It hung in the closet. From its pocket was produced the gun which had slain Chief Clements!

Proof that this was the particular gun would have to await examination of ballistics experts, though. Identification numbers had been filed off. Judging by the shiny condition of the file grooves, it was a safe bet this had been done since the fatal shooting.

Monk entertained no doubt about its being the murder gun. Some one had planted it in his room. He proclaimed this fact loudly.

“It explains the murder of the policeman!” he declared. “The cop happened to find the Green Bell or one of his men hiding the gun in this room! That's why he was killed!”

“The gun bein' here shows Doc Savage has been here,” the sergeant insisted. “He could have done the killin'!”

Monk subsided. What was the use of arguing?

A FRESH stream of objections now came from the Prosper City business men. If Doc Savage was guilty, they asserted, why arrest everybody? Some of them made the ominous prediction that, if this kept up, Prosper City would soon find herself with an entire new set of policemen.

The officers relented—partially. It was agreed that every one should remain at Aunt Nora's place under careful guard, Doc's four men—thinking of their bronze chief concealed in the water tank—were not pleased at this turn of events.

Flames still leaped from the top of the tank. It was the nature of Monk's chemical to burn slowly—it would blaze for another hour. Then what?

Doc stood an excellent chance of being discovered, and none at all of escaping from the grounds.

"We ought to warn Doc how things are stacking up," Monk whispered to pretty Alice Cash.

Alice now showed that she carried around something besides good looks on her shoulders. She secured permission from the policemen, and retired to the privacy of her room. On a sheet of stiff white paper she wrote a brief summary of what had occurred. She sealed this in a large-mouthed bottle which had once contained stick candy.

The roll of paper pressed against the walls of the bottle, due to its own stiffness. Hence the words it bore could be read through the glass.

Alice found a heavy paper weight, and tied this to the bottle to serve as a sinker.

The current fashion in gowns tended toward full sleeves. She was wearing the latest. She concealed the bottle in a sleeve, then managed to make her way outdoors without attracting suspicion.

She maneuvered toward the flame-crowned tank and tossed her message inside, without seeming she was doing anything unusual.

Descending through the water, the bottle and its weight landed on Doc's right knee. He grasped it. The fire above lighted the water more brilliantly than sunlight would have. Too, although the burning chemical was not supposed to make much heat, the water was getting unpleasantly warm.

Peering through the wall of the bottle, Doc read the message.

He reached a swift decision. Indeed, he seemed hardly to consider the matter at all, so rapidly did his brain analyze the situation and ferret out the best procedure.

The cork left the neck of the bottle which held the extinguishing compound. It was a milky fluid. In wreathing streamers, which resembled the smoke from a small fire, it climbed upward. The chemical flames were promptly snuffed out.

Removing the rock anchor from his lap, Doc got up and clambered from the tank.

Yells of surprise greeted his appearance. Alice Cash pressed her hands to her cheeks and looked startled.

The police sergeant dashed forward, gun in one hand, handcuffs in the other, shouting: "You're arrested! If you bat an eye, you'll get plugged!"

Chapter XIII

PIPED COMMANDS

WITHIN surprisingly few seconds, Doc was centered in a bristling ring of gun mules.

Judborn Tugg bounced up and screamed: "Kill him, officer! Don't let him escape! He's the devil who murdered your chief!"

Long Tom chanced to be near Tugg at that instant. The electrical wizard—slender, pallid, unhealthy-looking—did not seem half a match for the portly Tugg. But he sprang upon Tugg. His fists delivered a smacking volley.

Before Long Tom was hauled off, Judborn Tugg had lost three front teeth. His nose was awry. Both his eyes had received a pasting which would soon turn them a beautiful black.

Long Tom swung his fists recklessly at officers who grabbed him. Two dropped. The electrical wizard had the appearance of a weakling, but his looks were highly deceptive.

Ordinarily, Long Tom kept a level head; but on rare occasions, he flew into a great rage. He was having one of his tantrums now. The accusations against Doc had heated him to the exploding point.

A lawman got behind and whipped the back of Long Tom's head repeatedly with a blackjack. The electrical expert tumbled over, unconscious.

Doc Savage was now conducted into the basement of Aunt Nora's house, and ordered to undress.

Every piece of his clothing was taken. This indignity was suggested by bruised, trembling Judborn Tugg.

"You don't want to take any chances," Tugg told the police. "There's no telling what kind of weapon this bronze fiend might have hidden in his clothing."

An old pair of overalls and a blue shirt were handed Doc. His feet were left bare. The officers conducted him to a large police touring car.

The top was up, but there were no curtains. Doc sat in the rear, an officer on each side. Three more cops occupied the front seat.

When they headed for town and jail, two cars rolled ahead. Three came behind. In one of the latter Long Tom languished. They were going to jail the electrical wizard for his performance on Tugg.

Every one else was, it seemed, to be permitted liberty. Now that the police had Doc, they seemed to think everything was settled.

The official cars were driven slowly. Their motors were rather silent for such big machines.

As they entered a part of town where residences were more plentiful, a metallic squeaking of radios in houses could be distinguished. Evidently the Prosper City

broadcasting station put on a program at this hour which was very popular with the housewives. A majority of sets were tuned in.

The autos progressed several blocks. Suddenly, all about them, a wailing and screaming came from the radio speakers.

The uproar had an eerie, banshee quality. Intermingled with the bedlam, rising above it, came a procession of dull gonging notes. These persisted for only a few moments, then the whole clamor died.

“The Green Bell!” a cop gulped.

The police looked at Doc as if suspecting the bronze man might have made the noise.

Doc showed by no sign that he had heard. His hands reposed on his knees. They rested close together, snugged by handcuffs. His ankles were also manacled.

Three railroads entered Prosper City. To avoid dangerous crossings, the tracks lay on high grades. Overhead bridges spanned the streets.

The police cavalcade crawled toward one of the bridges. Two passed under. Doc’s machine came up within a score of feet of the structure. It traveled at a leisurely pace.

Flinging both fists above his head, Doc sprang upward. Driven by tremendously developed leg muscles, his body burst through the top fabric as if it were paper.

He twisted out on top. The bows were stanch enough to support his weight.

The shackles on wrists and ankles seemed to hamper him hardly at all. By the time the car reached the bridge, he was standing erect.

Springing upward, he grasped the bridge beams. A flip outward and upward hooked his toes over the rail. An acrobatic swaying—and he was atop the bridge.

HAD DOC sought to make an escape in any direction other than upward, the police would have been in a position to riddle him. As it was, the tops of the cars spoiled their aim. Before they could lean outside, Doc was gone—sheltered by the high steel side pieces of the bridge.

In concealment, Doc tested the handcuffs against his bronze sinews. It was no mean feat of muscle he was attempting. The handcuff links were not undersize, nor were they of a special metal, so brittle it would snap easily—two dodges sometimes employed by professional strong men.

His sinews seemed to bunch, and crawl like animals under his bronze skin. *Snap!* went the links joining his ankles. Then another straining tug, and those on his wrists went the same way.

Down the tracks he ran, doubled as low as possible between the rails. Policemen were shooting, yelling, and scrambling madly up the grade!

It would have been an excellent time for a train to come along. But never was a horizon more barren of a snorting locomotive. Doc scooted ahead until a bullet squeaked dangerously close, telling him officers had gained the track.

He pitched right, and literally slithered down the grade on his stomach. The railway section men had sown a plentiful amount of clover on the slope—it was a sweet variety of clover which grew rank and offered excellent concealment.

Doc gained a fence, left pennants of his overalls on the barb wire getting through, and dived behind some one's chicken house, just as bullets began to smack the boards.

He crossed the yard, surrounded by a young tornado of frightened chickens. Racing past a small dwelling, he glided down the street.

He was safe. He made directly for Aunt Nora Boston's place.

THE brief, hideous clangor of the Green Bell over the radio was the reason for Doc's escape. He had no proof as to the meaning of the unearthly radio noise, but he had concluded it could have only one purpose.

Rumor said the noise always presaged death or violence by the Green Bell's men. Therefore, Doc reasoned, the gong was a summons to bring the evil, hooded tribe to some point where they received orders.

Doc was certain that Judborn Tugg was one of the clan—if not its chief. He intended to watch Tugg's reactions to the radio call.

Doc reached a tall tree some distance from Aunt Nora's home. This was a lofty elm. It chanced to be the same perch from which the ill-fated Slick had watched. Small scuffs on the bark, a clinging thread or two which had been wrenched from Slick's suit, told Doc this part of the story as he climbed upward.

He stationed himself at the end of a large limb.

Some sort of disturbance was going on near one of the circus tents. Judborn Tugg was waving a fat arm and shouting. Monk and Johnny were dancing about him with threatening gestures.

Tugg's actions showed he was insulting Doc's two aids in studied fashion.

In a moment, Monk and Johnny seized the pompous man and threw him bodily out of the grounds.

Doc Savage, witnessing this bit of drama, felt a new respect for Tugg's sagacity. The fat man had managed to get himself kicked out so that his departure, so soon after the radio clangor, would not be suspicious.

Doc silently lowered himself from his perch and followed Tugg.

The fat man entered his limousine. However, he drove only a short distance, and that very slowly. Parking near a wide flat field which was overgrown with brush, he made for the ramshackle barn.

The sunlight was brilliant. At no time did Tugg take more than half a dozen steps without glancing alertly around. Yet Doc was hardly fourscore feet behind when his quarry ducked into the old barn.

Doc sidled near the structure, only to be forced back as he heard the approach of other men.

The Green Bell's pack was assembling!

They came by twos and by threes. Once, half a dozen in a group. The last arrival closed the door.

Each man to come to the spot had been incased in a long black garment with a green bell painted on the breast. No one remained outside on guard. That exotic

masquerade would have been sure to attract attention of any chance passer-by. No doubt more than one watching eye was pasted to the cracks, however.

In assembling the vast knowledge which his remarkable brain held, Doc had made it a practice to learn from masters in each line; then, by intensive study, to improve on the best they were able to give. He had gone to animal hunters of the jungle to learn woodcraft, for these were the masters of stealth.

As noiselessly as a cloud-cast shadow, he drew near the ramshackle building.

A hollow, earthy voice mumbled within the structure. The words, as they reached Doc's ears, were almost too distorted for understanding.

The thing Slick Cooley had learned only by use of his eyes, Doc's keen ears discerned instantly! The voice was pouring from an underground pipe!

"Is every one here?" it was asking.

"Yes, sir!" Judborn Tugg shouted in answer.

"You are here for orders!" came the sepulchral tones of the Green Bell. "Each of you, of course, made sure he was not followed?"

To this, there was general clamor, evidently meant for assent.

"Good!" boomed the voice from the ground. "We finally got Savage in jail. His men remain. It is to hear their fate that you were summoned."

DOC SAVAGE listened with only half attention, for he was worming a slow way through the weeds, pressing an ear to the ground at frequent intervals. Due to the marshy nature of the earth, he did not believe the tiling could be deeply buried. Otherwise it would fill with water.

The Green Bell—wherever he was—must of necessity shout loudly to make his voice carry with volume. Doc thought he should be able to locate the tile by ear.

"Judborn Tugg!" donged the Green Bell.

"I am here!" Tugg shouted.

If he did not know the figure to which he spoke was a dummy of sticks and cloth, he must be very puzzled at being asked to identify himself.

"You will recall that, nearly a week ago, you were commanded to make certain preparations near Aunt Nora Boston's home!"

"Yes," howled Tugg.

"Just what did you do? I want to be sure!"

"I hid a big bottle of poison in a brush patch on the mountain slope, close to Aunt Nora's place! You can't miss the brush! Four large trees grow out of it. They're in a straight line—as if they'd been planted."

"Exactly where is the bottle?"

"Buried halfway between the middle two trees."

"What kind of poison?"

"Cyanide! The most deadly stuff I could find!"

Outside, Doc Savage dug silently with his fingers. His sensitive hearing had guided him well, for the hole he sank landed squarely on top the tile. He spaded rapidly with

his hands, lengthening his excavation along the tile.

The big clay pipes were not long.

The Green Bell's voice boomed: "Tugg, you will get that poison and go——"

In the midst of the gonging words, Doc struck a sharp blow with his fist. The pipe was not of very strong construction. It collapsed, eggshell fashion.

The Green Bell interrupted himself, roared: "What was that noise?"

"It sounded as if—it came from under you some place," Tugg yelled.

"Never mind," the master mind said hastily, apprehensive lest his hirelings learn the figure in the barn was only a stuffed dummy of wood and fabric.

Doc hastily cupped palms over the hole. This was to prevent escape of too much voice sound. Picking up several pinches of fine dust, he let it trickle slowly into the opening.

Entering the tile, the dust streams were sucked away from the barn. This showed a draft, and gave him the direction.

It was possible that the string of tiles turned before they reached their destination.

"Tugg, you will get the cyanide which you secreted near Aunt Nora's!" continued the Green Bell. "There is, I presume, a large quantity of it in the bottle."

"A lot!" Tugg shouted.

"Good! You will get it! To-night you will take a group of men and dig up the water main which supplies Aunt Nora's home. I happen to know that, due to the house being in an outlying district, the water line is very small—two-inch pipe. You will insert the poison. I am sure you can handle the mechanical details."

"I guess so!" Tugg replied uneasily.

DOC SAVAGE glided away from the barn, following a trail used by the masked men. His gaze switched here and there—always on the ground.

Soon he found what he expected—a cigarette stub. He picked it up, then continued his hunt. He added two remnants of Judborn Tugg's dollar cigars to his assortment.

The prize find was a discarded paper matchbook—one match remaining. Doc had feared it was going to be necessary to start a fire Boy Scout fashion, twirling one stick upon another.

He moved back toward the dilapidated building. The cigarettes, cigars, and matches had been discarded by the Green Bell's men as they donned black hoods upon nearing the rendezvous.

Back at the tile, Doc crumpled the tobacco into a loose fistful. He put a match to the papers off the cigarettes, then added the tobacco. The draft made it burn.

A wisp or two of smoke escaped the baked clay pipe. This was not enough to lift above the weeds and be seen by the watchers in the barn.

Doc listened. Judborn Tugg was talking, giving a recital of what had happened at Aunt Nora Boston's.

Doc felt there was no need of Judborn telling the Green Bell what had happened at Aunt Nora's. The Green Bell had been upon the scene, and had murdered the

policeman, Doc believed.

Collison McAlter—the group of Prosper City factory and mine owners—the others who had been on hand—one of these must be the Green Bell.

Doc circled widely, sensitive nostrils expanding and contracting as he sniffed the air. Tobacco smoke possessed a marked odor. He hoped to locate it where it escaped from the end of the tile. Daily from childhood, Doc had taken an exercise calculated to develop his olfactory organs. His sense of smell was phenomenal.

He ringed the place, without finding what he sought. The second time, he went entirely around. The last circle was wider. Doc quickened his pace; he had expected better luck.

Over toward the barn, he heard noises. Brush cracking. The Green Bell's gang leaving the trysting place! The séance had ended.

Doc let them go. Judborn Tugg was the important member. He would not be hard to locate. Doc concentrated on trying to find the mouth of the tile.

Judborn was one of the first to leave the barn. He walked swiftly from the vicinity. It was a hot day; his black hood was uncomfortable. He removed it as soon as he got out of sight.

Although his name was spoken freely at these sinister meetings, Tugg was always careful to keep his face hooded. This was merely an incidental precaution. If anything came up in court he could swear he had never attended the conclaves, but that the culprit must have been some one else masquerading under his name.

Entering his expensive car, Tugg drove back to town, taking his time. He smoked one of his costly cigars. There was nothing ahead of him for the remainder of the day.

As for getting the poison from the cache near Aunt Nora's home, that would wait until darkness.

TUGG eventually wheeled his machine up before his great white house. A few months ago, there had been a flunky to open the door; but there was none now. Tugg had dismissed all his servants, pleading financial stringency.

The real reason was that he did not want servants around where they might pick up dangerous information. Tugg was unmarried, and took his meals at Prosper City's leading restaurant.

He entered his sumptuously furnished library. The minute he stepped through the door, he jumped a foot in the air.

A somber black crow of a figure was perched in a deep armchair. The green of the bell insignia and the green of glass goggles were almost the same hue.

The apparition held a leveled gun.

The firearm alone was enough to tell Judborn Tugg that he was now facing the Green Bell in person. The czar sinister always held a gun when he showed himself, to make sure none of his followers took a notion to yank off his hood.

"W-what do you want?" Tugg spluttered. "I—I—I was just talking to you."

"And a fine mess you made of it, too!" The Green Bell's tone was deep, angry.

Tugg dropped his cigar, and it lay unnoticed, charring the rug. “What do you mean?”

“Savage followed you to the swamp! He listened to everything that was said!”

Tugg shook his head violently. “Impossible! The police have Savage!”

“He escaped!” The Green Bell’s gun never wavered from a line with Judborn Tugg’s heart. “The police—helpless fools—let Savage get away. And he followed you to the meeting in the barn.”

“*Me!*” Tugg choked. “Surely not!”

“We will not argue about that!” the Green Bell clanged. “Savage was there! I heard him! I am certain! You will take the orders which I came to give you! Then I will go!”

“What is it?”

“You will ignore all orders pertaining to the hidden bottle of cyanide!”

Tugg blinked. Then his quick brain grasped the possibilities.

“Say, boss, if Savage overheard us talking about that poison, he’s sure to go to destroy it. We can lay an ambush——”

“The ambush is already set!” intoned the Green Bell.

“But I didn’t know you had gotten hold of any of the men——”

“This is a trap which does not use men. And it is the more effective for that!”

The Green Bell now took his departure, fading into the shrubbery.

Judborn Tugg, watching from a window, swore in disgust and wished he had not landscaped his place so profusely. He would have liked to follow and learned the identity of this fiend who was behind Prosper City’s difficulties.

Chapter XIV

THE SUSPICION PLANT

HAD DOC SAVAGE been able to witness what had just occurred at Judborn Tugg's home, he would no longer have retained a suspicion that Tugg was the Green Bell.

However, Doc was not considering Tugg very seriously for the part of villain. His reason for this was simple. Tugg was too obviously connected with the Green Bell organization. The man actually behind the thing was too clever to let suspicion point at him in that fashion.

Doc had now made five circles around the barn ruin. He had detected no faintest odor of tobacco smoke. He was frankly puzzled. It was hardly possible that the Green Bell had been this distant from the rendezvous.

Disgusted, Doc returned to the ramshackle old farm building. By now, his bird had flown. He concluded to follow the tiling and learn where it actually did go.

The baked clay pipes were not buried deeply. By jabbing a sharp stick, he traced them. They ran perhaps two hundred feet, turning sharply at two points. Then they suddenly ended.

He dug. The discovery he made was unexpected. The tiles simply elbowed straight downward. After a depth of three feet, the shaft was steel pipe.

Doc compressed a small ball of clay, dropped it. The lump fell, he judged accurately, at least two hundred and fifty feet.

With great care, Doc now wiped out all traces of his presence, filling in the holes he had excavated, and scattering leaves and trash about.

He left the vicinity. His steps were careful; his progress noiseless. This, although there was no apparent danger. His was an instinctive caution.

Many days had passed since the last rain at Prosper City. Yet the ground underfoot was soft, wet. In some spots it was muck which oozed over his shoes.

It was not ground through which one could readily drive a tunnel. A few feet beneath the surface, the earth must be literally a thick soup. Yet the tile line had ended in a vertical shaft which sank straight downward more than tenscore feet.

Doc had a theory to explain this. He hoped it might play an important part in the eventual capture of the Green Bell.

Something over an hour later, the bronze man turned up in the vicinity of Aunt Nora Boston's home. Evading a covey of searching policemen had delayed him somewhat.

Numerous blue uniforms were scattered in Aunt Nora's yard. Others could be glimpsed occasionally, moving within the house.

Doc set a course for the mountain slope which began almost at the edge of Aunt Nora's abode. He had no trouble locating a patch of brush from which grew four

perfectly aligned trees. This, from what he had overheard, was the hiding place of the deadly poison.

What he did not know, though, was that the Green Bell had set a death trap at the spot.

Old leaves made a gray-brown carpet under the brush and smaller trees. These would show tracks, for the undersides were dark and moldy, while the upper surfaces had been washed and bleached by the weather.

As Doc progressed, the brush thickened; trees of moderate size became more plentiful.

Doc crouched, then sailed upward in a great leap. His sinewy fingers trapped a limb. He swung easily to another branch, nipped atop it, glided its swaying length, and seemed to float outward in space to the next tree.

It was a remarkable exhibition of agility. Few jungle anthropoids could have done better.

THE four extremely tall trees, he discovered, jutted from the midst of a thorn thicket. Moreover, a path grooved between the second pair. From the condition of the carpeting leaves, it was evident this trail received only occasional use.

Directly between the spindling trees, there was a small opening in the thorny trail walls. Almost a pit! This seemed a logical hiding place for the poison.

Doc balanced out on a branch of a smaller tree, some yards from the four giant sentinels. Lowering, he dangled from sinewy hands. Back and forth, he began to flip, after the fashion of a trapeze artist getting his swing going. The bough gyrated.

Releasing his clutch at the proper instant, the big bronze man arched upward through space. He made a perfect landing on the lowermost limb of a tall tree.

It was then that he encountered his big discovery.

A machine gun was lashed to the tree. Its ugly snout angled downward. Doc sidled along the limb, examined it. He sighted down the barrel. It was aimed at the tiny recess in the thorns, which probably held the poison.

A flexible wire, attached to the trigger, ran down through tiny, greased pulleys. A death trap! Any one who grasped the poison bottle would be instantly riddled.

Doc thought swiftly. He detached the trigger trip of the gun. Then, with a long, descending leap, he landed on the path.

Searching under the leaves, he quickly found the poison. He untied a small wire from the neck of the bottle. This was the trip for the rapid-firer.

A glance showed him the poison was genuine. The stuff was not in crystal form, but was an odorless, volatile liquid. Cyanic acid! One of the most deadly of poisons!

Doc carried the bottle some distance away, got rid of its contents in a hole which he dug in the ground, then refilled it with water from a stream trickling down the mountainside. This stream, due probably to the presence of mines above, had a foul color, not greatly different from that of the cyanic.

Replacing the now harmless bottle took only a moment.

Moving with the ease of a squirrel, Doc clambered into the tree which held the machine gun. He altered the position of the weapon slightly.

Doc took great pains with the work. Several times, he sighted along the fluted barrel. Then he replaced the wire on the trigger.

He quitted the vicinity as noiselessly as he had arrived.

In the distance, a freight train was whistling and puffing as it pulled out of Prosper City. It got under way slowly, and its snorting and bleating became fainter and fainter.

The freight was still audible when Doc appeared in the brush which fringed Aunt Nora Boston's spacious yard. He waited, watching.

A car approached from the direction of town. It rolled into the yard, bearing Long Tom.

The slender, pale, temperamental electrical wizard must have put up bail and received a quick release on the charge of battering Judborn Tugg.

Perhaps five minutes, Doc waited, in order that the jubilation caused by Long Tom's return might subside. Then the bronze man's strange, mellow, trilling note saturated the vicinity.

Musical, yet entirely without tune, it ran up and down the scale. A bystander, looking at Doc's lips, could not have told it was from thence that the fantastic sound came. Yet the weird resonance possessed remarkable carrying qualities.

It penetrated across the lawn and soaked through the innermost reaches of the vast old house. Policemen glanced about wonderingly, with no idea where the cadence was coming from.

Doc's four men gave no indication that the eerie note meant anything to them. But a few minutes later, the quartet sauntered casually into the house. They used binoculars from upstairs windows.

It was gaunt Johnny, spectacles containing the magnifier cocked up on his forehead, who discovered Doc.

A strange bit of pantomime followed. Johnny's binoculars were powerful. Hence, Doc was able to converse with him by using deaf-and-dumb sign language.

DOC explained fully what he wanted. Then he eased away from the region.

Patrols of cops had taken to prowling the vicinity. He wished no contact with them which could be avoided.

The sun had marched two hours nearer meridian when Johnny, driving down the road in one of the rented cars, passed a certain culvert. Without stopping, he flung a paper-wrapped bundle from the machine. This hopped end over end, coming to a rest directly before the culvert.

Johnny drove on as if nothing had happened.

An arm—it looked like a beam wrapped with steel hawsers and painted with bronze—reached out of the profuse weed growth and snared the packet.

Both bundle and arm disappeared.

This seemed the end of the incident. The tops of the weeds shook a little; but that might have been caused by the breeze.

About eight minutes later, and about eight blocks distant, a householder's dog dashed madly through his back yard, barking. The householder looked out.

He saw, or he thought he saw—for he was not quite sure—a mighty bronze figure vanishing along the alley. The householder went back and sat down to his dinner, grinning widely. The police were after that bronze man! What of it? The viands on the table before him were some distributed by Doc Savage the night before.

The next incident of this sort occurred well on the other side of town, when a merchant, coming home to his lunch, was astounded to have a giant bronze man step from a grape arbor ahead of him, and calmly cross the street.

The merchant ran after the apparition. It was not in his thoughts to give an alarm. He wanted to thank this bronze man for a morning's business, which had practically saved his store from bankruptcy.

This merchant had been carrying scores of impoverished families on credit, and these, practically without exception, had been grateful enough to make a substantial repayment with the money which they had received from Doc.

The merchant, however, was forced to withhold his thanks. He failed to find the bronze figure which he had glimpsed. The form had vanished magically in a garden.

These two spots where the metallic giant was sighted were on a direct line between Aunt Nora Boston's home and Judborn Tugg's palatial white mansion.

JUDBORN TUGG had just partaken of an excellent dinner at Prosper City's leading restaurant. He returned to his home, driving his luxurious limousine.

Pausing before the front door, he made an elaborate ritual of clipping the end from one of his dollar cigars, and applying a match.

He opened the door, entered, stopped—his jaw seeming to disappear in his fat neck as he gaped.

He made an absent gesture at putting the cigar in his mouth, but missed that cavity fully four inches.

"I thought you—goodness gracious!" he stuttered uncertainly. "What is the trouble now?"

A figure in a raven-black robe occupied one of the living-room chairs. A green bell was painted on the front of the hood. The eyes were practically invisible. There were eye holes in the hood, but the wearer's face seemed to be bandaged heavily in white.

"Nothing is wrong!" snapped the somber figure in a hollow, gonging voice.

Tugg blinked, lifted his chin out of his fat neck, and found his lips with his cigar.

"You look much different than you did this morning!" he mumbled. "I guess it is because you are not wearing your green goggles. You have your eyes bandaged! I hope you have not met with an accident?"

"Don't worry about my health!" tolled Doc Savage, imitating the Green Bell's macabre tones.

At the same time, Doc wished he had known about those green goggles. He had resorted to the white bandages to disguise the distinctive gold color of his eyes, knowing they would give him away instantly.

This Green Bell gown had been in the bundle which Johnny had flung from his car. Johnny himself had tailored it.

“What do you want with me?” Tugg demanded anxiously.

“About the bottle of poison!” Doc returned, angling for anything which would give him a lead.

Tugg’s head dived into his neck and came up as he nodded. “Yes, yes! When you were here this morning, you told me not to go for the poison, but that Doc Savage would probably appear on the scene and be caught in a death trap!”

This was illuminating. It told Doc nearly all he needed to know. The Green Bell had learned Doc was eavesdropping in the vicinity of the old barn. The czar of fear himself had later visited Tugg and countermanded the barn orders.

“That plan is changed!” Doc said in his assumed tolling voice. “The new scheme is for you to go get the poison, just as you were ordered at first.”

“You mean I’m to go ahead——”

“Exactly! You are to poison the water main leading to Aunt Nora’s place!”

“Oh, my goodness!” Tugg gasped. “Didn’t Savage fall into the trap?”

“Entirely unforeseen developments came up! Savage, I regret to say, did not tumble.”

“But maybe he’ll be watching the hiding place of the poison?”

“He will not harm you!”

Tugg shivered, said: “I’m kinda worried——”

“You, Tugg, are to get that poison!” Doc ordered in his assumed tolling.

“You are to go in person. Above all things, you are not to send any one else! Understand!”

Tugg squirmed. “Very well.”

Doc Savage, in his masquerade as the Green Bell, had accomplished his purpose. He did not want to stretch his luck. Consequently, he now took his departure.

His going was quite effective. Judborn Tugg, determined this time to follow the master mind, flung wildly to a window the instant the somber figure exited. Quick as he was, the sepia form had been swifter. The visitor had vanished, as if gifted with supernatural powers, or an agility which would put him across fifty feet of lawn while a fat man was crossing a room.

EXASPERATED, TUGG turned on an electric fan and seated himself in its windy breath. The taste of his excellent dinner had been ruined, and his digestion hampered.

Sometimes, he wondered if any good at all would ever come from his association with the Green Bell. He had, in fact, pondered this on numerous occasions.

He wished Slick Cooley was still alive. Slick had been intent on learning who the Green Bell was, then killing him.

That would have been highly satisfactory to Tugg. Slick had expected to take over the Green Bell's organization. Judborn Tugg smiled wolfishly, and mused how easily a bullet from his own hand would have finished Slick.

This brought an unpleasant thought—Slick's death!

Tugg snapped up very straight in his chair. Then he scrambled forward and shut off the fan. He was cold enough now without any artificial refrigeration. His spine, in fact, felt like ice cubes joined with a string.

The newspapers had said Slick Cooley had gone insane in his jail cell, and had been shot while trying to escape. Insane! That was the Green Bell's trademark!

Slick Cooley had been killed because, in the hands of the law, he was a danger to the organization. That was clear!

Judborn Tugg's head crawled in and out of his neck. Doc Savage suspected *him* of being one of the gang. Did that not make him—Judborn Tugg—a menace to the organization?

This was a frosty thought, for it suggested the possibility that the Green Bell might find occasion to dispense with Judborn Tugg.

Throughout the evening, Tugg wrestled these thoughts around in a mire of unease. He would go through with the poisoning—it was often fatal to ignore the Green Bell's commands—but he would be very careful.

JUST before dark, furtive, slinking figures began dropping in on Tugg. These were disciples of the Green Bell—the fellows who were to help with the poisoning of the water main.

Tugg directed each of them to meet him at a spot some distance from Aunt Nora's house, then bundled them out. He considered it a strain on his dignity to associate with such riffraff.

An hour and a half after the street lamps of Prosper City had been turned on, Tugg neared the four sentinellike trees on the mountain slope. He was rushing the job. He wanted to get it over.

He carefully scouted the vicinity of the trees and the thorn patch. No lurking figure was flushed out by this strategy.

"Maybe I am wrong in thinking myself in danger," Tugg argued with himself. "Of course I am! The Green Bell will not murder a man of my importance to the organization. I would be hard to replace."

His mental balloon received a big prick when, a few moments later, he bent over and picked up the bottle of poison.

There was a deafening clatter behind him! It was as if a gigantic iron turkey had started gobbling. Bullets swooped over Tugg's head, chopped branches, and clouted the earth.

Tugg flattened, instinctively spinning. He saw the fire-lipping snout of the machine gun.

He had no way of knowing Doc Savage had aimed the weapon high enough that it could not possibly hit a man on the path. He had no way of knowing Doc Savage had

been here at all! His only thought was—he had been doublecrossed!

The Green Bell had tried to murder him!

Judborn Tugg's actions for the next few moments were those of a frantic man. He scuttled down the trail, collecting numerous thorns in his haste.

Sweat bubbled from his forehead like grease from a cooking bacon rind. He fell to cursing the Green Bell.

“Tried to kill me like a dog!” he snarled.

It did not occur to Tugg that he might have been tricked. Up until a few minutes ago, he had held an evil admiration for the Green Bell. That had evaporated. Rage had taken its place. Rage, and a lust to turn the tables.

Revenge! The thought flamed Tugg's brain. But how to get it? Tugg knotted his fat hands.

He reached a momentous decision. The attempt on his life meant that he needed protection from the Green Bell. Where better to get this than from the Green Bell's Nemesis, Doc Savage?

Judborn Tugg decided to go to Doc Savage, tell the bronze man everything, and ask sanctuary. If there was any safety at hand, the bronze man was it.

This was the exact train of thought which Doc Savage had foreseen when he had reaimed the machine gun and set the trickery trap for Tugg. Doc was psychologist enough to guess that Tugg, in protecting himself, would turn upon his master.

Doc Savage, in fact, was at that moment gliding along not fifty yards from the frightened and enraged Tugg.

The portly, terrified factory owner bee-lined for Aunt Nora Boston's home, so Doc let him go.

MONK, a towering, furry form in the night, challenged Tugg. Seeing who it was, Monk smiled grimly, reached out, and trapped Tugg's fat neck.

Tugg wriggled, squealing: “Now, don't hurt me! I came to see Savage!”

“Yah!” Monk growled. “I hope you don't expect to find him here, after your lying charge that he murdered Chief Clements!”

Desperately, Tugg pulled at the hirsute hands claspings his neck. But at the same time, his active little brain raced. Since he had himself murdered Chief Clements, he would have to make some sort of a deal. Any kind of a deal!

If it came to the worst, Tugg was willing to go to trial on a murder charge. With his influence in Prosper City, he believed he could get off. Tugg was a supreme egoist. He did not realize his influence was practically nil.

Better yet, he might strike a bargain with Doc Savage, whereby, for his services in trapping the Green Bell, he would be permitted to go free.

Tugg was also always the optimist. If he had known Doc Savage's true character, the iron determination of the bronze man, he would have entertained scant hopes of a deal.

“I think I made a mistake about that killing!” Tugg wailed.

Monk loosened his clutch. "You what?"

"I might have made an error!" Tugg said evasively. "If I can see Doc Savage and talk to him in private, I can tell whether my identification of him as the killer was correct!"

To all appearances, there was not room for a spoonful of brains in Monk's knot of a head. But he possessed a keen intellect. He perceived instantly what Tugg was driving at.

"You wanta make a deal?" he demanded.

Tugg did not commit himself. "If I could see Doc Savage——"

Monk shook him and said: "You'd what?"

Tugg remained stubbornly silent.

The mousy tufts which Monk wore for eyebrows crawled together as he thought deeply. The upshot of his reflection was that he conducted Judborn Tugg to the house.

They sought out the sergeant who was in charge of the detachment of Prosper City police.

"Prosper City's leading citizen thinks he made a mistake in calling Doc a murderer," Monk declared, elbowing Tugg roughly. "Ain't that right, fatty?"

The indignity galled Tugg's pompous soul. But he was desperate.

"I've got to see Savage!" he gulped.

"There ain't no need of that unless you can swear he wasn't the killer!" Monk said cannily.

Tugg writhed, perspired, and pulled nervously at his gold watch chain until he broke it. He had reason to know his own peril was desperate. In his extremity, he was willing to make almost any concession to get in touch with Doc Savage.

"I—I think I made a mistake!" he groaned.

"You think?" Monk scowled.

"I—I'm sure I did!" Tugg gulped. "Savage wasn't the killer!"

Monk whistled loudly. Renny and the others raced up, together with policemen.

Tugg was conducted into the house. Monk—his small voice for once a great roar—announced vociferously that Judborn Tugg was willing to swear Doc Savage was not Police Chief Clement's slayer.

Monk was exerting pressure, not giving Tugg a chance to back up. The proclamation broke up a meeting which the Prosper City business men were holding in the house.

This conclave was for the purpose of discussing the transfer of their holdings to Doc Savage. Although Doc had, of necessity, been absent all day because of the police, his four aids were rushing his plans for the salvation of the manufacturing community.

Collison McAlter was a prominent figure in this conference.

Monk left Tugg inside, went out on the porch, lifted his voice. "Doc!" he bellowed. "Tugg is willin' to clear you! But he wants to talk! What'll we do?"

As if it were answering his howl, a shot banged loudly within the house.

Chapter XV

THE GREEN TRAP

MONK veered around. The screen on the front door had a patent lock which defied his fingers. So he walked bodily through, bearded hands pawing fine wire.

Inside the house, the only thing lacking to make the situation a perfect one for murder in the dark, was the lack of darkness. The lights were on brilliantly.

Collison McAlter and Ole Slater rushed up to Monk, crying questions. Other Prosper City industrialists boiled about.

“The shot was upstairs!” somebody yelled.

Big-fisted Renny came lumbering from somewhere. He grunted at Monk, and the two giants shouldered each other up the stairs. In the hallway, burned powder made a tang.

Since the evening was warm, most of the room doors were open to secure cross ventilation. The cordite reek was coming through one of these. Renny and Monk split, each popping their heads into a row of doors.

They fully expected to find a corpse. They were equally as certain that it would be Judborn Tugg.

“The Green Bell croaked Tugg before he could talk!” Monk wailed.

Their expectations were not realized.

In the first place, there was no body in any of the upstairs rooms. Nor was there a lurking gunman.

In the wall of Aunt Nora’s room they discovered a gouge in the plaster. This held a bullet. The slug was not distorted, and obviously had not hit the wall with much more force than could have been developed by a small boy’s slingshot.

The explanation of the puny blow was scattered over a dressing table—the mangled remains of an ordinary electric toaster.

Monk snorted loudly. “Lookit!”

“The bullet was laid in the toaster, and the heat exploded it,” Renny agreed.

“Sure! A plant! Somebody did it to draw attention!”

Monk and Renny had come up the stairs in haste, but they went back down with a great deal more speed. Indoors, a swift search was started.

Racing outside, Monk bellowed for every guard to keep his eyes on the house.

Both hunts drew blanks. Not only were there no murdered bodies around, but nobody had the slightest idea what the excitement was about.

However, the mystery lost its profundity before long.

Judborn Tugg, somewhat pale, his pudgy form drawn up in a stiff dignity, walked toward the door.

Monk collared him. “Where you goin’, fat boy?”

“I wish to take my departure!” Tugg replied in a voice which he could not quite make pompous.

Peering at the fat man, Monk observed that a remarkable change had taken place. Tugg was still frightened, but he was no longer anxious to talk to Doc Savage. His greatest concern was now to get out of the vicinity.

Monk looked fierce, but groaned inwardly. He realized what had happened. The shot had been a trick by the Green Bell to secure an opportunity to speak with Tugg in private.

“So you’ve changed your mind!” Monk gritted.

Judborn Tugg’s answer was an angry squirm for his freedom. Monk let him go. He had a hunch that, if he did not, Tugg would immediately reverse his previous declaration that Doc was not guilty of Chief Clements’s murder.

Tugg left the vicinity in great haste. He made directly for his palatial white home on the other side of town.

Monk’s conjecture that Tugg had received a communication from the Green Bell was correct. What Monk had no way of knowing, however, was that Tugg possessed no idea of who had delivered the words. They had been whispered through the crack of a partially open door, when every one was interested in the banging noise upstairs.

The verbal interchange had been short. In a single angry sentence, Tugg had told of the machine gun. With equal terseness had come the reply that the whole thing must be a clever plot by Doc Savage.

Tugg was to lie low! That was the word. For the immediate future, he was to conduct himself as Prosper City’s leading business man, and nothing else.

There was a catch to this.

“I will attempt to dispose of Doc Savage by other means,” the Green Bell had advised. “If that fails, it may be necessary for you to serve as a bait to draw Savage into a trap!”

THE GREEN BELL had not upbraided Tugg for nearly turning traitor. But Tugg was not deceived. He was live bait. The minute Doc Savage was slain, that bait would no longer be needed.

Tugg shuddered, perspired freely. He was in the jam of his shady life!

A giant, silent bronze shadow dogged Tugg’s footsteps until the fat man was ensconced behind the locked doors of his palatial home.

Doc made certain that Tugg showed no sign of immediate activity. Then he retraced his spectral way to Aunt Nora Boston’s.

The place, from a distance, had all the aspects of a circus. The giant tents, brilliantly lighted from below, seemed many times their actual size.

Curious individuals were swarming the vicinity, although there was to be no food distribution to-night. The money payments of the night before had made that unnecessary. But they were greatly interested in the negotiations over the factories.

If Doc Savage was given control, they got jobs. If he was refused, there seemed nothing but hard times ahead. So they came to loiter and snap up the latest gossip.

Two of these loafers were arguing hotly about the Chief Clements slaying; suddenly, they fell silent. They gaped slightly; their eyes roved the night.

For upon the scene had come a fantastic note, a nebulous, wind-borne sound which might have been the song of some exotic bird, or the trilling of the night breeze. Up and down the scale, it chased a musical crescendo; yet it was without tune.

“What’s that?” demanded a man. “Where’n blazes is it comin’ from?”

No one knew—except Doc’s four aids. Almost at once, they drifted casually into the darkness. They met a short distance away, where they were well concealed in the brush.

They gave no signal—Doc had, without a doubt, followed their departure closely. For Doc’s strange sound, trilling in the murk, could have but one meaning—a meeting was desired.

Doc appeared like a wraith at Monk’s elbow, causing that furry individual to all but jump out of his hirsute hide.

“What have you fellows been able to learn about that fake shot?” he demanded.

The four blinked owlshly. Doc had not been glimpsed around the house, but he seemed to know what had happened.

“I’ve been drifting around in the darkness, listening!” Doc explained. “I’ve heard a dozen different versions of what occurred.”

“It was simple,” Monk muttered. “It made us look like numskulls! A cartridge in an electric toaster! *Bang!* We all fog upstairs! And while we do that, somebody slips Tugg the word to keep his trap shut.”

“What got Tugg in the notion of talkin’, anyway?” pondered the gaunt Johnny, fumbling with his eyeglasses.

Doc told them about the machine gun trick with which he had deceived Tugg into thinking his master was thirsting for his life.

“Now—you have no idea who talked to Tugg?” he finished.

RENNY made rocky sounds by tapping his knuckles together.

“It’s the darnedest thing I ever saw, Doc!” he rumbled. “We questioned everybody. It seems Tugg, being shy of friends because of his attitude toward you, was standing apart from everybody when the shell exploded in the toaster. Nobody knows who talked to ’im!”

“It could’ve been Collison McAlter!” Monk put in. “It could’ve been Ole Slater, Aunt Nora, Alice—anybody! I’m tellin’ you, this Green Bell is slicker’n greased lightnin’, as we used to say back home.”

“And there’s somethin’ funny about Collison McAlter turnin’ up at that factory this mornin’,” added Long Tom, the electrical wizard. “It looked kinda like he might’ve been there with the hooded gang who came after the papers Jim Cash had hidden! He could’ve stayed behind!”

“Was there any proof of that?” Renny demanded of Doc.

“There was no proof either way,” Doc replied. “Except, of course, Collison McAlter’s word that he had come out to the plant when he found himself unable to

sleep at home!”

“What gets me is this—what’s behind this whole mess?” Renny boomed. “Is this Green Bell somebody who hates Prosper City—hates it so that he’s tryin’ to wipe it off the map?”

“Hate does not work like that,” Doc pointed out “Men hate other men, rather than such inanimate things as towns. You might dislike a town, but I don’t think you’d try very hard to destroy it.”

“I wouldn’t!” Renny grinned. “But this Green Bell might. If you ask me, he’s crazy!”

Doc shook his head. “Wrong!”

“Holy cow!” Renny exploded. “Have you got an idea who he is?”

“I have,” Doc imparted dryly, “a faintest of suspicions!”

“Who?”

“I haven’t enough on him to justify pointing the finger at him,” Doc replied. “But as to why he is ruining Prosper City—that is as plain as the nose on your face. But, again, there’s no proof as yet.”

Long Tom shook a pale fist. “I’m all for divin’ right into this thing! Doc, ain’t there somethin’ we can do?”

“That’s why I called you out here!” Doc told them.

GRINNING, the four aids of the bronze man drew a bit closer. They knew, from past experience, that the plans which Doc propounded had an uncanny way of working.

“Johnny,” said Doc, “your profession is knowing the earth and what it’s made out of! This job is in your line. I want you to get me a geologic map of this region!”

“Right!” echoed Johnny. “There’s a firm of mining engineers right here in town that’ll have ’em!”

“Get them to-night!” Doc directed. “I want the best—maps showing rock formations, coal veins, the different faults and fissures—all that stuff.”

“Want charts of the mines?”

“Of course! Not only the late workings, but old ones as well!”

“O. K.”

“Tell nobody about this. Not even Aunt Nora Boston!”

“Aunt Nora—sure! I won’t tell her!” Johnny’s voice sounded a bit queer. Did Doc suspect Aunt Nora?

Doc wheeled on Long Tom, the electrical expert.

“Long Tom, it’s your job to work on that gonging noise with which the Green Bell summons his men over the radio! You know, of course, how he makes the noise?”

“Sure I do, but I ain’t told anybody!” Long Tom chuckled grimly. “That noise simply comes from another radio station, hidden somewhere. It’s on the wave length of the Prosper City station, and it’s much the more powerful of the two. It simply blankets the Prosper City wave out almost completely.”

“That’s right.”

“I learned from Aunt Nora that the United States government had radio inspectors in here, trying to find the interference,” Long Tom continued. “They didn’t get to first base! Once, they got a line on it. But they didn’t find a thing.”

“Where did they trace it to?”

Long Tom seemed reluctant to answer. “To Aunt Nora Boston’s house—or at least, right in that vicinity!”

Doc’s four men were uneasily silent. They liked Aunt Nora. They hated to see this evidence piling up against the motherly old lady.

“I don’t like that Ole Slater!” Monk grumbled, to break the tension.

“You wouldn’t!” snorted big-fisted Renny. “If you don’t stop makin’ eyes at his girl, he’s liable to smear you!”

Doc said: “How about it, Long Tom? Can you find the secret radio station?”

“If it can be found—I can!”

This, Doc and the others knew, was not a boast. There was probably but one other living man knew more about electricity in all its branches than did Long Tom. And that other man was also in this group. It was Doc Savage.

“Go to it!” Doc advised him. “And the same thing I told Johnny goes for you! Don’t tell Aunt Nora, Alice Cash—or anybody else!”

“Right!” Long Tom mumbled.

Doc now addressed the group as a whole. “What’s your idea about the attitude of the police toward me?”

There was thoughtful silence.

“They’re on the fence,” decided Renny, the engineer. “Tugg’s backing up helped things a lot.”

“Tugg will return to his original story that he saw me shoot Chief Clements,” Doc said with certainty.

Renny rumbled a humorless laugh. “The police won’t be so ready to believe him. Even they can see Tugg is acting queerly. If that murder charge from New York was quashed, I believe you’d be safe in showing yourself, Doc.”

“That’s the way I sized it up,” Doc agreed.

Monk’s tufted brows crept together as he thought deeply. “Doc, I’ve been thinking about Judborn Tugg. I sure thought the Green Bell would croak Tugg. But he didn’t. Don’t you reckon that means that the Green Bell hopes to use Tugg to decoy you into a trap?”

“The idea occurred to me,” Doc said wryly. “You can rest assured that I’m going to be very careful of Tugg. But here’s a point you can check up on when this is all over—I think the Green Bell has another very good reason for not killing Tugg!”

THIS ended the conference. Doc’s four aids would have liked very much to know what theory the bronze man did hold. But they knew it would do no good to ask questions.

Doc never put important theories into words until they were proven facts.

Monk and the others tramped back through the moonlight toward Aunt Nora's rambling house. Doc accompanied them part of the distance—they never did know exactly how far. Somewhere en route, the bronze giant faded silently from their midst. Shadows, soaking the undergrowth like puddled ink, had swallowed him.

Policemen eyed Doc's gang suspiciously when they appeared. Just a bit too late, it had dawned on the officers that these men might have gone to meet their remarkable chief. The fact that no mention was made of the incident was an omen.

One of the most powerful forces in existence was working in Doc's behalf—public opinion. The food and money he had distributed, the jobs he had promised, had put the working folk of Prosper City on his side.

This meant nine out of every ten men in town. Such a preponderance of sentiment could not help but sway the police.

For that matter, practically every officer had relatives who hoped to get jobs through Doc's great work.

Easing his gaunt length into one of the rented car fleet, the gaunt Johnny drove off in the direction of town. The geologist was going to locate one of the firm of mining engineers and get hold of maps showing the rock and mineral formation under Prosper City.

The flotilla of rented cars was parked along the road in front of the house. The yard lacked room for them. Flood lights in the yard did not reach the spot. Tall trees lifted near by. This combination made it rather gloomy around the machines.

Long Tom soon came up. Monk accompanied him, as a matter of safety. Long Tom unlocked the rear compartment of the roadster and stowed various packages of electrical equipment inside.

"I'm goin' back to the house to get a bite to eat," Long Tom declared. "Then I'll pull out."

The two men swung jauntily back past the flood-lighted circus tents.

Shadows covered the cars like black cloths. Little sound was about, except for talk from the near-by house.

Metal on metal made a tiny, mouselike squeak. This came again. The engine hood of Long Tom's roadster lifted.

The sheet-steel covering was raised only a moment. An arm—it might have been only a darker string of the night—deposited something atop the engine. It withdrew.

The hood now closed down. A wad of murk flowed stealthily away from the roadster.

Then things began happening. A flashlight spiked a blinding rod into the night. This waved, seemed to lick like a hungry, incandescent tongue. Then it fixed.

Impaled in the glare stood a somber figure—it might have been a black six-foot tube of flexible India rubber, except that it had arms and legs.

The breast of the weird form bore a bell in green. The eyes were the lenses of goggles—snakelike, with a green glitter.

The Green Bell himself! Only the sinister czar wore those green goggles to shield his eyes.

Chapter XVI

THE MAN WHO VANISHED

FOR ten or fifteen seconds there was a silence in the stricken dead. Night insects droned and buzzed. On the distant horizon, heat lightning jumped about, a gory blushing.

The flashlight beam in which the Green Bell was embedded held as steady as if cast in steel. It threw a dull back glow which faintly disclosed the big bronze man who held it.

Doc Savage had been watching his four aids—against just such an incident as this.

Slowly, the bronze man advanced on the sable figure of the Green Bell.

The darksome form suddenly lifted a clenched, black-gloved fist. The fist rapped against the bell design done in green on the mantle. And the bell rang! Dull, muted—but it rang!

Some sort of a small gong was mounted under the black cloth.

A signal!

Near-by darkness came to rushing life. Dusky figures popped up like evil jinnies. Their arms waved, tentacle fashion, and yellow-red sparks leaped out of the ends. Gun sound convulsed the air.

Doc doused his flash. For all his sharpened senses, he had been unaware that the Green Bell's henchmen were standing by for an emergency.

Whipping right, then left, he evaded lead slugs which hunted him like whining, ravenous little animals. He headed straight for the spot where the Green Bell had stood.

A man besmoked in black, triggering a pair of pistols in wild aimlessness, got in Doc's path. The bronze giant, hardly pausing, snapped a casehardened hand to the fellow's spinal nerve center. The man dropped—marked by no wound, but absolutely incapable of further movement.

In learning this strange paralysis which he employed, Doc had delved deeply into the mysteries of chiropractic pressures and their effects on the muscular system.

Doc reached the spot where the black czar had stood. The nigrescent bird had flown. Doc felt disappointment, but no surprise.

The Green Bell had saved himself by having his men present. He had, while flaming guns harassed Doc, faded into the night from which he had come.

Dark-hooded forms whipped among the parked cars, hunting. Two of them bumped each other. Guns gulped thunder—each thought the other an enemy, so edged were their nerves.

Both sagged down, cursing, clawlike hands digging into their own flesh where bullets had torn.

Over toward the circus tents, big-fisted Renny raced to a flood light, picked it bodily out of its mounting, and turned the great calcium spray on the road.

The light ended the battle. The Green Bell's men were creatures of the night. Also, Renny, Monk, and the rest were charging from Aunt Nora's house. They were a fighting crew with which nothing less than a young army could cope.

The black-frocked men fled.

Doc haunted their retreat. Twice, he descended upon stragglers, to compress and knead his corded fingers, and leave his victims—limp and helpless—in his wake.

The light, as he had fully expected, showed no trace of a hooded figure with green goggles.

The czar sinister had managed his escape.

DOC SAVAGE soon abandoned the pursuit of the fleeing black forms. He could not hope to corral all of them in the night.

Picking up the two he had just overcome, he carried them back to the parked cars. Three more of the darkly masked men lay there—the one Doc had paralyzed, and the two who had shot each other.

Doc's aids, police, and ex-service men swarmed the spot. With loud yells, hoods were torn off the Green Bell hirelings, and their faces revealed.

"Just bums from around town!" grunted Ole Slater, after eying the unveiled features.

"Here's two more!" Doc called from the darkness. Then he left the vicinity with great speed.

Policemen ran to the spot from which he had spoken. They found the two prisoners; nothing else. The officers were excited, but more by events of the last four or five minutes, than by the presence of Doc Savage.

The police made no effort to pursue Doc.

This was significant. There was a warrant out for Doc's arrest on the charge of murdering Chief Clements, but the police were rapidly getting in a frame of mind where they did not care much about serving it.

The prisoners were picked up and carried toward the house. A physician was summoned to patch up the pair who had shot each other. All five were in for a night of questioning.

No one paid the least attention to Long Tom's roadster. Certainly, no one lifted the hood. Whatever object the Green Bell had placed upon the engine, still reposed there.

In the house, Monk bowed his great, sloping shoulders. Small kegs of muscle seemed to spring out on his gorilla frame.

"I know how Doc charmed these eggs," he said softly, little eyes boring the prisoners. "I can snap 'em out of it. I'm gonna do that. And, brothers, I'm gonna make 'em talk like phonographs!"

Renny blocked his huge fists and clanked them together. "Yeah! We'll make 'em talk!"

A policeman chuckled loudly. "You know, all of us guys are beginnin' to think alike!"

Monk made a homely grin. "Meanin' you're beginnin' to believe Doc Savage didn't murder Jim Cash or Chief Clements, or even the cop who was found hangin' in the vines?"

"Somethin' like that," the officer admitted.

This was just one policeman's opinion. But the same attitude seemed to be general.

Long Tom sighed. He would have liked to remain behind and take a hand at questioning the captives. The process of eliciting information was likely to be extremely rough. These prisoners probably did not know the identity of the Green Bell, but they might know other things.

For instance, could they swear Doc had not murdered Chief Clements and Jim Cash? And the bluecoat found slain and hanging in the vines?

"Sorry I can't attend the show!" Long Tom grumbled. "I've got a little errand to perform! It can't wait!"

The electrical wizard headed for the kitchen to finish his interrupted lunch. He had no idea how long he would be away, or how busy he would find himself. It was no simple task, this rigging of apparatus which would locate the Green Bell's secret radio station.

The mysterious transmitter was never on for more than half a minute. In that short space, it was very difficult to get accurate readings with an ordinary radio direction-finder.

Long Tom, however, had an intricate scheme which he intended to use.

He grinned as he ate. Things were looking up. Most of the town was on Doc's side. The police were approaching the point where they would ignore all charges, however heinous, faked against the remarkable bronze man. The Green Bell's agitators were afraid to open their mouths in public.

"We've got 'em on the run!" Long Tom chortled.

He did not know that the Green Bell had planted some mysterious object under the hood of his car.

THE food consumed, Long Tom burdened himself with additional pieces of electrical equipment. He swung outdoors.

Around the cars, things were once more quiet and dark. Mosquitoes buzzed like small airplanes.

Long Tom swatted at one, chuckled: "Jersey canaries!" He was feeling very good.

He unlocked the rear compartment, leaned down to insert the articles he was carrying—and his jaw dropped.

A small slab of glass rested in front of his eyes. It was, he saw, one of the windshield wings which had been taken off the roadster.

The glass bore written words which glowed with an unearthly, electric blue. The script was machine perfect. There was a message of some length on the glass, yet it occupied little space.

The communication was from Doc, of course. The bronze man often left missives in this fashion—written on glass. He used a chalk of his own compounding, a chalk

which left a mark invisible, not only to the naked eye, but also to all but the most powerful of microscopes.

When subjected to the glow of ultra-violet light—rays also invisible to the eye—the chalk marks glowed with this uncanny blue luminance.

A tiny ultra-violet lantern reposed on the compartment floor, its beam focused on the glass slab.

Long Tom read the message:

The Green Bell placed a chemical on the engine of your roadster. This, when heated by the motor, would have made a deadly gas.

The chemical has been removed.

Suppose you leave the impression you were slain by the gas, Long Tom. If the Green Bell believes you dead, you can work in peace.

Long Tom hastily switched off the ultra-violet lantern. The communication was unsigned, but there was no need for an appended name. Only one hand could write a script as perfect as that—Doc Savage's.

Reading of the note had taken only an instant. No onlooker would have dreamed Long Tom had done other than stow his burden in the compartment.

He got behind the wheel, started the motor, and drove off. He racked his brains. Too bad Doc had not suggested how Long Tom could fake his own death! But then, Doc usually left details of their respective jobs to his men. They were supposed to be the most astute in their individual professions.

Long Tom put a grin on his somewhat unhealthy face. He had it!

Prosper Creek ran along the south edge of Prosper City. This was not a large stream, but it had dug itself a deep ditch down through the centuries. A concern had installed a dam for a small hydro-electric plant. This backed the water up rather deeply.

A bridge spanned the creek where some of this back-water stood.

Long Tom zigzagged about town to shake off possible shadows, and finally headed for the bridge. He was certain no one was on his trail.

A few hundred yards from the bridge, he unloaded his equipment and concealed it in a weed patch. Then he rolled the roadster to the bridge, yanked the hand throttle open, and jumped out.

Motor thundering, the machine dived for the wooden railing of the bridge! It crashed the stringers! They gave. The car seemed to try to climb a steel beam which formed the bridge frame. The beam bent; metal screamed, rent!

The car rolled over and disappeared beneath the water.

AFTER the roadster sank, bubbles came up with a loud gurgling and sobbing. It was as if the monster of rubber, iron, and fabric were a drowning, living thing.

A man, a resident of the neighborhood, came racing along the road, drawn by the crash sound. He peered down at the hideous sobbing in the water, lighted several matches and dropped them, then whirled and ran madly to call help.

Long Tom grinned and worked away from the vicinity. He gathered up his apparatus, such of it as he could carry.

He intended to locate two directional radio devices at widely separated points. These differed from the conventional apparatus in that the directional focusing was done automatically.

Compasslike, they would indicate the source of a radio wave. Long Tom intended simply to tune them in on the regular Prosper City broadcaster, and leave them. When the secret station came on, the indicators would swing to it, pulled by its stronger wave. An inked marker would show the exact direction.

In the distance, an ambulance siren wailed like a lost hound. Long Tom, listening, nodded. That would be an emergency crew coming to rescue his supposed body from the sunken roadster.

Not finding it, they would conclude it had been carried downstream by the slight current.

The Green Bell would believe the gas had overcome Long Tom at just the right moment for his car, running wild, to leap the bridge.

Chapter XVII

THE TOUCH THAT YELLOWED

LOUD and blaring was the siren on the ambulance speeding to the spot where the car lay in water under the bridge. A police emergency truck followed it. This had an even noisier siren.

Many ears heard the uproar—among them, Doc Savage's. He was satisfied. The noise meant Long Tom had lost no time putting across his deception.

At the moment, Doc was loitering in the murk near the cars. Sounds from the house reached his sensitive ears. Howls of pain, curses, moans! The prisoners were being questioned.

Doc did not fancy the sounds. On occasion, he inflicted exquisite torture himself, but it was always of the type which did no lasting harm.

Too, administering physical pain was not the way to get information from hardened thugs such as these disciples of the Green Bell. Fist blows, the smash of gun barrels, they could understand. Men are less likely to fear what they can comprehend.

Doc's methods on the other hand, were so unusual that they impressed the average man, steeped in ignorance as he was, as smacking of the supernatural. And men fear what they cannot understand.

Leaving the darkness, Doc stalked boldly into the zone whitened by flood lights.

The bronze man wished to question the prisoners in person. But more important, he had plans—a trick to try. This trick required his presence in the house.

His appearance created a commotion equal to that of the recent fight. Policemen ran up. They did not flash guns, however. Nor did any handcuffs come out of pockets.

Questions volleyed.

Doc ignored them. A towering, metallic giant in the flood glare, he made for the house.

Collison McAlter jumped like a stricken man when he saw Doc, then sank in a chair.

"They'll arrest you!" he gulped. "Oh, why were you so reckless as to show yourself?"

Monk and Renny snorted in unison. They knew Doc's methods. The bronze man could, they were sure, escape from the police practically at will.

Aunt Nora Boston gave Doc a wide smile, and said warmly: "I think we can persuade the police to permit you to remain at liberty, Mr. Savage." She jabbed a plump hand at the prisoners. "Especially if those rats cough up the truth."

Charming Alice Cash also gave Doc a radiant smile. She was glad to have the bronze man in their midst again, and made no effort not to show it. Of late, she had seen very little of this strikingly handsome man of such amazing marvels.

Ole Slater grinned widely at Doc, but the grin was unnatural. He glanced covertly at Alice. Ole, it was plain to be seen, was getting more worried about losing his girl as each hour passed.

“Any luck?” Doc asked, indicating the captives.

Monk chuckled, pinched a hard-faced villain, and produced a lusty wail.

“A lot of that kind of music!” explained the homely fellow. “But nothin’ that does us much good!”

Doc’s weird golden eyes prowled the prisoners, appraising their faces and their nervous condition. He selected the weakest of the lot.

He said no word. He merely stood over the man and stared steadily. From his lips began to come the strange, mellow trilling note which was part of Doc. It seeped through the room, with nothing to show from whence it arose.

Doc had long ago learned this sound facilitated his efforts at hypnotism.

The man on the floor was a coward. He did not even wait to be mesmerized.

“Damn you! Damn them eyes!” He squirmed madly, gnashing the links of his handcuffs together. “What d’you wanta know? I’ll spill! Only turn them glims the other way!”

ASTOUNDED expressions settled on the faces of those in the room. They had seen this man on the floor defy blows and threats of death. But he had succumbed to the mere stare of the bronze giant.

Monk and Renny showed no emotion. They had seen things like this happen before. Doc’s presence seemed to have an uncanny effect upon evildoers—especially after they had come to know what a frightful foe he was.

“Who’s the Green Bell?” Doc queried.

Collison McAlter shifted his feet nervously; his eyes roved to the doors, the windows. Aunt Nora shivered, put her hands to her plump cheeks. Alice Cash watched Doc, fascinated.

Ole Slater drew a revolver and seemed to be trying to watch every one present. Most of the Prosper City business men were there. Some one here, in this room, was the Green Bell.

Slater acted as if he were alert to seize the culprit, should his name be disclosed.

“I don’t know who the Green Bell is!” groaned the man on the floor.

Doc had expected that. “Who killed Chief Clements?”

A minor convulsion seized the fellow as he made up his mind whether to answer or not.

“Judborn Tugg!” he wailed.

Several policemen charged for the door, yelling: “That settles it! We’ll nail Tugg!”

“Who killed Jim Cash?” Doc demanded.

“I don’t know nothin’ about that!” moaned the prone man.

“And the policeman found hanging in the vines under Monk’s window—who murdered him?”

“The Green Bell! The cop came upon the boss while he was plantin’ the gun that Tugg used to kill Chief Clements! That was why he was croaked!”

Doc waved an arm which took in every individual present. “Do you think the Green Bell is one of these people?”

“Yeah! Sure, he must be!”

This had the effect of causing each person in the room to shrink slightly from his neighbor. They had, of course, suspected the Green Bell was one of them. But having it put into words in this way was a shock.

Doc now addressed the crowd: “Any questions you care to have answered?”

“Yes!” Ole Slater shouted shrilly. “What is behind all this horror? Why is the Green Bell tryin’ to ruin Prosper City? Is he a madman who hates the town?”

Eyes rolled in the head of the man on the floor.

“I dunno!” he mumbled. “None of us knows what’s behind it all!”

THIS was the extent of the information secured. The other four prisoners insisted sullenly that they knew no more than their companion.

“Which is probably the truth,” Doc commented.

The bronze man now employed a small hypodermic needle upon each prisoner. This caused them to go into a trancelike sleep, from which only the application of another drug could arouse them.

The five were loaded into an ambulance which Doc called. To the ambulance driver, Doc gave secret directions, and a neat sum of money. The machine started off, ostensibly for a Prosper City hospital, where the men were to go into the prison ward.

The ambulance, however, never reached there. In fact, it was fully a year before the five prisoners were again seen. Then, it was in a distant city, and, had an old acquaintance hailed either of the five, they would not have been recognized.

The captives went into Doc’s institution in upstate New York, where they were subjected to brain operations wiping out their past, and given training which fitted them to be honest citizens.

The policemen who had gone to arrest Judborn Tugg now returned. They were a disgusted lot.

“The bird flew the coop!” they explained, “There wasn’t no sign of ’im!”

“Any of his clothing gone?” Doc asked.

“Didn’t look like it! We’ll spread a general alarm for ’im!”

“You’re wasting your time!” Doc assured them. “Judborn Tugg is a man who likes flashy clothing. He would not have fled town without taking some.”

“Then what became of ’im?”

Doc did not answer this, much to the puzzlement of the officers. Doc had an idea what had happened to Judborn Tugg. But that idea was part of the theory as to who the Green Bell was. Lacking proof, he was not yet ready to reveal it.

Johnny, the bony geologist, appeared. He carried a long, circular blue-print case. Catching Doc’s eye, Johnny nodded—thereby affirming that he had secured the

geologic survey maps of the region under and around Prosper City.

Doc received the maps, but did not immediately consult them. Instead, he went upstairs. He secured, from where it had lain in Monk's room, the small segment of wood which was the chief remnant of the Green Bell's sonic device for producing insanity.

He worked over this perhaps half an hour. Then he carried it back downstairs, mounted a table, and made a speech.

"This"—he held up the bit of wood—"may lead us to the Green Bell. In fact, it is almost certain that it will!"

This pronouncement, coming without any previous dramatic build-up, was breath taking. The crowd surged close. Word was passed outside, and every one sought to get into the room.

"As you all know, or, at least, have heard," Doc continued, "the Green Bell sought to drive me insane with a peculiar sonic device. The upshot of the attempt was that the device came into my hands!"

Monk, Renny, and Johnny swapped puzzled stares. What was the bronze man up to?

"We found that the box held finger prints of the person who made it—probably the Green Bell," Doc continued. "That they were the Green Bell's was made fairly certain by the fact that he sought to destroy them."

"Sought!" yelled a cop. "You mean that there's finger prints on that piece of wood? It's a hunk of the sonic box, ain't it?"

"It is!" Doc replied gravely. "And it bears proof which is almost certain to trap the Green Bell!"

MONK looked at Renny.

"That's the first lie I ever heard Doc tell!" he grinned.

"Lie?" Renny asked. "What was a lie?"

"When he said there were finger prints on that piece of wood. There ain't any! I examined it. Doc examined it. And there ain't a speck of a print."

"Doc didn't say there was a print on it!" Renny pointed out.

Monk scratched the top of his bullet head.

"Huh!" he snorted. "That's right—he didn't! But he sure gave the impression there was!"

"I guess he hopes the Green Bell will try to get the stick, and betray himself in the process," Renny hazarded.

This conversation had taken place in whispers which no one could overhear. In addition, both men had cupped palms over their mouths, so that, should the Green Bell be a lip reader, he could not eavesdrop by sight.

Doc Savage now waved every one away from the table on which he stood. He was carrying his prize tenderly in a handkerchief.

“We must be careful that the Green Bell does not get this bit of wood!” he warned, and placed the piece on the table top.

The policemen promptly formed a circle around the table, keeping every one at a distance.

“Hm-m-m!” Monk breathed. “Doc’s makin’ it awful tough for the Green Bell to get that wood!”

“Bring a microscope!” Doc called. “Also a camera for taking finger print photos. You police have such devices handy, I presume.”

“Huh!” Renny whispered to Monk. “D’you reckon there is a print on that thing?”

As if to answer him, the lights went out. Bulbs in the house, floodlamps on the grounds—all blotted simultaneously. The current had been shut off at the main switch, probably in the shed at the back of the house.

A stunned silence followed the first gush of blackness.

It was interrupted by a low hissing noise, a *clunk!* Neither sound was loud.

“The piece of wood!” a man bawled.

Excitement exploded in the room. Policemen yelled, drew their service weapons. Men elbowed their neighbors in their perturbation, and the neighbors, thinking it was the Green Bell seeking to escape with the wooden fragment, lashed out with fists. In a trice, a dozen fights were in progress.

Monk, Renny, and Johnny stood in the background. Whatever was going on, they did not think it had caught Doc napping.

Flashlights came out of pockets, spitting white funnels. The fighters discovered their opponents were friends, stopped swinging blows, and began profuse apologies.

“It’s gone!” squawked a cop. “The chunk of wood is gone!”

COLLISON MCALTER held up both his hands, shouting: “I want to submit to a search! And I think every one present should do the same!”

Ole Slater came elbowing through the crowd and agreed: “I second that suggestion!”

Aunt Nora Boston grumbled: “I’m agin’ it!”

Alice Cash gasped in surprise: “Why, Aunt Nora!”

“Ain’t no use searchin’, child,” said Aunt Nora. “This devil ain’t fool enough to keep that thing on his person.”

The hunt went forward, none the less. Even the police submitted.

Monk maneuvered over behind Doc, eyed the table, then asked: “How on earth did the guy get it? There was a ring of cops around the table!”

Doc pointed at a tiny cut in the table top.

“He simply tied a penknife to a thread, leaned over a cop’s shoulder, and speared the piece of wood. Harpooned it, if you like.”

Monk groaned. “He put over a fast one on you, Doc!”

The bronze man smiled slightly. “Not so you could notice, Monk!”

A loud shout came from the kitchen.

They dashed for the spot.

Aunt Nora Boston was crouched over the coal-burning kitchen range. Her jaw was slack, her eyes were bulging a little. She was peering into the firebox of the stove, from which she had removed a lid.

In the firebox, barely recognizable so charred had it become, lay the fragment of wood from the Green Bell's sonic device.

With it was a small pocketknife. This had had celluloid handles, but they were burned away.

"I was gonna put more wood on the fire," mumbled Aunt Nora. "And I seen this _____"

"Recognize the knife from what is left?" Doc questioned.

Attractive Alice Cash answered the query. "I do! It is one I keep on my desk to sharpen pencils."

More inquiries followed, in which the police took a hand. But this got no results. Who had deposited the fragment and the knife in the stove?

Investigating, Doc learned what had happened to the lights. Some one had taken a fork from Aunt Nora's kitchen cabinet and jammed it across the terminals in the fuse box, causing the fuses to blow. There were no finger prints on the fork.

Monk had dogged Doc's footsteps. While the bronze man was installing new fuses, the homely chemist picked up the conversation which Aunt Nora's discovery had interrupted.

"You said the Green Bell didn't put a fast one over on you!" he whispered. "What d'you mean by that, Doc?"

Doc Savage surveyed the vicinity to make sure there were no eavesdroppers.

"There was no finger print on that bit of wood," he said.

"Sure! I know that!"

"But I soaked it in certain chemicals from your collection. Those chemicals were very powerful. If the skin is brought in contact with them, enough will be absorbed to affect the liver, causing an increased production of biliary pigment."

Monk blinked. "So what?"

"The biliary pigment will be absorbed in the blood, resulting in a yellow condition of the skin. In other words, the Green Bell, in touching that wooden fragment, merely contracted an excellent case of yellow jaundice."

Monk all but choked. "You mean—whoever picked up that wood will start turnin' yellow?"

"Exactly! All we have to do is set back, keep from getting killed, and wait for somebody to turn yellow."

"How long'll it take?"

"That is difficult to say. It depends on the individual. A day; perhaps a week. Not over that!"

Chapter XVIII

LULL

THE rest of the night was uneventful. Dawn brought an airplane from New York—a small, speedy machine from Doc Savage's private hangar on the Hudson River.

The dapper Ham stepped out of it. He lost no time making his way to Aunt Nora Boston's home.

The only article of baggage which accompanied him was his slender, innocent-looking black sword cane.

Monk observed Ham's arrival from within the house, and grinned from ear to ear. He had missed his usual diversion of insulting Ham.

Putting a black scowl on his homely face, Monk hurried out.

"Listen, shyster, you had orders to stay in New York!" he growled. "What's the idea of showin' up down here?"

Ham caught sight of pretty Alice Cash. He dressed Monk down with a cold look, swung over jauntily, and bowed to the young lady.

"You are more ravishing than ever!" he assured Alice.

Monk writhed mentally. He usually told pretty young women that Ham had a wife and thirteen children, all halfwits. But he had neglected to tell Alice the yarn. He'd better spill it in a hurry!

Ham guided Alice into the house, where Doc was studying the geology maps of Prosper City's vicinity.

"The murder charge against you in New York is all washed up!" Ham declared.

"How'd you work it?" Doc inquired.

"Simply by putting the fear of Old Nick into the four lying witnesses! I dug up some stuff in their past—burglary and blackmail. That did the trick! They broke down and confessed that they were hired to say they saw you kill Jim Cash!"

Alice Cash flinched at mention of her brother's murder, and left the room hastily. Ham, glancing out of the window a moment later, saw Monk with an arm across her shoulder. Monk was an excellent comforter, especially if the grieved one was as good-looking as Alice was. Ham groaned.

"Who hired the four?" Doc asked.

"They didn't see the fellow's face. He wore one of those trick gowns with a green bell painted on it."

Doc nodded. "Rather thought it would be like that. What did you do with the four?"

Ham smiled fiercely and fiddled with his sword cane. "Got them out on bail when the cops arrested 'em for lodgin' that false charge; then grabbed 'em and sent 'em to our little place in upstate New York."

"Good work!"

After a glance about, Ham grunted: "I see everybody but Long Tom. Where's he?"

"Hiding out," Doc replied. "He has his apparatus all set to locate the Green Bell's secret radio station, once the thing goes into operation."

"I hope he finds it quick," Ham grinned. "I crave some action! That business in New York didn't get me warmed up!"

AS the hours dragged, however, it seemed Ham was to see no action. The Green Bell and his hirelings made no hostile move. Judborn Tugg did not put in an appearance.

The day was marked with events of great interest for Prosper City, however. Practically all factories opened. The mines, as well!

Renny, with his vast fund of knowledge concerning engineering in all its branches, took active charge of this work. He organized crews, demoralized by the recent troubles and inactivity.

Since Doc intended to put the plants on a profitable basis, Renny's work was not easy. In the first place, a high wage scale was introduced in every department of each concern. This made economy of production a prime necessity.

Monk stationed his ex-service men guards over each plant, and made the rounds like a general, keeping things in form.

If he expected trouble, though, he was disappointed. Not a Green Bell agitator put in an appearance. Peace reigned. All was quiet.

"But it's kinda like the quiet of a guy who is aimin' his gun!" Monk muttered pessimistically.

Doc Savage set Ham to work clearing up the final legal details of the deal by which Prosper City's industries were being taken over, literally in the whole. When that was done, Doc visited the ramshackle old barn on the marsh.

He took particular notice that this was hardly more than three quarters of a mile from Aunt Nora Boston's home.

The bronze man did nothing while he was there, except drop a firecracker down the vertical pipe through which the Green Bell had addressed his men. He listened with great interest to the hollow reverberations as the cracker let loose, possibly two hundred and fifty feet below.

These sepulchral echoes seemed to rumble and gobble for fully a minute.

Leaving the spot, Doc visited the men who had suffered more than any others from the trouble in Prosper City—the poor souls who had been driven insane by the Green Bell's sonic machine.

He made a detailed examination in each case, using X rays, blood tests, spinal-fluid tests—almost every test known to medical science.

Late that afternoon, he made his announcement.

"Sections of the brain are merely in a quiescent state—a form of nerve paralysis induced by the disrupting force of the sonic vibrations."

"Will you put that in plain English?" Aunt Nora requested.

“They can be cured,” Doc replied. “It’ll take a little time. But there’s not the slightest doubt.”

Aunt Nora Boston sat down and cried.

“I never did tell you,” she said moistly. “But one of the afflicted men is a nephew of mine.”

While Doc was telephoning to New York, Chicago, Rochester, and other great medical centers, for specialists to take personal charge of the brain cures, Alice Cash offered her services.

“That’s great!” Doc replied. “You can sort of look out for these cases.”

“I’ve been watching your work,” Alice told him thoughtfully. “I notice from the way you are organizing it that you are putting others in actual charge. Even Renny, the engineer, is serving merely as a supervisor. What does that mean?”

“Simply that we are going to step out as soon as the danger is past!”

“You mean that you are going to leave Prosper City?” Alice Cash sounded slightly stricken.

“You didn’t expect us to remain here? Not, of course, that Prosper City isn’t as nice a town as the average.”

Alice flushed. “I—I was hoping you would.”

DOC SAVAGE saw how the wind was blowing. The young lady was more interested in him than he wished. Unwillingly, he had made another conquest, or was on the verge of making it.

This pained Doc. He did not care to hurt any one’s feelings. So he did something that he rarely did. He took off an hour and explained his strange purpose in life—his life profession of going up and down the trails of the world, hunting trouble and peril, helping those in need of help, and administering punishment to wrongdoers.

He made it very clear to his beautiful listener that such a life precluded any feminine entanglements. When he finished, he believed he had painted such a picture of horror and danger that a female heart would quail at the thought of sharing them. He thought he had scared this gorgeous young woman off.

“What you need is a loving wife to attend to your needs,” pretty Alice Cash said warmly. She did not say that she would like the job, but it was in her voice.

Doc mentally threw up his hands. What could you do in a case like that?

He got away as quickly and gracefully as he could, sought a secluded spot, and went through the round of exercises which he had taken each day.

They were unlike anything else, those exercises. Doc’s father had started him on them when he could hardly walk. They were solely responsible for his phenomenal physical and mental powers.

He made his muscles work against each other, straining until perspiration filmed his mighty bronze body. He juggled a number of a dozen figures in his head, multiplying, extracting square and cube roots.

He had an apparatus which made sound waves of frequencies so high and so low the ordinary human ear could not detect them. He listened intently to this—his

proficiency along that line had already saved his life on this adventure.

He named several score of assorted odors after a quick olfactory test of small vials racked in a special case. He read pages of Braille print—writing of the blind. This whetted his sense of touch.

Many and varied other parts were in his routine. They filled an entire two hours at a terrific pace, with no time out for rest.

Monk and Ham came upon Doc as he finished.

Monk groaned. “Think of doin’ that every day!”

Ham sneered audibly. “You, I suppose, don’t take exercises?”

Monk flexed his hairy arms. “Some of these days I’m gonna have a workout on you! That’s the one exercise I need!”

Unsheathing his sword cane, Ham flicked it. The fine blade twanged like a guitar string.

“Try it, and I’ll do some sculpture work on you with this!” he promised.

The two glared at each other as it they had murder in their hearts.

“What’s the trouble?” Doc questioned.

“This furry, lying dead beat!” Ham purpled and jabbed his sword at Monk. “He told Alice Cash that yarn about my wife and thirteen half-wit children! The missing link! I’ve never had a wife!”

AT nine o’clock that night, there was to be a meeting at Aunt Nora Boston’s. Heads of all plants in Prosper City—now actually in charge—were to attend.

At eight thirty, Alice Cash turned on Aunt Nora’s radio.

Ten minutes later, the Green Bell’s hideous clangor, squealing, and wailing, came from the instrument.

“I know it!” Monk yelled. “We’re in for real trouble!”

From Doc Savage’s actions, it seemed he had been waiting for just this. He raced upstairs to Long Tom’s room. When he came back, he carried two small boxes. One was a radio transmitter, a tiny portable set. The other was a receiver.

Doc gave the receiver to Monk. “Keep tuned in on this! Clamp the headset on that knot of a head, and don’t take it off for anything!”

The telephone rang. It was Long Tom.

“My equipment got the source of that secret radio wave!” he barked excitedly. “It came from Aunt Nora Boston’s house!”

“It what?”

“From Aunt Nora’s! I can’t believe it! But it’s a fact.”

Doc hung up, faced Renny. “Where’s Aunt Nora?”

“Dunno! Ain’t seen her for a few minutes!”

The maps which Johnny had secured lay on a table. Doc seized them, carried them with him as he ran out of the house. He also bore the radio transmitter.

Doc consulted the charts, then headed due east, mounting the slope of the mountain. After covering a few hundred yards, he added stealth to his pace. He moved with the quiet of a windblown feather.

Blackened knots of buildings lurched up in the moonlight ahead. He eyed the maps once more, identifying the structures.

They were surface buildings of a coal mine—a mine which had been closed for several years, the veins below exhausted. For years, however, it had been the largest mine in Prosper City; at one time, it had led the nation in coal output.

Doc posted himself near by and waited. He was not disappointed.

A group of seven furtive figures crept up. They wore the hideous black gowns of the Green Bell. They disappeared into the maw of the mine.

Other men came, two of them, this time. Then three fellows arrived alone. Eight were in the next group.

The evil clan was gathering.

Doc waited until there came an interval of five minutes when no sinister men put in an appearance. Then he entered the black gullet of the mine.

The tunnel was exceedingly dry for an old working. It sloped downward. Doc sought a recess and used his flashlight on the maps. One of the charts showed every cranny of this particular abandoned mine.

When the tunnel branched, he turned left. The tunnel swept in a vast curve. Doc knew—the map showed it, too—that he was approaching a spot directly under Aunt Nora Boston's house.

He slackened his pace. The drift was long and straight—fully three hundred yards without a turn. A bullet could be fired the length of it without touching a wall.

He covered this direct lane.

Lights appeared ahead. A moment later, he was peering out into a great room. Pillars—coal left standing to support the roof—were a forest before his eyes.

In this forest, black-cowled men were clustered.

Chapter XIX

DEATH UNDERGROUND

ENTERING the underground cavern, Doc glided forward. There was not much chance of discovery. The Green Bell and his men thought themselves safe here.

The Green Bell was present—in person! He sat, cross-legged, as the dummy of sticks and fabric in the distant barn had sat. No doubt some of the masked men before him did not know there was a difference between this figure they were looking upon now, and the form in the dilapidated farm building.

The dummy in the barn! It was that which had given Doc his lead to this underground rendezvous. The pipe diving straight downward two hundred and fifty feet, from which the evil czar's voice had come! It could lead to nothing but a mine tunnel!

Geology maps of the region had shown that a sheet of hard rock underlay the swampy field. The presence of the rock, a great bowl holding water, accounted for the moist nature of the field itself.

And the map of this old mine showed a drift under the swamp. The Green Bell had simply drilled a hole and forced his pipe upward, not a difficult task. Hydraulic jacks and a driving-head on the pipe would do the work.

The Green Bell was speaking.

“Are all of you here?” he boomed hollowly. “That is important, to-night! There must be no absentees! For on our work to-night depends success or failure!”

There was a general wagging of fingers as a count was made.

“Unmask!” commanded the Green Bell. “We must be certain!”

The black hoods came off, some a bit reluctantly. Flashlights furnished a glow sufficient to inspect the faces.

Doc surveyed them with interest. Three men were, he saw to his disgust, fairly prominent factory owners of Prosper City. It was these men who had objected most strenuously to his proposition to take over all plants.

Collison McAlter was not among them.

The Green Bell himself did not remove his hood. He stared, goggled green eyes malicious, glittering in the flash glare.

“All here!” he decided. “Now, we will get down to work!”

The Green Bell arose, strode through the ring of men, and vanished into the blacker reaches of the cavern. A chain rattled.

When the masked leader appeared again, he was leading a forlorn, manacled figure. Judborn Tugg! Tugg's face bore numerous bruises and cuts: dried crimson stains were on his clothing, his hair. His nose seemed to be damaged much more than it had been by Long Tom's blows. Most of his front teeth were missing.

Tugg had obviously been tortured.

“This worm!” intoned the Green Bell, kicking Tugg. “This worm was an unfaithful servant!”

Tugg blubbered: “I couldn’t help it if——”

“Shut up! You would have betrayed me! That is regrettable. You were to be the mainstay of the industrial empire which I intend to build, with Prosper City as its center! You were to have been the apparent head of all my enterprises!”

The Green Bell’s voice became a shrill tinkling, and he delivered another forceful kick.

“It was through you that I intended to buy all the factories and mines in Prosper City, once I had reduced the owners to a point where they would have to sell for a song!”

THIS information did not surprise Doc. He had surmised that such a scheme was behind the Prosper City trouble. This man, the Green Bell, had money, a lust for more money—a scheming brain. The combination had launched him on this plan of forcing a whole city into bankruptcy, then buying its factories for a pittance.

“You were a fool to go against me!” the Green Bell snarled at Tugg. “I am powerful! I have millions, made by selling stocks short during the great depression! I will have more millions—billions!”

Tugg moaned. “Lemme go, won’t you? I can’t harm you! I’ve signed over every stick of my property to you!”

“Not to me!” The Green Bell turned, pointed a black-sheathed arm at one of the Prosper City business men, and said: “You, sir, may not know it, but you are now the owner of Tugg & Co. This—this gaudy worm signed his entire holdings over to you for a consideration of one dollar! Incidentally, I will now pay him the dollar!”

The Green Bell produced a bit of silver from his gown, using his left hand. He bent over and offered this to Tugg. His right hand remained out of sight in the robe.

Poor Tugg did not know what to do, except take the dollar. He reached for it.

Like a striking black cobra, the Green Bell whipped out a knife with his other hand. He ran the blade into Tugg’s heart. The steel went in easily, as if it had been a hot wire making its way into grease.

Tugg emitted one piercing, lamblike bleat, then began to kick around convulsively on the floor.

The Green Bell put a foot on Tugg’s squirming form and held it steady until all movements had ceased. Then he stepped back.

“You may wonder why I did not shoot him, and why I held him still!” he tolled monotonously. He leveled an arm. “Look! There is the explanation!”

To one side, a small tunnel penetrated. Evidently it had been drifted there long ago, in pursuit of some wisp of coal which had dribbled out.

“There is a room in that tunnel!” said the Green Bell. “It is only a few yards from this chamber. It holds the powerful radio set with which it has been my custom to summon you!”

Doc nodded slightly, where he was concealed in the gloom. This explained why the radio signals had apparently been traced to Aunt Nora Boston's! The room was directly under her house!

"Also, in that room are some thousands of quarts of nitroglycerin!" continued the Green Bell. "It is connected to electrical contacts rigged on a seismograph. Do you know what a seismograph is?"

"A jigger which wiggles when there's an earthquake!" some one muttered.

"That is an excellent description. The contacts are on the jigger which wiggles, as you call it. Any large shock in the earth near by will cause the explosive to detonate."

There was much uneasy squirming at this information.

"Do not worry!" boomed the voice of the robed man. "The seismograph is adjusted so no distant earthquake will operate it. Only a shock near by will close the contacts. Such a shock will be the explosion of a small quantity of nitro approximately half a mile from here, which I will arrange."

A hideous laugh gurgled from the lips of the cowed figure who had murdered Tugg so callously.

"Aunt Nora Boston's home is directly above this cache of explosive! Not many yards above it, either! The house and every one in it will be blown to bits!"

DOC SAVAGE silently unlimbered the radio transmitter. The thing operated without noise, except for the faintest of clickings as he vibrated the key.

The radio waves, of course, would travel through the intervening earth and stone to Monk's portable receiver.

"Is this—necessary?" quavered one of the assembled men.

The Green Bell cursed. "Necessary! Of course it is! It's imperative that we get rid of Savage and the others at once! The devil is clever! To-morrow he will trap me!"

"To-morrow——"

"Exactly!"

"But how can he?"

"Shut up!" excitedly boomed the hooded leader.

Doc had finished transmitting, and was listening with great interest. He knew why the Green Bell was positive he would be trapped.

The fellow had found his skin was turning yellow! He had realized that Doc's maneuvering with the segment of the sonic box, the night before, had been a trick.

"I called you here to-night to warn you all to keep away from Aunt Nora Boston's house," said the Green Bell. "Now that the orders are given, you may go!"

As one man, the crowd whirled for the exit.

This took Doc somewhat by surprise. He was given no opportunity to circle the group, so as to remain in the cavern and disconnect the seismograph device. The only thing he could do was to retreat into the tunnel.

He sidled into it. Down the long, straight shaft he sped. Three hundred yards without a turn! He would have to cover that distance before the men behind him cast

their flashlights down the passage. He ran as he had seldom run before.

He failed to make it.

A powerful flash scooted a white beam along the straight drift.

A yell! "Savage—it's Savage! There he goes!"

The next instant Doc seemed to become a bullet in a giant barrel of rock! Lifted by an irresistible force, he was hurled ahead. His eardrums threatened to cave!

Landing, he knotted himself like a circus tumbler. He was helpless to impede his progress. He was pushed from behind by a blast which might have been from a monster air gun!

Rock walls battered him! Dust, boulders, sprayed against him, past him! He crashed into the cross passage and dropped, almost unconscious. All of mother earth seemed to come down on his head!

One of the Green Bell's gang had forgotten the seismograph and the nitro, and had fired a bullet at Doc. The detonation had loosened the explosive.

Even now, the segments of Aunt Nora Boston's rambling, charming old home were probably floating around some hundreds of feet in the air. Any one in it would be dead.

Dead as those black-cowled men back there in the underground room! There was no possibility that any of them had survived. The sinister czar, who had chosen a green bell for his symbol, was dead—wiped out by his own death device.

His was a fate which had overtaken more than one enemy of Doc Savage.

TEN minutes later, Doc stumbled out of the abandoned mine. He did not feel like coming, even then. He was bruised, battered, damaged as he had seldom been in his life. But deadly gases were loose in the mine, and he had to get out.

Half an hour later, he encountered Monk.

The homely gorilla of a fellow stared at Doc's injuries.

"It looks like you caught yourself an earthquake," he suggested.

"How about the others?" Doc demanded.

"Them—they all got out, after you sent your radio warning, telling them to do so as quick as possible." Monk chuckled mirthfully. "Poor Ham! The overdressed shyster lost his sword cane in the rush. He was about to start back after it when the whole world blew up!"

"How did Aunt Nora take the loss of her house?"

"Swell! She said it was an old wreck that she'd been tryin' to sell for years, anyway!"

"She's a brick!" Doc said, absently fingering various aching muscles. "We'll have to put her in charge of charities here in Prosper City. Of course, we'll reimburse her for her house, and the money she spent on charity before we got on the job."

"She'd go for that," Monk agreed. "But you're forgettin' to tell me what happened down there under the ground."

Doc sketched briefly what had occurred.

“The Green Bell and every one of his followers is finished,” he ended. “In a few days we can turn those factories back to their owners and clear out.”

“You sound anxious to get away?” Monk said slyly, thinking of ravishingly pretty Alice Cash.

“Well, we should get back to New York,” Doc told him. “Something may come up—it always does.”

Doc’s statement was only a guess, based on the past. He had no way of knowing what awaited them in New York, not being gifted with an inner sight. But it would be there—trouble, peril, mystery! These had always come to them.

“So the Green Bell found his hide was turnin’ yellow?” Monk ruminated thoughtfully, as they moved through the night.

“There’s no doubt of it!” Doc agreed. “And that persuaded him to rush his devilish plan to completion.”

Monk grinned. “Ain’t you gonna tell me who he was?”

“I didn’t get a look at his face!” Doc said dryly.

“You mean we’ve cleaned this case up without knowin’ who he was?”

“I think his identity will come out. It is pretty plain who he was.”

“How d’you figure that?”

“Simply from the uncanny way the Green Bell had of knowing our every move. He was very close to us.”

They had been striding down the road as they talked.

Pretty Alice Cash appeared. She showed relief at sight of Doc; then registered concern over his bruises.

“Have you seen Aunt Nora?” she asked, a moment later.

“She’s around somewhere—I saw her a minute ago,” Monk replied. “What’d you want with her? Important?”

“Well, not very,” replied Alice. “I wanted to ask her if she had seen Ole Slater.”

“Ain’t Ole around?”

“No. And I’m curious. You see, Ole seemed a bit ill this evening, when I last saw him.”

Monk gulped twice, swallowed, exploded: “What ailed him? Was he turnin’ a funny color?”

“Ole Slater seemed to be turning yellow,” Alice said. “It was the strangest thing!”

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.

A cover was created for this eBook and is placed in the public domain.

A Table of Contents was created for this eBook for reader convenience.

[The end of *The Czar of Fear* by Lester Dent (as Kenneth Robeson)]