

The Other World

A Doc Savage Adventure
#29

Kenneth Robeson
[Lester Dent]
1939

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A DOC SAVAGE ADVENTURE

BY KENNETH ROBESON

THE OTHER WORLD

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THE OTHER WORLD

Chapter I

THE MYSTERIOUS FUR

WHEN the plane landed on a farmer's oat-stubble field in the Mississippi bottoms near St. Louis, the time was around ten in the morning.

The farmer had turned his cattle on to the stubble field to graze, and among the animals was a rogue bull which was a horned devil with strangers.

This bull charged the aviator.

The flier then killed the bull with a spear.

Naturally, the farmer who owned the bull was astounded. The farmer happened to be watching, and his astonishment came not so much from the fact that the aviator killed the bull; if the flier had drawn a gun and shot the animal, the farmer would not have been surprised. The spear was the astonishing item.

The spear was small—seven feet or so in length, not very heavy. When hurling the spear the flier used a peculiar device, a stick about the length of his arm, equipped at one end with two thong loops for the forefingers, so that it could be clasped very tightly, while the other end of the stick was forked to grip the spear shaft. With this device, the spear could be thrown with great force, as a rock is hurled from the split end of a stick. There was something primitive about it.

“Hey!” The farmer dashed into the oat field. “You all right?”

“I'm extremely sorry,” the flier said.

“About the bull? Hell, that's all right” The farmer wiped off perspiration. “Brother, we been afraid that ox was gonna gore somebody.”

The flier said, “I shall pay you for the animal, of course.”

The farmer's eyes began to pop with astonishment as he eyed the aviator. “I'll be jiggered!” he said.

Because he had been a little astonished over the business of the bull, the farmer had failed to particularly notice the flier's clothing.

“Bless my boots!” the farmer muttered.

The flier's garments—skin tight trousers, very loose coat-blouse—seemed to be made of buckskin, or animal hide of similar nature. Further, his feet were shod in a covering that the farmer at first thought was steel, but later concluded must be some metal more nearly like aluminum. This metal footgear was solid, after the fashion of Dutch wooden shoes.

“I shall,” repeated the flier, “pay you for the animal.”

The farmer was not too surprised over the pilot's appearance to overlook a dollar. “Well now,” he said, “he was a pretty good bull. Thoroughbred. I can show you the papers on him.”

“Unfortunately, you will have to wait a few days for the money.”

“Eh?”

“I will leave my plane here,” the pilot said, “and be gone two or three days. Then I shall return and pay you.”

The farmer had noticed by this time that the man was having some difficulty with his speech, as if he had not spoken English for a long time, or had recently learned it.

Since an airplane was obviously more valuable than a bull, hence good security, the farmer said: “Sure. That’s all right.”

The flier took a large bundle from the plane—a package about three feet square, wrapped in the same type of skin from which his clothing was made, and equipped with packstraps for carrying.

“As I said,” the aviator remarked, “I shall return later.”

He walked across the oat stubble and disappeared into a woods.

The prominence of St. Louis as a fur-buying center, while possibly not fully known to the public, is an appreciated fact by the fur industry, a multitude of dealers in raw skins converging on the city during the season to dicker for pelts. Mink, raccoon and skunk from the Middle West. Muskrat from Louisiana. Fox from the Hudson Bay. Wolf from the Rockies. Chinchilla from South America.

The flier got a laugh when he walked into the market rooms. A rather contemptuous glance or two, as well. Some of them figured, from his skin clothing, that he was a nut.

“Dan’l Boone come to town,” someone said, and snickered.

The flier’s unusual metal shoes made a loud noise on the tiled floor as he crossed to an exhibition table, upon which he lowered his bundle. Before he opened his bundle, he made a speech. Not a long one.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “you can buy these furs for five thousand a skin.”

Someone laughed at that, but there was no mirth after the man opened his bundle and spread out the contents, slowly and proudly, handling them as though each was a jewel as fragile as a cobweb.

“Holy cats!” someone said.

They weren’t cat hides, but something else, something incredible. A fur so luxurious, with such subtle coloring and quality, that the buyers were stunned. A man stepped forward, held one of the skins up and stroked it with his hand, and it was indeed as if a fabulous jewel were being shown. Fur men came to the spot, magnetized by such a fur as they hadn’t dreamed existed.

A fur man said, “Who owns that dyeing process? My firm will pay plenty for it.”

The man who was holding up the pelt studied the fur closely.

“Not dyed,” he said.

“You’re crazy. There’s no animal with fur like that.”

They gathered around the table. They were not passing the skins about but touching them reverently.

“How much did you say?” a man asked the flier.

“Five thousand a skin.”

“Dollars?”

“Yes.”

The other laughed. “Be yourself, guy. Chinchilla is the most expensive fur in the world, and it doesn’t bring that.”

The aviator did not seem impressed. “And what makes Chinchilla cost?”

“Scarcity. The animals are getting rare—”

“Not as rare as these.” The flier held up his hand and silence fell; they listened to him speaking in his strangely difficult fashion. “You see here,” he said, “a collection of skins which is complete. And by complete, I mean that in this pile here are all the skins of this animal that you will find in the world, and there will be no more such skins. Never. I have twenty-seven skins here, and there will never be any more.”

“You mean,” put in a new voice, “that no more of that particular fur you’ve got there will ever come on the market?”

“Exactly,” said the flier.

“Why not?”

The flier seemed, judging from his hesitation, reluctant about answering that question.

“Because,” he said finally, “there are no more of the animals. I killed and skinned them all. Their pelts are here.”

“Just who are you, anyhow?”

“My name,” the flier said, “is Tercio.”

“Tercio?”

“Decimo Tercio, yes.”

“And you’re from——?”

“That,” advised Decimo Tercio, “is not your business.”

The man who had taken up the questioning of Decimo Tercio stepped back and showed his teeth unpleasantly. He was a dealer specializing in sealskins, and he somewhat resembled one of the animals himself, particularly about the countenance. His face was equipped with a pair of large dark pop eyes.

Someone whispered to a companion, “It didn’t take that Tercio, whoever he is, very long to get Two Wink’s number.”

“Is Two Wink a crook?”

“He hasn’t been caught at it.”

There were no fireworks. Two Wink Danton merely scowled, growled, “I just asked you a civil question,” and walked away. He went directly to his office, wasting no time.

Gerald Evan Two Wink Danton was not particularly liked on the fur exchange, nor was there anything definite to account for this. The man had a rather long nose as far as other people’s business was concerned, his principal interest apparently being directed toward becoming an encyclopedia of gossip. However, he was like a blotter where gossip was concerned; he absorbed, but did not give forth. Which wasn’t so bad.

Danton’s nickname of Two Wink came from his habitual bidding gesture. During fur auctions, when large numbers of bidders are gathered before the auctioneer, bidding is usually done by giving slight signals—the lifting of a finger, the tilting of a cigarette,

a tug at an ear with the fingers. Danton invariably winked twice, and if there was any secretive intent about the gesture, it was futile, the man's pop eyes making a double wink quite noticeable. He might as well have jumped up and waved both arms.

Two Wink dived into his office and sent an excited bark at his stenographer.

"Where's them two fur samples?" he rapped.

"What samples?" the girl asked nervously.

"The two that were left with me about three years ago. The men wanted to be notified if any similar fur appeared on the market. Offered me five hundred dollars reward if I found a similar fur on the market and notified them."

"Oh, that." The girl went into an adjacent room and soon came back with two envelopes.

Each envelope bore a name and address, and each contained a small piece of fur. One of these bits of fur was worn somewhat more than the other, but there was no doubt but that they were of identical type.

Two Wink carried the two fragments of fur back to the display room and, without doing anything that drew attention to himself, carefully compared the two bits with the pelts which Decimo Tercio was attempting to sell for five thousand dollars each.

It had now become apparent that Decimo Tercio stood a very good chance of getting five thousand dollars apiece for the skins. Someone had already offered twenty-five hundred, providing examination showed that the skins were genuine and not a clever piece of manufacturing.

Two Wink listened to the bidding, and he was very thoughtful when he went back to his office. Several things were on his mind. This Decimo Tercio was a strange fellow, and his clothing was even more unusual. The buckskin pants, as snug as an acrobat's tights. More particularly, the metal shoes that served him as footgear.

"You know," muttered Two Wink, "I think there's something queer about this."

"What did you say?" asked the stenographer.

"Never mind."

Two Wink went into his private sanctum and had a silent argument with himself. On one side of the argument was a conviction, rather vague now but growing stronger, that there might be a great deal of money to be made if a properly interested fellow who played his cards right, such as Two Wink considered himself capable of doing, could get hold of breeding pairs of the animals which had produced that amazing new fur. On the other side of the argument stood one thousand perfectly good dollars, five hundred each from two men who had offered the sums as a reward to be notified if such a fur as this appeared on the market.

The philosophy of a bird in the hand beating two in the bush eventually won out in Two Wink's mind, so he telegraphed the two men who had offered the rewards.

One telegram recipient was named Arnold Columbus.

The other was named Wilmer Fancife.

Both of them were in New York City, although at different addresses.

Chapter II

THE QUARRELSOME MEN

THE fight at the airport that evening was a honey. The hostess saw it start. Two of her passengers—they had not left their seats during the nonstop flight from New York, had boarded the plane separately in Newark, hence obviously neither had known the other was aboard—arose to leave their seats after the big sky cruiser landed in St. Louis. The instant they saw each other, fireworks started.

One man was young, not far beyond late college age; he had the body of a young blacksmith, hair as yellow as a new oat shock, a rather grim expression.

The other fellow was a tough fat man. His mouth looked as if it had been made carelessly with a hatchet. Nature had not given him much of a nose, and this donation had been hammered upon until it had somewhat the appearance of a large wart. He was cross-eyed. His skin gave the impression of having been appropriated from a rhinoceros.

The fat man saw the young one first. He was carrying a suitcase, which he immediately lifted and crashed down on the young man's head. The case split and clothing erupted.

The young man was, jarred down on his knees, but he got up and wheeled around to face his assailant.

"Fancife!" he yelled.

He lunged in, hooked a fist to the fat man's ribs. He might as well have slugged a draft horse. The fat man was tough.

The young man was no lily. He made a roaring noise, waded in. He slugged and got slugged. The two men fell on the plane floor amid the litter of Fancife's suitcase.

Seizing a necktie, the young man wrapped it around Fancife's neck like a garrote cord, and tied a hard knot in it. Fancife got an extra shoe that had been in the case, pounded the young man between the eyes, loosened him.

The thing became serious. Fancife snatched up a razor, tried to cut the other's throat. He failed. The foe got a belt, began whipping the other across the eyes, finally jerked the razor out of his hand.

Fancife began turning purple, due to the knotted tie about his neck.

The co-pilot—the hostess had been screaming ineffectually for them to stop it—came rushing back and tried to part the men. He made progress for a moment, then got two teeth kicked down his throat. He doubled over, coughed up the teeth, and as mad as either combatant, he rushed forward to hunt a wrench.

The fat man, Fancife, had started the fight with confidence. By now, he was changing his mind. The younger man was fighting with a fury that was maniacal.

Fancife snatched up a bottle of rubbing alcohol and struck the younger man on the forehead with it. The bottle broke, not harming the victim greatly. But the alcohol ran

down into the young man's eyes, making stinging blindness.

Fancife took advantage of his foe's blindness to get out of the plane and run.

Tearing off the throttling necktie as he raced past the airport waiting room, Fancife vaulted a low steel-wire fence, reached a taxicab. He did not waste time. He reached into the cab, clutched the astonished driver by the coat, slugged him on the jaw and made him senseless, then dumped him on the ground. The cab leaped away, tires throwing gravel, Fancife at the wheel.

En route into town, Fancife proved that the taxicab could do eighty. Later, he abandoned the cab, straightened his ruffled clothing, and caught another hack in a conventional fashion. He changed cabs twice thereafter.

Between one of the cab changes, Fancife looked up the residence address of Gerald Evan Two Wink Danton.

Two Wink Danton, being owner of a vinegary disposition and a completely selfish nature, had always lived alone. At present he occupied a rat trap of an apartment—he was also as stingy as Scrooge—in a part of town that was down at the heels. The living room was lighted inadequately by a twenty-watt bulb dangling on the end of a cord from the center of the ceiling, and by this bad light, he surveyed his visitor. He did not immediately recognize the other.

“Who—what——?” Then he understood. “Oh, it's Mr. Wilmer Fancife.”

“Hello, Two Wink,” Fancife said.

“You got my telegram, I guess. But I wasn't expecting you so soon.”

Fancife began coughing and put his hand to his chest as if in pain; when he took the hand away, there was a large blue gun in it.

“You weren't expecting this either, probably.” Fancife wagged the gun. “I hope you understand what happens when these things go off at a man.”

“What's the idea?”

“We've got to get away from here in a hurry. It just happens there isn't time for explanations, hence the gun.”

Two Wink was not without judgment, so he walked down to the street meekly, and even said, “I have my car handy, if you would prefer we take that.”

“Let's.”

Two Wink drove out toward Forest Park, the park being one of his preferred haunts because it was free. Fancife rode silently, holding the gun against his ample keg of a stomach, pointed at Two Wink.

“I fail to understand this at all,” Two Wink said finally.

“My hurry to take you with me, you mean?” Fancife made a noise that did not contain enough humor to be a laugh. “That was because somebody besides me could read the telephone book.”

“I still don't get it.”

“You don't?”

“Slightly less than three years ago,” Two Wink said thoughtfully, “you came to me and gave me a small piece of fur, a wonderful fur of a type that was totally unknown to me. You offered a five hundred dollar reward to be notified if pelts of such a fur appeared on the St. Louis market. Today, such pelts did appear. I wired you, and you rush here by plane. You must have come by plane.”

Fancife said, “Would it puzzle you more to know that I had left samples of that fur at every major fur center in the world, together with the same reward offer?”

“It strikes me as strange.”

“It’ll have to keep on striking you as strange, then.”

“What do you mean?”

Fancife apparently decided he no longer needed his gun, and he put it back in the underarm holster from which he had taken it.

“All you’ve got to do with this is produce information,” Fancife explained. “I want to know who brought the furs today, and where I can find the person.”

“Wasn’t there something said about five hundred?”

Fancife reached into his hip pocket for a billfold and began counting out twenty-dollar bills.

“You’ll get it,” he said.

Two Wink casually reached into his coat and a moment later Fancife was looking into the threatening twin maws of a large-caliber derringer.

“I’m afraid I’ll need more than five hundred,” Two Wink said.

The two men examined each other during tense moments while Two Wink brought the car to a stop near a street light in a deserted section of the park. Each one saw that the other was not afraid, and a mutual respect sprang up between them.

“I didn’t figure you would have a gun,” Fancife said disgustedly.

“I did have, you see.”

The strained silence continued. There was no noise other than the muttering of the engine and the ticking of a valve tappet. Breeze moved the park trees, and leaves cast squirming clusters of shadow.

“Well?” Fancife said questioningly.

“I can see only one answer to this,” Two Wink said thoughtfully. “Someone has bred a new type of fur-bearing animal, and skins of that animal were offered on the market today. That fur, if a man had had a monopoly, would be worth millions. So I want in. I’m no hog.”

“What do you mean—no hog?”

“I want fifty per cent. Half.”

Fancife chewed his lower lip. He was thinking. “And if there was more to it than just a new fur-bearing animal?”

“Half. Still half.”

Fancife continued thoughtful, until finally he drew in a deep breath.

“I like your style.” He scowled at Two Wink. “I don’t think I would care much for you personally, but you don’t handle yourself bad. I could use you.”

Two Wink said frankly, “I was just thinking the same thing. We might do each other some good.”

There was a silence. Then, without further speech, with no other manifestation, they shook hands to seal the bargain. Another silence followed, for they were both somewhat surprised, suddenly realizing that they understood each other fully, that their minds worked in exactly the same fashion, so that each seemed to know exactly what the other thought and intended to do. It was almost uncanny.

“We should make a team,” Fancife said.

Two Wink put away his derringer, admitted, “Yes, we should.”

“Our first move,” Fancife announced, “is to get hold of the man who brought those furs to St. Louis. And the next move,” added Fancife, “will be to get rid of a fellow named Columbus.”

Chapter III

THE GANG-UP

THE yellow-haired young man who was built like a blacksmith was having his troubles.

The airplane stewardess said, "I saw the fight begin, and he didn't start it. The other man hit him first."

The policeman asked, "Who kicked your teeth out?"

"The other one," admitted the co-pilot. "Not this fellow, but the one who got away."

The yellow-haired young man made an impatient gesture with his large, strong-fingered hands, then gave a convincing speech.

"So why not turn me loose?" he argued. "This fellow attacked me and I simply defended myself, so the fracas was not my fault. I didn't even know the man, therefore he must have been a nut of some kind. You better be devoting your time to finding him. Why, he's probably a crazy man running around loose, a menace to humanity."

The policeman said, "You didn't even know him?"

"My name," said the young man who had furnished half the fight, "is Arnold Columbus, but naturally I get called Chris Columbus. I'm from New York. I'm a fur specialist, and I frequently travel to remote parts of the world. You're liable to run into me inside the Arctic Circle hunting unusual sealskins, or you might find me in the Andes Mountains dickering for a catch of special chinchilla. I was simply coming to St. Louis on business, and this fellow attacked me."

"According to the plane company records, the other man's name was Wilmer Fancife," the policeman explained. "You say you never knew a Wilmer Fancife before?"

Chris Columbus lied without batting an eye.

"Never heard of the cuss," he said.

The policeman thought it all over and came to a conclusion. "Thank you very much. Will you kindly keep in touch with us, in case something should develop?"

Chris Columbus grinned pleasantly and said, "I take it that I can leave now?"

"Yes. Where do you intend to stay?"

"The Ritz Hotel."

"Thank you."

Chris left the airport in a taxicab and did not go near the Ritz Hotel, visiting instead a tobacco shop which was open at this late hour. He examined the telephone directory for Gerald Evan Two Wink Danton's address. Having found the address, he rode to within two blocks of the spot in a taxicab, then alighted.

Chris told the taxi driver Two Wink Danton's address. He also gave the driver a five-dollar banknote.

“I want you to do me a favor,” Chris explained. “A friend of mine lives there, and he is very sociable indeed and he also likes his liquid refreshment, so I suspect he may be somewhat pixilated. If he is oiled, I doubtless will have trouble getting away from him without hurting his feelings, and there is where you come in. If I do not return in half an hour, say, you come to the door and knock and explain to whoever answers that there is a policeman downstairs and he is going to come up and get me if I don’t come down. I will tell my friend that I was pinched for speeding, and the cop is taking me to the bastille, but merely let me stop off to see my friend as a great favor.”

Chris Columbus was sometimes rather proud of his ability as a liar.

“It sounds kind of complicated,” said the taxi driver.

“But you’ll do it? There’s some more bucks in it for you.”

“Oh, sure. In half an hour.”

Chris Columbus listened intently outside Two Wink Danton’s door and heard a radio playing softly, and no other sound, so he knocked. The door soon opened.

“Hello, Mr. Two Wink Danton,” said Chris. “You alone?”

“Why, yes, by myself.” Two Wink stood back hospitably. “Come on in. I didn’t expect you to arrive so soon. I only sent my telegram slightly after noon today.”

“It doesn’t take much over six hours to come from New York to St. Louis by plane,” Chris said.

He walked in unsuspectingly, not realizing his mistake until Two Wink slammed the door and disclosed that Fancife had been standing behind the panel with a cocked gun ready in his right hand, and his left hand gripping a pillow with which to muffle noise of the gun, should it be necessary.

The glare Chris gave Fancife held such desperate fury and hate that the craggy fat man clapped the pillow over the muzzle of the gun, ready to fire.

“No!” Two Wink barked wildly. “Somebody’ll hear the shot, sure!”

Fancife snarled, “Get your hands up!”

Chris Columbus lifted his arms. His fists were clenched, his face drained of color, his mouth hate-twisted. He hated Fancife, it was obvious, more than anything else in the world.

Fancife added, “You tie him, Two Wink.”

Two Wink secured a cotton clothesline—he was such a skinflint, and cared so little for his personal appearance that he did his own laundry in the apartment—and bound the prisoner, showing an extensive knowledge of knots.

“Now a gag,” Fancife suggested.

Two Wink rammed a dishrag into Chris Columbus’ mouth, and over this tied a bath towel.

Then suddenly Two Wink looked at Fancife, exclaimed, “I just thought of something. That damned dog—and I’ve got some of the stuff left.”

“What has a dog got to do with it?”

“One of the neighbors had a dog, and the blasted thing always barked at me and kept me awake at night with howling. Once it bit me. So I got some chloroform, and

one night I caught the dog.”

“And you have some of the chloroform left?”

“Yes.”

“Get it.”

Two Wink had started worrying over his own suggestion by the time he came back with a chloroform bottle that was wide-necked and stoppered with a wadded rag.

“If we kill him,” he said hoarsely, “and they catch us, it might be kind of bad.”

“If we kill him and they don’t catch us,” advised Fancife, “we will both be millionaires.”

Two Wink was an amateur as far as murder was concerned. His hand began shaking, and somehow it occurred to his twisted mind that—if they were caught—his part of the crime might be held less heinous if he didn’t actually apply the lethal chloroform. He handed the bottle to Fancife.

“You do it,” he said shrilly.

Fancife said, “With a lot of pleasure,” and got down on his knees and poured the chloroform on the towel, running a small stream out until the bottle was entirely empty, and by the time he had finished the victim’s eyes were closed.

Fancife shoved Chris Columbus’ head, and there was looseness of unconsciousness in the neck.

“Now,” said Fancife, “where’s this fellow who brought the strange skins to St. Louis? What name did you say he used?”

“Decimo Tercio,” explained the white-faced Two Wink.

Two Wink was not enjoying his first participation in a murder.

Decimo Tercio had stopped at the Black Fox Hotel, which was in the fur district, an ancient hostelry constructed back in the days when a black fox skin was a rare and expensive article, before fur farming brought the price down to almost the level of a first-class dark mink pelt.

The Black Fox Hotel, although it had entertained its share of queer patrons—the guests had included shaggy trappers from Alaska and black lion hunters from Africa—was a hostelry that was somewhat agog. Decimo Tercio, with his buckskin suit and his metal shoes, was something different.

Two Wink and Fancife used a simple ruse.

“Will you advise Mr. Tercio,” said Two Wink, “that two fur buyers wish to see him. Two buyers who are perfectly willing to pay him five thousand dollars apiece for his skins, and take the whole lot.”

This admitted them to the fourth-floor room where Decimo Tercio had established himself.

Tercio was standing in the middle of the room—he merely called, “Come in,” and they entered—naked except for a towel which he had wrapped around his middle. They could not help but stare at him. He had a body of remarkable muscular development, and a skin marked by numerous scars. The scars were irregularly shaped, some much

larger than others. As if the man had been torn and mauled by animals, Two Wink reflected.

A new suit of ordinary clothing was lying on the bed, so it was evident Tercio was just preparing to change to civilized garb. The buckskin suit, together with the metal shoes, lay on the floor.

Fancife closed the door, then produced his gun.

“You know what this is?” he asked threateningly.

Tercio knew; he put up his arms.

“Look the place over,” Fancife ordered Two Wink. “We might find maps, which would make our job simple.”

Two Wink conducted an enthusiastic search. He was probably much more interested in finding something than his new partner, Fancife.

It had occurred to Two Wink that he really knew very little about the whole affair, and it made him uneasy. He had thrown his lot with Fancife, a comparative stranger, and had immediately taken part in a murder. He wondered if that didn’t make him a profound damn fool.

There were some pockets in Tercio’s skin garments, but they contained nothing.

“What kind of hide are these things made of?” Two Wink asked, puzzled.

“You’ll find out later,” Fancife said enigmatically.

Two Wink scowled and hefted the metal shoes. He found them very light, noticed also that the soles were scarred.

“What kind of metal is this?” he asked. “Never saw stuff like it before.”

“Hurry up the search,” Fancife said shortly.

In a bad humor, Two Wink completed his hunt, ending up with empty hands.

“Nothing,” he reported.

Fancife now addressed their prisoner, Tercio, in a tone that left nothing in doubt.

“You can get shot here,” Fancife said, “or you can do what you’re told, and live through it. You will put on your clothes. Those street clothes there, and not that rig you wore when you came out of—er—came to St. Louis. And you will come with us to a place where we can talk privately.”

Tercio, who had been scowling at them, asked, “Just who are you two gentlemen, anyhow?”

Fancife countered, “Do you know Lanta?”

Tercio didn’t need to answer. His surprised start was sufficient affirmative.

At which Fancife grinned and said, “That should give you some idea. Now are you coming with us, or are you going to stay here and get buried?”

“That doesn’t give me much choice,” Tercio said in his strangely difficult English. He began dressing.

After a while, they walked out of the hotel, Tercio presenting a much more normal appearance in his civilian clothing, and not making any move toward resistance.

Two Wink said, “I don’t see the object of this.”

Fancife snorted. “We’re simply going to make our friend here, Tercio, take us back to where he came from.”

They drove away in Two Wink’s car.

Chapter IV

THE DESPERATE MAN

CHRIS COLUMBUS rolled over and managed to sit up, after which he made a throat-clearing noise that had nothing of pleasantness in it.

“Feeling better?” the taxi driver asked.

Chris tried three times before he could say a coherent, “No,” after which he lay down on the floor again to be punished by sickness. The illness itself wouldn’t have been so bad, if it wasn’t for the frantic condition of his mind. It was, really, a battle between the two, his body wanting to lie there and sleep for a long time, his mind a raging tiger of anxiety.

Finally he rolled over and tried to get up again, and this time he made it, although after he was on his feet he had to walk sidewise for a short distance to keep from falling again.

“Whew!” he said.

The taxi driver said, “You remember me now? I’m the guy who hauled you around in a hack. The guy you gave five dollars to come here after half an hour and get you away from an intoxicated friend.”

Chris Columbus peered at him blearily and muttered, “Yes, I know. Thank God for *you!*”

“What happened to you?”

“I had a fainting spell,” Chris explained, “and it must have embarrassed my friend greatly, because when I faint, I thrash around violently and utter embarrassing cries. I presume that is why my friend tied me and gagged me. I presume also that my friend has merely dashed out for a doctor, which leads me to suggest that we depart rapidly, a doctor under the circumstances being inclined to commit me to the goon house, which I would dislike.”

The taxi driver grinned and said, “You may not be the best liar, but you’re a long-winded one.”

“You doubt me?”

“Now and before. I had strong doubts when you first began telling me about the friend, and it didn’t sound right, either, when you told me to say a policeman was waiting downstairs. It looked as if you wanted to give somebody a cop scare.”

“Did you wait a half hour before coming?”

“Not quite.”

“Probably a good thing.” Chris massaged his head briskly, hoping to get some of the fog out of it. “Or maybe I would have survived. He had used that chloroform on a dog, then let the bottle stand with a rag cork for a long time. The stuff must have evaporated and gotten weak.”

The taxi driver walked over and picked up the telephone.

Chris said, "What are you going to do?"

"Call the law."

Chris felt of his hip pocket and discovered he had not been robbed. There were four ten-dollar banknotes in his billfold. He presented the taxi driver with three of them.

"Suppose you have a lapse of memory," he suggested.

The hackman hesitated, grinned, said, "Sold—one lapse of memory," and took the three tens.

The fur market opened at nine o'clock the following morning, with Chris Columbus the first man inside. He knew a number of fur men in the place, having bought skins in St. Louis on a number of occasions in the past, and being employed by one of the most reputable quality houses in the business. Chris became a fountain of questions.

"Sure," he was told. "There was a guy walked in here yesterday with a pack of furs of the kind you describe."

"Where are the furs?"

"Locked in the vaults, I suppose. He rented a vault, I heard."

"What'd he look like?"

They described Decimo Tercio, dwelling in particular upon the peculiarity of his garb of buckskin trousers and coat, and his one-piece metal shoes.

At this Chris Columbus practically jumped up and down in his excitement.

"This is marvelous!" he exploded. "The man obviously came straight from—uh—that is, I've got to find him. Where is he?"

Tercio had made it generally known that he was going to the Black Fox Hotel, desiring that prospective buyers of his unusual furs call him there.

"He seemed mighty anxious to sell those skins," a fur man explained, "even if he did persist in holding out for the ungodly price of five thousand dollars apiece."

Chris broke speed records to the Black Fox Hotel.

"Mr. Tercio has not appeared this morning," he was told.

Chris found the hotel manager and said, "I want a look at Tercio's room, and it's important enough to me that I'm going to be blunt about it. Either you go up there now with a master key and unlock the room and let me look it over, or I'm going to call the police and tell them Tercio has disappeared, which will get in the newspapers and do your hotel no good."

The manager was sensible, finally grumbled, "Well, if Tercio comes in while we're there, I'll tell him you are an interior decorator and we're looking over the room." They went up.

Decimo Tercio's original clothing, the garments made from the material similar to buckskin, and his all-metal shoes, lay on the floor.

On a table were gun catalogues from the leading St. Louis sporting goods houses.

There was nothing else.

"They got him," Chris croaked.

He stumbled out of the hotel. He stood on the street, mentally tearing his hair, peering about in a distraught fashion. Finally he walked back into the hotel and seated himself in the writing room, where he picked up pen and paper—

Later, when Chris Columbus again appeared on the street, he was carrying an envelope and licking an airmail stamp which he applied to the envelope. Then he dropped the letter in a mailbox on the corner.

Chris walked on, moving like a man with a purpose until he reached a cab, which he entered, and the cab vanished in traffic.

Shortly after this, Fancife came out of a drugstore from which he had been watching the hotel. He scowled at the mailbox for a time, then went back into the drugstore and telephoned Two Wink Danton.

When Two Wink arrived, half an hour later, Fancife met him eagerly, demanded, "Did you stop and get a maul?"

Two Wink unwrapped the bundle which he was carrying, and disclosed a sixteen-pound sledge hammer.

"This one heavy enough?" he asked.

"It ought to do the job," Fancife said.

They used the sledge to smash open the mailbox. Being made of cast iron, the box split from the first terrific blow. Four letters, the entire contents, fell out. The two men snatched up these and fled, getting away safely.

Two Wink was as worried about the mailbox robbery as he had been the night before over the supposed murder of Chris Columbus.

"That is a Federal offense," he groaned. "Now they'll put the postal inspectors and maybe the Feds after us, and those are no babies to fool with."

Fancife had been looking over the letters, finding the one which Chris Columbus had written, and opening the missive. He read, and began wearing the expression of a man who was drinking vinegar.

"Choosing between the two," he said, "I'll take the postal inspectors and the Feds."

There was strangeness in his voice that made Two Wink glance at him sharply, demand, "What do you mean?"

Fancife shook the letter. "This was a letter asking help."

"Help? Who from?"

Fancife said, "Have you ever heard of a man named Doc Savage?"

Two Wink Danton was smoking a cigar; he gave the weed a slow bite and his face assumed an expression not on the cheerful side.

"See you've heard of him," Fancife said.

Two Wink grabbed the letter, stared at it, and was somewhat disappointed as he read. The missive was addressed simply to Doc Savage, New York City—not that Two Wink entertained any doubts about it failing to reach its destination because of insufficient address, had they failed to apprehend it.

What disgusted Two Wink was the fact that the letter gave no information which he did not already have. The communication stated the ostensible facts—that a mysterious fellow named Decimo Tercio had brought unusual pelts to St. Louis and offered them for sale at five thousand apiece, and that Two Wink Danton and Wilmer Fancife had made away with Tercio; also that the sender of the letter, Arnold Columbus by name—called Chris for short—wanted to locate Tercio, it being more important than anything else in the world that he do so.

The letter added that the writer, Columbus, had abruptly recollected that he had heard Doc Savage was a man who made a business of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers who happened to be outside the law. Here, Columbus wrote, was a great wrong to be righted—and “a mystery so fantastic you would not believe it if I put it on paper” to be solved. Further explanations would be forthcoming upon Doc Savage’s appearance at the Ritz Hotel in St. Louis, where Columbus was staying.

“That’s bad,” Two Wink said thoughtfully.

“I call it good,” Fancife retorted. “Suppose we hadn’t laid hands on this damned letter? Suppose it had gotten to this Doc Savage?”

“How bad would that have been? I’ve only heard rumors about an adventurer, or soldier of fortune or something of the sort, named Doc Savage.”

Fancife frowned at his associate. “You don’t travel much, do you? Never go out in the field—Alaska and Siberia and Ecuador and places like that—buying furs?”

“No.”

“Well, you hear about Doc Savage in those places. The man must have been everywhere, and wherever he’s been, they don’t seem to forget him. He’s not an adventurer or soldier of fortune, like you said. He’s—well, a damn fool, it seems. He chases crooks—for the fun of it.”

“No profit in that.”

“I’m not explaining the man—I’m telling you what I’ve heard. You can’t hire him, and if a thing doesn’t appeal to him, he won’t touch it. I don’t know where he gets his dough, and neither does anybody else. He always has plenty.”

Two Wink frowned at his partner in crime, finally said, “I take it you don’t want any part of Savage?”

“That’s right.”

“In which case we’d better put the bingo on Chris Columbus. If we don’t, he’ll send this Savage another message.”

Fancife nodded, asked grimly: “Can you get hold of a good rifle with a silencer?”

Two Wink, confronted by the approach of a second murder attempt, turned the approximate color of a peeled potato.

“I can try,” he gulped finally.

Chapter V

THE STRANGE FACTS

DOC SAVAGE—or Clark Savage, Jr., to give him his correct name, which practically nobody knew—was a man of mystery as far as the newspapers and the general public were concerned. It was known that he was a remarkable individual who made a business of helping other people out of trouble, and who did not charge fees; it was no secret, either, that his headquarters were located on the eighty-sixth floor of one of midtown New York's tallest buildings—but beyond this, Doc Savage was a rather puzzling enigma, a mystifying sort of legend about whom all kinds of fantastic things were told.

The fact that Doc Savage helped people without charging them was naturally a magnet that drew many persons who had the wrong idea. Many a bum and no-account, worthless moocher and tramp in search of a handout—they came wanting every sum from fifty cents to fifty thousand dollars—had migrated to the place at one time or another. There were some deserving individuals, of course, and these got understanding treatment and help—but no money. They got jobs, not jobs with big salaries and short hours, but jobs with hard work and possibilities for betterment. The out-and-out moochers caught hell at the hands of a staff of expert hell-dishers-out.

To handle the problems of these people who really required nothing extraordinary in the line of a solution, Doc Savage maintained on the ground floor the reception staff which arranged jobs for the needy, or dished out the hell to the undeserving.

Any matter important or particularly fantastic was passed on upstairs where it got attention from one or another of Doc's group of five close associates.

These preliminary reception committees served a double purpose, both of which were defensive. They defended Doc from what could easily become a twenty-four-hour-a-day job of interviewing persons with piddling problems—not a few of them merely curiosity lookers come to get a look at a famous person. They also defended against very real enemies who frequently concocted some ingenious schemes for killing Doc Savage.

This morning, one of Doc's group of five aids was on duty in the reception room of the eighty-sixth floor headquarters. The reception room was sparsely furnished with a great inlaid table, a few comfortable leather chairs and a safe so large that it looked out of place.

The aid on duty was Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett Monk Mayfair, one of the world's leading industrial chemists, and also probably one of the world's homeliest men. Reasons for the nickname Monk were obvious; you would not have to encounter him in a very dark alley to think you had met an ape. His mouth was astoundingly large, his small twinkling eyes were almost lost under bulging eyebrows, and his nose had been broken so often by unfriendly fists that it had about given up the struggle to look like a nose.

Monk read the telegram as soon as it arrived. He was immediately interested.

He entered the adjacent library, a great room filled with cases containing books, all of them ponderous scientific tomes, which comprised one of the most complete technical libraries in existence.

“What you make of this, Doc?” Monk asked.

Doc Savage took the telegram. He was a remarkable man; you felt this as soon as you saw him. His size alone—he was far above average, almost a giant—made him outstanding, and there were indications, such as the cabled sinews in the backs of his hands, the ligaments like steel bars in his neck, that his strength was fabulous. His complexion was an unusual bronze hue which came from exposure to tropical suns; his features were regular and firm, handsome without being prissy.

The big bronze man took the telegraph, and his eyes studied the missive. Most striking of all his features were his eyes. They were like pools of flake gold always stirred by tiny winds; possessed also of a compelling quality and intensity most aptly described as hypnotic.

The telegram read:

OF DESPERATE IMPORTANCE THAT I FIND THE MAN KNOWN AS DECIMO TERCIO WHO APPEARED ON ST. LOUIS FUR MARKET YESTERDAY AND OFFERED FOR SALE A TYPE OF FUR HITHERTO UNKNOWN. HAVE REASONS TO BELIEVE TERCIO HAS BEEN SEIZED BY TWO MEN NAMED TWO WINK DANTON AND WILMER FANCIFE WHO ALSO TRIED TO MURDER ME.

THERE IS FANTASTIC MYSTERY BEHIND THIS AFFAIR, SOMETHING TOO WEIRD TO MAKE BELIEVABLE IN A TELEGRAM. I HAVE HEARD OF YOU AND BELIEVE YOU CAN HELP. WILL YOU COME TO RITZ HOTEL IN ST. LOUIS? I AM FOLLOWING THIS TELEGRAM WITH A LETTER IN HOPES ONE OF THEM WILL REACH YOU.

ARNOLD CHRIS COLUMBUS

Doc Savage’s features had shown no particular emotion, which was one of the bronze man’s characteristics. He went to a telephone, dialed long-distance.

He called the St. Louis fur exchange and learned that a man named Decimo Tercio had yesterday offered for sale some furs of a type hitherto unknown. He was advised that Tercio could not be located today.

He called the Ritz Hotel and was informed that Arnold Columbus was registered there, but had not put in an appearance that morning.

“We will go to St. Louis and have a look,” Doc Savage said.

They left twenty minutes later, taking off in one of Doc’s fast planes from a hangar on the Hudson River water front, a hangar that outwardly appeared to be a disused warehouse.

Monk took along his pet pig, Habeas Corpus. Habeas was distinctly a runt, had extraordinary legs, ears that might have been wings, and a long snout.

Ham Brooks, who had conducted a perpetual quarrel with Monk for years, also accompanied them. Brigadier General Theodore Marley Brooks, as Ham was known at his exclusive clubs, was a leading lawyer and had no equal in the matter of being well-dressed.

Ham brought his pet chimpanzee, a scrawny animal which he called Chemistry, and which had the hilarious characteristic of looking almost exactly like a dwarfsized reproduction of the homely chemist, Monk Mayfair.

Colonel John Renny Renwick flew the plane, grasping the controls with fists so huge that they could hardly have been inserted in gallon pails, staring ahead with an unutterably sad expression on his long, puritanical face. His eminence as an engineer was unquestioned.

The other two members of the group—they were William Harper Johnny Littlejohn, archaeologist and geologist of the crew, and Major Thomas J. Long Tom Roberts, electrical wizard—remained in New York to be called later, if needed.

There was fog, rain, near-zero visibility, so they rode the regular airline radio beams all the way to St. Louis.

The desk clerk at the Ritz Hotel was both impressed and courteous; he seemed to remember Doc Savage without being able to exactly place the big bronze man.

“I’m very sorry,” he explained, “but Mr. Columbus is not here. He checked in, left immediately, and has not been back.” The clerk hesitated, then added, “Ah—two other gentlemen were here looking for him.”

Doc suggested, “Two Wink Danton and Wilmer Fancife?”

“They didn’t give their names.”

“Could you describe them?”

The clerk gave a fairly accurate word picture of the pair who had come seeking Columbus.

“Thank you,” Doc said, and they walked out on the street, where the bronze man suggested, “You fellows wait in the drugstore on the corner.”

Doc had learned the room number of Chris Columbus. He walked back into the hotel, using the rear service entrance where the clerk had no chance to see him. He produced one of several convenient documents which he habitually carried and said, “Elevator inspection.” The document was one certifying he was an elevator inspector, and was a phony only to the extent that it was not issued by the City of St. Louis, but by one of the largest concerns manufacturing elevators.

He took over a cage, rode to the seventh floor, went to 705, which was Columbus’ room. A small metal probe the shape of a distorted darning needle and a good deal of previous study of locks let him into the room. He searched carefully.

Later, Doc rejoined his men in the drugstore.

“Nothing in Chris Columbus’ room,” he explained, “except some papers that show him to be employed by a New York fur manufacturer, and the stub of an airline ticket showing that he came from New York to St. Louis by plane yesterday. And there was *this*.”

The bronze man exhibited a small glass bottle, thick-walled and wide-mouthed, closed by a screw cap—a bottle of the type used to hold stick candy. Inside was thickly rolled cotton; he took the cotton out, unfurled it so they could see the contents.

Monk exploded. “Say! What kind of fur is that?”

They were not experts on fur, but they did not have to be to know that they were looking at something fabulous. Ordinarily, a small bit of fur is an unappealing sight. But this fragment had richness, a fine lustrous quality that made it like a jewel.

There was a lock of hair, which Monk fingered.

“Looks like a lock of a girl’s hair,” the homely chemist ventured.

The fact that Monk, in spite of his unearthly homeliness, almost invariably had better luck with the gals than did the undeniably handsome Ham was a source of baffled disgust to the latter.

Big-fisted Renny suggested, in a voice that rumbled like thunder in a canyon, “Well, we’ve learned one thing, anyway. Those two men, Two Wink and Fancife, are still hunting Chris Columbus. So they haven’t caught him yet.”

Doc said, “We will check with the fur market next.”

They experienced no difficulty at the fur exchange in securing a description of Two Wink Danton and Wilmer Fancife, which checked with the word picture of the two men hunting Chris Columbus which the Ritz Hotel clerk had given them.

“This is all checking with Columbus’ telegram,” Monk said grimly. “Now let’s see those furs.”

There was some argument before they got a look at the mystery skins which Decimo Tercio had placed in a rented fur vault. They were breathless in the presence of the wonderfully luxurious skins. Unquestionably, they had never seen furs with more right to be called priceless.

“Five thousand,” Ham said finally, “would be a dirt-cheap price for those skins.”

“What kind of an animal could these hides have come off?” Monk asked.

They looked at Doc Savage. All of them respected the bronze man’s enormous store of general knowledge. But Doc did not answer.

They visited the Black Fox Hotel, where Decimo Tercio had registered. They had secured the address at the fur exchange.

The clerk was a filing case of information, once he was unlocked with a five-dollar bill.

He told them that Two Wink Danton and Wilmer Fancife—he did not name the men, but identified them by description—had come to see Decimo Tercio. Later, Tercio had gone away with the pair.

Still later, Chris Columbus had arrived in a futile hunt for Tercio.

Monk ventured, “It looks as if Columbus, as well as Two Wink and Fancife, were hunting Tercio. And Two Wink and Fancife got him first.”

Renny contemplated his large fists.

“It strikes me,” he said, “that we’ve traced this thing about as far as we can. What do we do now?”

They went up to Decimo Tercio’s room and examined the place.

Doc Savage looked at Tercio’s strange all-metal shoes for a time, then handed the shoes to Monk, the chemist.

“What do you make of that metal?” he asked.

Monk scrutinized the shoes. He even peered through a small magnifying glass which Doc Savage produced. Monk shook his head slowly.

“Not aluminum. I’ll swear I don’t know what it is without a chemical analysis.”

The skin garments which Tercio had worn provided a further puzzle. Doc Savage was a little more specific.

“The skin,” he said, “seems definitely to be that of an animal—an animal which was covered with both feathers and hair.”

“But what kind of animal could that possibly be?” Monk interjected.

Doc Savage did not elaborate on his analysis of the skin garments. He showed a marked lack of desire to discuss it further—as if he had ventured his first opinion on the spur of the moment, and further consideration had shown him the impossibility of the thing.

They looked at the gun catalogues.

The largest-caliber guns in each catalogue—elephant and tiger guns in every case except one, when the weapon marked was a new type of superpowered automatic rifle—had been designated with a pencil mark.

“If he planned to buy those rifles,” Ham suggested, “it looks as if he was going in for darned big game.”

They had been working on the mystery about four hours, and all they had done was further confuse themselves. They had not found Decimo Tercio, the mysterious man with strange furs to sell. There was no trace of Columbus or Two Wink or Fancife.

“We might,” Doc Savage suggested, “try to backtrack Decimo Tercio, and find out where he came from.”

Chapter VI

TERCIO'S TRAIL

"A MAN dressed as strangely as Tercio was when he came to this hotel," Doc Savage said, "would have been noticed."

They got on telephones and called taxicab companies and cab drivers—with no results.

"Try the railroads and the bus concerns and the drive-it-yourself companies," Doc directed.

The bronze man himself kept telephoning taxicab concerns in the small towns near St. Louis, and three hours later, he was successful.

A jitney driver from a small farming town in the Mississippi River bottoms about thirty miles from St. Louis had hauled Decimo Tercio to town.

Doc and his men drove out to talk to the driver, whose tongue was also easily keyed with a five-dollar bill.

"That funny dressed guy? He come into town here and hired me. Paid me in big bills." The driver chewed tobacco and grinned.

"What do you mean by big bills?" Doc asked.

"The old kind. You remember, our dollar bills used to be bigger than now. That was a lot of years ago."

"May we see them?"

The driver exhibited the money Tercio had given him. Large-sized bills.

"The government quit printing these things ten years or more ago," Ham said thoughtfully.

The village hackman took a fresh chew of tobacco and volunteered, "You know, I figure the feller might have been a hermit, maybe."

"Because he had the large-sized bills, you thought he might have hoarded them?"

"Not only that. It was the way he talked. Questions he asked me." The taxi driver chuckled. "Why, that feller had never even heard of Hitler. He didn't know about Roosevelt being president. He was way behind on the news."

Doc Savage's flake-gold eyes betrayed the bronze man's inner excitement slightly; the eyes seemed to take on a whirling alertness.

"Was the man interested in any particular phase of the news?" he asked.

"Well, he wanted to know a lot about Stalin and Russia," the taxi driver admitted. "Matter of fact, we was of some political difference, and once I thought one of us was gonna get a bust on the nose. I ain't no Communist, and I guess he was. Anyhow, I didn't know much about Russia to tell him, except that them and the Japanese have been makin' faces at each other."

"Any idea where the man came from?" Doc asked.

“Nope. Just walked into town, like I said.”

Doc Savage went to the telephone office, where he parted with some more money. As a result he got all the country lines radiating out of that exchange hooked together, and a “general ring” given. The “general ring” was a succession of ten short rings, a sort of summons that would draw all country subscribers to their phones.

He made a short speech in which he offered fifty dollars reward for any information concerning Decimo Tercio. He described Tercio.

Almost instantly, he got results.

“That feller,” said a farmer’s voice, “landed his airplane in my oat field, and killed one of my bulls with a spear. Said he’d be back, but he hasn’t.”

Doc got the farmer’s name and the location of the farm, and they headed for the place, using a car which they had rented.

Renny, who was the engineer of the group and knew much about things mechanical, took one look at the plane and rumbled an opinion. “A Russian plane!” he exclaimed. “And at least ten years old.”

Doc Savage examined the plane, and in particular made mental note of the identification numbers on the ship. The plane, for its age, was in remarkably good condition, showing very little wear. The fuselage and wing surfaces within range of the two big engines, however, were stained with oil as if from a recent long flight. There were no maps in the craft.

Having inserted a stick in the gas tanks to measure the fuel—the tanks were almost empty—Doc called Monk’s attention, asking, “You’ve conducted some chemical experiments in oil-cracking processes. What do you make of this fuel?”

Monk sniffed, tasted, squinted.

“The equivalent of raw casing-head stuff. Maybe a little alcohol, or something.”

Ham asked, “What do you mean—casing-head stuff?”

“I mean,” Monk explained, “that when you condense some types of natural gas, you get stuff like this.”

“Then it’s not regular aviation gasoline?”

“It’s not even regular automobile gasoline. The fellow must have done a lot of tinkering with his motor to get it to run on juice like this.”

The farmer, who watched them closely enough to see that they were rather puzzled, stepped forward to contribute his bit to the mystery. He produced a stick and a spear, said, “What do you make of these?”

Monk took the weapons, squinted at them, and decided, “They look kind of prehistoric to me.”

Doc said, “Atlatl.”

He was looking at the short stick that accompanied the spear.

“Huh?” Monk said.

“Atlatl. A throwing stick for propelling spears. Used by a number of prehistoric races. As a weapon, it preceded the bow and arrow.”

The bronze man demonstrated by grasping the throwing stick, inserting fingers through the finger loops, placing the spear in the gripping notch.

“That’s the way the feller threwed it at my bull,” the farmer said.

“It takes some experience to use one of these weapons,” Doc suggested.

At this point, the farmer’s wife came running across the oat stubble to them.

“The man who owns the airplane just telephoned,” she said. “Him and two other men are going to be out right away with some gasoline for the thing.”

Doc Savage nodded, said, “We will waylay them, of course. I will wait in the plane. Monk, we will hide you in a trench nearby. Ham and Renny can conceal themselves in the weeds in the fence row at the edge of the field.”

They scooped a trench large enough to hold Monk, scattering the dirt widely so that presence of the pit would not be noticed. Monk lay flat in it. They put coats over him, covered those with dirt, and placed straw over his face.

“I don’t know as how I’m going to stand for this,” the farmer announced sharply. “It looks queer to me.”

Doc explained, “We are Federal agents, making an investigation.”

The statement was true—he produced credentials and showed them to the farmer. The appointments to Federal service, a great convenience at times, had been given them in recognition for past services. They also possessed honorary commissions in the police departments of New York City, Scotland Yard and several other of the world’s large cities, the bronze man’s work on the side of the law being well-known.

The farmer was satisfied, and retired to the house, to act as if nothing had happened. And it was perhaps thirty minutes later when a man ran into the stubble field.

The man traveled as if in the last lap of a quarter-mile dash. His breath was whistling when he piled into the Russian plane, saw Doc Savage, and yanked a gun from his pocket.

Doc was taken—as were all of them, for that matter—flat-footed by the haste of the man’s arrival.

There was no chance of his reaching the man before the gun could be used. The bronze man still carried the atlatl, the spear-throwing stick. He threw this. It was not heavy, but weighty enough to numb the man’s wrist when it struck. That gave Doc time to reach him.

They fought. The newcomer, remarkably muscular, made some headway at first, hooking a terrific right to Doc’s jaw. Doc was unable to roll sufficiently with the blow, saw several constellations, and sank to his knees. He got hold of his opponent, however, dragged him down. They fought for a while.

Outside, Monk got up from the trench in a cloud of dust, howled, “Let me at ’im, Doc!”

Doc’s foe stopped fighting.

“Doc!” he barked. “You’re not Doc Savage?”

“Yes.”

“Why the hell didn’t you say so?” said the young man who had arrived in such wild haste. “I’m Chris Columbus.”

Outside, unnoticed because of the noise of the fight, there had been sound of a motor, but this had stopped. Then a rifle crashed.

Monk screamed. The rifle smashed out again. Doc Savage pitched to the plane door in time to see Monk fold like a hinge in the middle and pitch forward on the ground.

A hundred yards or so distant, an oil-tank truck had stopped. Two men were still in the cab. But Two Wink Danton had alighted on one side of the machine, Wilmer Fancife on the other, and both had rifles leveled.

Chapter VII

RURAL MELEE

ACTION during the next few minutes was something of a landslide. Two Wink and Fancife saw Doc in the plane. They fired. The bronze man jumped back, then dived forward to get down in the cabin where one big motor would shelter him from fire.

“Get here!” he rapped at Chris Columbus.

Ham and Renny jumped up out of the fence-row weeds. Both held supermachine pistols, a type of weapon which Doc Savage had perfected—resembling overgrown automatics, the guns could pour out an incredible quantity of bullets in a minute.

Two Wink and Fancife saw them, dived for the oil truck and got inside. Two Wink drove. The truck wheeled away.

Ham and Renny turned loose with their supermachine pistols, the weapons sounding like a pair of big bullfrogs giving short gasps.

Unluckily, the weapons were charged with the type of cartridges which they most frequently used—mercy bullets. These slugs were merely thin shells containing a chemical which produced quick unconsciousness. The bullets would little more than break the skin of a victim, and ordinarily the chemical did the rest. In this case, the mercy bullets splattered harmlessly on the tank-truck cab.

The tank truck went out of the oat-stubble field sounding like a frightened red hog, pulling a funnel of dust after it.

A dark, loose-jointed object tumbled from the speeding track. The regular driver. They had thrown him out.

Chris Columbus, beside himself with rage, squalled, “They’re gettin’ away!” He sprang out of the plane and ran after the truck in a hopeless and somewhat silly chase.

Renny and Ham raced for Doc’s rented car, which they had parked in the farmer’s orchard.

Doc himself lunged to the plane controls, made an effort to start the engines. It was hopeless, as he had suspected. The motors would never start on the low-grade fuel that was in the tanks; it was a miracle that they had operated on the stuff, even after they were hot.

Monk was rolling over and over on the ground, holding his stomach with both arms.

“They shot me!” Monk howled. “They shot me in the stomach!”

Doc flung out of the plane, shouted, “They’re escaping in the truck!”

Monk got to his feet and began to run toward their rented car. He traveled in an awkward spraddle-legged lope, squalling things that were angry and violent.

While he ran, Monk tried to pull up the front of his shirt to see if the rifle bullets had really penetrated the bulletproof mesh undergarment he was wearing. The

undershirt was made of an alloy on which Monk had expended his best chemical skill, but he was doubting the efficiency of the thing.

Ham and Renny had some difficulty starting the rented car, so that all of them reached the machine in time to pile aboard.

The man who had been thrown out of the truck—his uniform showed that he was the driver for the local oil company—had gotten to his feet. He was standing still and swearing at the top of his voice, the last they saw or heard of him.

At all speeds above fifty, the rented car had a knock that sounded as though a blacksmith was at work on the motor with a hammer.

Doc shouted, “You saw the other man in the truck, Columbus?”

“Yes.”

“Was it the mystery man, Decimo Tercio?”

“That was him. Two Wink and Fancife are holding him prisoner. They made him bring them out here. I think they were going to use his plane.”

“How did you happen to show up?”

“I’ve been watching them, trying to get Tercio away from them. I didn’t get a chance. They had rifles, and they were also looking for me to bump me off. I found their hideout, listened outside the window, overheard Tercio finally tell them where his plane was. I beat them out there. I intended to wait in the plane and waylay them. Wasn’t far enough ahead of ’em, dammit!”

“Why didn’t you go to the police with this?”

“And have the cops lock me up for crazy after they heard my story?”

It was a dirt road. The truck ahead sucked up an incredible amount of dust. Doc nosed into it; they coughed and gagged. The bronze man was forced to slow. There was not car-length visibility.

Doc Savage drove far out on the edge of the road to avoid as much of the dust as possible—which was fortunate.

Suddenly a blackness loomed ahead. The bronze man stamped the brake, wrenched the wheel. The car eased over in the grader ditch, but there was not enough room. Came a big gnashing sound of metal. Their off wheel and fender dug into the grader bank. The car slowly upended on its radiator, turned over, and they were an aching tangle inside.

Monk forgot his midriff pain and shouted, “They broadsided the truck! Figured we’d crash into it in the dust!”

A rifle bullet went in one side of the car and out the other, the double impact sounding almost like one report.

Doc said, “Out and into the ditch!”

The doors were jammed. Doc kicked one; it gave, and they crawled out into the swirling pall of dust.

Renny stood up, fired four short bursts from his machine pistol in four different directions. Then he dropped and listened, hoping the rifle would discharge again and

give him an idea of the direction of their foes.

Instead, they heard men running away.

Doc said, “We should be near the paved highway.”

“Holy cow! That explains it. They figured on killin’ us off with a smashup, then stopping a faster car on the highway. Knew they couldn’t outrun us.”

They scrambled out of the dust and out of the ditch—but got back into the ditch suddenly when rifle slugs made violent breaking-violin-string noises close to them. The capsized rented car had been making frying and creaking sounds. Suddenly gasoline vapor under the hood exploded; shorted wires or something of the sort had set it off. Flame climbed over the car and smoke spiraled upward.

Ham had crawled back into the dust to hunt for something—his sword cane, for now he scrambled out again with the weapon. He unlimbered his machine pistol, fired a burst. Renny also shot. Both bursts missed, for Two Wink and Fancife had doubled behind a high bank at the intersection of the dirt road with the paved highway.

There was brief silence.

Doc said, “If we can separate and encircle them——” He did not finish the statement.

Automobile tires were squalling on the paved highway.

Two Wink and Fancife were standing in the road, blocking it, holding rifles menacingly. The mysterious man, Decimo Tercio, stood between them, waving his coat as a stop flag.

A motorist in a black sedan was just stopping his machine as Doc’s party got sight of the tableau.

Doc said, “Try to get them with mercy bullets!”

Renny and Ham aimed their unusual weapons, put pressure on the firing levers, and the guns gobbled.

Two Wink threw up his arms and began doing bullfrog jumps.

“Got ’im!” Renny boomed.

Then to their disgust they saw Fancife seize Two Wink and drag him into the sedan which the pair had stopped.

Decimo Tercio now broke and ran. They realized, the moment the strange fellow put his head down and began sprinting, that he was making a break for liberty. He had luck; Fancife did not notice his flight for a moment.

When Fancife did see Tercio running, his howl of profanity reached their ears loudly. Fancife was inside the sedan, and they could see him struggling to get his rifle pointed at Tercio.

Chris Columbus realized the danger of Tercio and gave a frantic yell.

“Don’t let him shoot Tercio!” Chris bleated. “Tercio is the only man who knows what we’ve got to learn!”

Ham and Renny unlimbered their machine pistols again. At that range—they wouldn’t be point-blank range either, for that matter—the mercy bullets would not

penetrate the defense of car body and windows. But the splattering rattle of the slugs on the car frightened Fancife.

Fancife decided to forget Tercio and save his own skin.

He drove away at high speed in the sedan, after forcing out the motorist who owned the machine. The motorist, wanting no part of any of it, took shelter in the grader ditch. Fancife and Two Wink vanished around a curve in the sedan.

Monk held his stomach and galloped forward, shouting, "Why don't you guys do something? Everything is goin' wrong!"

There were two other cars on the highway, but both of them had been close enough to see the excitement and hear the shots, so that both drivers, instead of stopping when they were hailed, stamped accelerator pedals to the floor boards and moaned away, paying no attention to urgent shouts from Doc's men.

"Get Tercio!" Chris Columbus urged frantically.

Tercio had no intention of being got. Enough bad luck had beset him thus far to make him a wary fellow. He was crossing a pasture, legs a churning blur.

Renny shouted, "Tercio! This is Doc Savage's party. We're your friends."

This had no visible effect on Decimo Tercio, except to speed him a little, if anything. There was no question but that he heard, because Renny's shouting voice was a tremendous thing that rivaled the twin foghorns on the forward funnel of the *Queen Mary*.

"Chris Columbus is here!" Renny bellowed after Tercio.

Chris said, "That won't faze him. He may not know me from Adam's ox."

Tercio kept going. On the far side of the pasture, several horses were prancing about nervously.

Doc said, "We will have to outrun him."

They sprinted forward, Monk losing ground with his ungainly lope. They passed the motorist owner of the car Two Wink and Fancife had seized for their getaway; the fellow lay in his ditch and shouted, "I'm not in on this! I'm an innocent bystander!"

They piled over the pasture fence, barbed wire and staples squawking complaint.

Tercio had reached the horses. They were saddle animals, spirited, apparently none of them gentle. Tercio plunged into the tangle of horses bunched in the fence corner at the far side of the pasture.

"He'll get his brains kicked out!" Ham exploded.

Tercio gave an exhibition of harsh, but highly skilled horsemanship. He managed—that feat was remarkable in itself—to grasp a mane, swing and get astride a horse. The animal he had picked was long-legged, racy. It began bucking. Tercio used his heels, his fists—and controlled the horse perfectly.

A long wild whoop scattered the startled animals out of the pasture corner. Tercio then rode furiously toward a fence. The horse jumped, cleared the wire. Wild rider and mount vanished into a woods.

Monk stopped, looked at Ham and asked angrily, "Why didn't you use your gatling?"

“My machine pistol,” Ham snapped, “is empty.”

“Mine, too,” Renny boomed.

The remainder of the horses had their tails up and were going around and around the pasture. Nothing short of a pony, a lasso rope and considerable cowboy dexterity would trap one of the animals. Doc tried to outsprint a large roan gelding and get the horse in a corner, but the roan won.

Decimo Tercio was no longer in sight.

Two Wink and Fancife had long since vanished down the road.

Chapter VIII

RADIO TRAIL

THEY stood in the Missouri sunlight getting breathing back to normal and feeling too disgusted over the situation to venture comment upon it. Comparative quiet had fallen, the only animated object now being the motorist whose car had been stolen, and who had gotten out of the grader ditch and was going in a long-legged run for the farmer's house, probably with the idea of using a telephone to contact the State troopers. Elsewhere there was stillness and a return of the rural peace, with birds that had been frightened coming out of the bushes to which they had fled, and the horses standing at the far side of the pasture, instinctively bunched together in their nervousness, heads up and nostrils distended.

Doc Savage said, "Monk and Ham, you trail Tercio as best you can. Report to us through the police in St. Louis. Renny and Chris Columbus and myself will see what we can do about finding Two Wink and Fancife."

Monk and Ham called their pets. The two animals had been investigating the farmer's barnyard, and had missed all the excitement. They came running, now, and Monk and Ham set off with them into the woods where they had last seen Tercio.

The paved highway had become quiet and empty, and since the wrecked rented car and the truck were out of sight down the dirt side road, there was no indication that anything unusual had happened recently.

Doc Savage had no trouble stopping the first St. Louis-bound car that passed. The driver was alone in the machine; when shown money, he readily agreed to take them into the city.

Doc, Renny and Chris Columbus rode three together in the back seat. Silently for a time. Then Renny spoke.

"Holy cow!" rumbled the big-fisted engineer. "That Tercio rode a horse like—well, a Cossack."

"Matter of fact," Doc said in a low voice, "he was once a Cossack."

"Huh?"

"Decimo Tercio isn't the man's name. In fact, *decimo tercio* are the Spanish words for the number thirteen. So the fellow might have selected the name Decimo Tercio as a sly practical joke."

"How do you figure the Cossack part?"

"Identification numbers on his plane. The plane itself—Renny, if you will remember back about ten years you will recall an epidemic of transatlantic airplane flights."

"I remember. Majority of them weren't successful."

"Exactly. Among those that were not successful was one of the first Russian trials to span the pole, an attempt that did not get much publicity at the time both because the

Russian government was not too popular in the American newspapers at the time, and because the Russians made no effort to publish the flight widely. However, it was no great secret that a flier named Veselich Vengarinotskovi took off alone across the north pole, and was not heard from again.”

“You say his name was Ven— Ven——” Renny grimaced. “Never mind. I’ll take Decimo Tercio.”

“Veselich Vengarinotskovi is now Decimo Tercio, by my guessing,” Doc said, “because that Russian plane standing back there in the oat stubble bears the same identification numbers and name as the plane used by the Russian aviator who started over the pole some ten years ago, and was lost.”

The bronze man glanced at Chris Columbus, asked, “What about it?”

“Could be. The facts check,” Chris Columbus said.

“You can not tell us for sure?”

“I can’t give you any facts about this fellow Tercio.”

Big-fisted Renny leaned over to stare at Chris Columbus. “But maybe there are some facts you could give us?”

“A lot of them.” Chris looked meaningfully at their driver. “But not just now.”

They rode in silence, Chris Columbus holding his chin cupped in a palm, deep in thought, until finally he looked sidewise at Doc Savage and asked, “Where in the devil did you dig up that data about the Russian aviator you just gave us?”

“Happened to remember there was such a flight,” Doc explained.

“Yes, but you even knew the plane identification numbers!”

Renny interjected a rumble. “Doc’s got a filing cabinet for a brain. That, and an encyclopedia. You’ll get used to it after a while.”

Chris Columbus sighed and settled back on the seat. “I heard a friend of mine talking about you. That was a month or so ago. He had met you. Name of Sam Taft.”

“Sam Taft, the explorer and authority on early Mexican art?”

“Yeah, that’s Sam. He told me a lot about you. So much, to tell the truth, that at the time I was on the verge of calling you and asking you to help me with this mystery we’re mixed up in now.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Chris Columbus grinned. “Didn’t want to make a fool out of myself. I figured you wouldn’t believe the story. I know I wouldn’t if I was told the yarn by some young fellow who looked as if he ran more to muscle than brains.”

Their driver proved to be timid in traffic, so that after they reached the outskirts of the city their progress was slow. They paid him off and changed to a taxicab.

“Police headquarters,” Doc directed.

Time was required—more than an hour—in getting the police and State troopers to broadcast a pickup order for Two Wink, Fancife and Decimo Tercio. Two Wink and Fancife were charged with kidnapping. Apprehension of Decimo Tercio was directed on the ground that he was the kidnap victim, hence a material witness.

“Call for you, Mr. Savage,” an officer said.

It was Monk. Disgusted.

“You know what this Decimo Tercio did?” Monk demanded. “He turned the horse loose in the river bottoms for us to follow. We finally figured it out that Tercio got to another highway, and must have hailed a car. That means Tercio has had time to get back to St. Louis, and no telling what else.”

“Come back into town,” Doc directed. “Watch Tercio’s hotel.”

The bronze man, looking disgusted with himself, hurriedly dialed another number on the telephone. He spoke for a short time, hung up with a deepened expression of self-disapproval.

“We muffed this nicely,” he said in a grim voice.

Renny stared at him. “Meaning?”

“Decimo Tercio got back into town, sold his furs for four thousand dollars a pelt, took the money in cash and left.”

Renny sprang up and started for the door.

Doc stopped him with the query, “Where you going?”

“To hunt that Tercio.”

“Where?”

Renny threw up his hands and sat down. “You’ve got me. What would we use for a clue?”

“The gun catalogues,” Doc suggested.

“Eh?”

The bronze man slapped a telephone book down on the desk and began calling the sporting goods houses which had issued the gun catalogues they had noticed in Decimo Tercio’s hotel room. First try was a blank, but the second one got a surprised grunt.

“The gentleman you’re inquiring about just left,” the gun firm manager explained.

“What did he buy?” Doc asked.

“Can you give me a good reason why I should furnish you with such information?”

Doc identified himself and added that he was a Federal investigator, and that the man could call the police if he didn’t believe it.

“All right, all right,” the gun house manager said. “This man—Tercio, you called him, didn’t you?—bought a number of our most high-powered rifles and a very large amount of ammunition. An extraordinary amount of ammunition, I might say.”

“And then——?”

“Then he loaded everything into one of our delivery trucks, got in with the driver himself, and they headed for the Lambert airport.”

“How long ago?”

“Why—fifteen minutes, I should say.”

Doc Savage hung up and explained to Renny and Chris Columbus. “Decimo Tercio sold his furs and bought the highest-powered rifles he could get, and ammunition. Now he is headed for Lambert flying field.”

Renny boomed, “That’s where we’ve got *our* ship!”

Chris yelled, “We may be able to head him off!”

He started for the door. Renny caught him.

“Hold it,” Renny advised. “Doc seems to have an idea.”

The bronze man was using the telephone again, getting a connection to the flying field.

Chris Columbus grinned, said, “That’s a better idea. We can have them grab him out there.”

Doc Savage was speaking into the telephone, addressing the field manager, whom he happened to know.

“Does a man named Decimo Tercio have a plane there? . . . No? Well, possibly he did not use that name, so here is his description.” Doc drew a word picture of Tercio, waited while the man spoke at the other end of the wire, then corroborated what he had been told, saying, “He just bought the plane by telephone, did he? Promised to pay cash and take immediate delivery. What kind of a ship did he buy?”

The room was still enough that Renny and Chris Columbus could hear the voice of the distant airport manager.

“It was a big ship, one of those jobs that have a lot of fuel capacity,” the man explained. “It’s a used crate. Fellow had it fixed up for a round-the-world try, then got cold feet. This man—Tercio, if that’s his name—got the job for twenty-eight thousand, which is dirt for that bus.”

Doc said, “Do me a favor, will you? My plane is out at your field now. Go to the crate, and back in the cabin you will find a number of alloy metal cases. The cases fit in racks along the cabin wall, and they’re numbered. Open case number nine. You got it?”

“Open nine. Right.”

“Take out the green metal box you will find inside on top. There is only one green metal box in that case, so you can’t make a mistake. There is a switch on the box. Only one. Turn it to the *on* position. Got that?”

“Switch to *on* position. Got it.”

“Then hide the box on this plane that Decimo Tercio just bought. Hide it in the back of the fuselage, or some place where it will not be found.”

“It’s not a bomb or something?”

“No.”

“Well, I’ll hide the thing in his plane.”

Doc Savage hung up, and Chris Columbus stared at him, stared as if he had some doubts about the bronze man’s mental stability.

“I must say I don’t get it,” Chris grumbled finally. “We could have had ’em catch that guy.”

Doc Savage was not disturbed. “I am curious about where Tercio is heading.”

“So am I.” Chris laughed harshly. “What do you think I’ve been tearing around like a wild man for?”

“We’ll follow him.”

“Follow him? You can’t! How will you follow an airplane?”

“You are familiar with radio?” Doc asked.

“I listen to programs now and then. I understand airplanes follow radio beams nowadays. But I’m no radio engineer.”

The bronze man explained patiently. “You can take a directional aerial, usually a loop, and a properly sensitive receiver, and locate a radio transmitter. Direction finding, it is called.”

“That’s kindergarten stuff.”

“In that box we’re having the airport official hide in Tercio’s plane is a short-wave transmitter,” Doc advised. “It is self-contained, operates from batteries which will keep it transmitting continuously for a hundred or more hours. The tubes do not draw much current.”

Chris grinned suddenly, drove his right fist into his left palm.

“Means we can trail Tercio, doesn’t it?” he yelled.

Chapter IX

GUNS NORTH

DOC SAVAGE's plane was constructed with two fuselage skin coverings, an outer one of tough alloy that would resist ordinary rifle and machine-gun fire, and an inner skin which was non-sweating; in between these coverings was a padding of extremely light material with insulating qualities effective against both sound and cold. In spite of this, it was cold in the plane.

The big plane was slicing through smoky darkness that was as cold as frost. Occasionally the fuselage and wings of the craft were licked by a weirdly-hued glow from the strange lunging fans of aurora borealis that climbed up in scintillating fantasm from the cold white mystery of the polar wastes.

The heaters—they were electric and operated by wing generators—made soft, warm sound. The big motors were muffled, and prop scream was louder than exhaust moan, but even that noise, heard from inside the soundproofed fuselage, was undertone.

Renny had his eye jammed to a visual drift indicator. He had taken one bearing on a tiny frozen lake faintly discernible below; at the end of a timed interval, he took another bearing. Then he consulted the altimeter, made some figures with a pencil.

"Ground speed one-eighty," he announced. He drew a compass-bearing line on the chart, then stepped off some mileage with the dividers. "Holy cow! If this keeps up, somebody's gonna wish he'd brought his long underwear."

Monk called, "Where are we?"

"About two hundred miles north of the Canadian border."

Doc Savage had been flying. Now he turned the controls over to Ham and came back to the rear of the cabin.

Chris Columbus sat there, bundled in blankets. His color was perfectly good, his eyes clear. But otherwise he looked as if his disposition had curdled.

"You getting over your airsickness," Doc Savage asked dryly, "enough to tell us your story?"

Chris Columbus hesitated. Finally he grimaced.

"I wasn't airsick," he said.

"So we figured." Monk leaned over him and showed him a hairy block of a fist. "You got any idea what *this*"—Monk moved his fist threateningly—"could do to that face of yours?"

"Probably not as much damage as you think," Chris said, unimpressed.

"Easy on the rough stuff, Monk," Doc advised.

"Rough stuff, or smooth stuff—I've made up my mind about this," Chris said flatly.

"In what way?"

“You’re mixed up in this thing now,” said Chris slowly, “and I’ve got a hunch you’ll go on through with it. I’ve been studying you fellows. You like excitement and mystery. Yes. You’ll go on—regardless of whether I tell you what I know, or not.”

He looked up at them. His jaw was square with determination.

“So I’m not going to tell you a thing,” he added.

Monk’s temper was chiefly notable for the suddenness with which it could get away from him. He squared off, yelled, “Put up your fists, you double-crosser! I’ll make hamburger out of you!”

Renny reached over, shoved Monk, said, “Be quiet, you missing link! He must have some good reason for not talking to us!”

“I’ll give him a good reason to tell us!” Monk shouted.

Chris Columbus shook his head at them. “I don’t blame you for being hot. But here’s how it is. This whole thing is important to me. It’s the most important thing in my existence. I’ve devoted two years of my life to it, and if we fail now, I’ll go right on. I’ll continue by myself, and I’ll feel better if no one but myself knows the true story.”

Monk snapped, “That reason doesn’t make sense!”

Chris nodded agreement.

“There’s another reason,” he said. “I’ve mentioned it before. If I tell the story, you might get the idea I’m crazy, and lock me up in a zany box somewhere instead of going on with it. I’m telling you flatly that the truth behind this is not easy to believe.”

There was a finality about the young man’s tone that definitely put a period to the conference. Even Monk subsided.

Doc Savage worked with the short-wave radio—not the direction finder, for Ham was using that as he handled the controls—until a response came over the air. The bronze man turned from the apparatus, obviously satisfied.

Fifty miles ahead, somewhat to the west, was a spot marked on the chart as a flying field maintained in the northern wasteland by the Canadian government.

“Land there,” Doc directed. “Long Tom and Johnny are meeting us there,” Doc advised. “I got in touch with them by radio and suggested they bring up another plane—the small speed ship that is painted a silver color.”

The plane they were flying, one of the bronze man’s largest ships, was painted a bronze color which Doc used most frequently, and the hue was not one readily adapted to camouflage against snow.

The speed ship to which he referred was a smaller, single-motored job that was mostly motor and wings, although it also had a low landing speed due to scientific wing design and an equipment of efficient wing flaps. It was coated with an iridescent silver material somewhat in the nature of the so-called “fish scale” paint applied to automobiles, and flying at any considerable height it was almost invisible.

The little plane was resting on the snow-covered flying field, and they did not discern it until they were a hundred feet above.

There was enough snow to make their landing difficult.

“What we need,” said big-fisted Renny, “is ski equipment.”

“Tercio has made no effort to equip his plane with skis instead of wheel gear,” Doc said. “There must be some purpose in that.”

William Harper Johnny Littlejohn and Major Thomas J. Long Tom Roberts, remaining pair of Doc’s group of five aids, came running to meet them.

Johnny Littlejohn was a man of two achievements: His big words, which he had a distressing habit of using upon everyone but Doc. And his ability as a geologist and archaeologist was unquestioned. He was a very long and thin man, longer and thinner than it seemed any man could be and still live. His clothing never fitted him, and he usually wore a monocle attached by a ribbon to his lapel, the monocle being a powerful magnifying glass which he used in the course of his work.

Long Tom Roberts, the remaining member of the party, had a name that in no way applied to his appearance. He was not tall. The nickname had arised out of his misadventure with a pirate cannon of the “long tom” variety in the past. He was a rather unhealthy-looking specimen, owning a complexion readily associated with a mushroom cellar. He did not look like a man with an international reputation as an electrical wizard.

When Doc Savage explained that he planned to take the smaller plane himself and fly on accompanied only by Chris Columbus, the idea did not meet with much approval.

Renny got the bronze man out of earshot, rumbled, “Holy cow, Doc! That Chris bird has double-crossed us by not telling us anything. How do you know he can be trusted?”

Doc explained his motives.

“There is something about human nature that makes a man more inclined to tell his troubles to one person than to a crowd,” he advised. “That may work out with Chris. If it doesn’t—if he fails to tell me the truth about this—we are no worse off than we are now. Also, it is better if we travel in two planes,” Doc added. “Then, if something happens to one ship, we have the other available.”

If the bronze man had actually expected Chris Columbus to break down and part with the truth as a result of privacy, his reasoning failed to bear fruit. Chris seemed steeped in gloom. He slouched in the bucket seat, biting his fingernails, or staring at them, and shoving his lower lip out in various shapes. Once he did look up shamefacedly.

“This makes me a hell of a guy, don’t it?” he demanded. “I call on you for help, then I refuse to tell you what it’s all about. Boy, does that make me a stinker!”

Which was as near as he came to talking freely. The bronze man decided to give him a bit more time, then try indirect persuasion upon him. Just now the air was very bumpy, and the little plane, with its terrific speed, felt as if it were being hit a succession of blows by a giant rubber maul.

Then, quite suddenly, the bronze man realized they were flying over Decimo Tercio’s plane.

“Tercio’s ship,” the bronze man said abruptly, “seems to have landed. We’re over the spot.” He looked at Chris Columbus. “What do you advise doing?”

“Me advise?” Chris stared at him. “You still trust me?”

“Why not?”

Chris took a deep breath and grinned. “You’re all right. The average guy would bop me on the nose and tie me up for what I’ve done.”

“Would it be a good idea to land near Tercio’s ship?”

“It would. Nearer the better.”

Decimo Tercio’s big plane—the upper wing surfaces were painted the conventional orange color, which made it easy to spot—stood close against a thick wall of evergreen trees that fenced in a flat snow-coated surface that might have been a frozen lake or merely a meadow.

Dawn was building up in the eastern sky like a growing white sheep, but it was not yet spreading enough illumination to distinguish more than general things.

To the north and west not far distant there was a bleak rock of a mountain, bare and dark and sheer, but distinctly marked on its southern face, where there were two great irregular white rings caused by snow, probably everlasting, that reposed in rock crevices.

“Target Mountain,” Chris Columbus said.

Doc glanced at him sharply. The young man seemed greatly pleased; moreover he must have known this part of the Northland well to recognize that remote butte.

“You’ve been here before?” Doc asked.

“Oh, sure. I traded for furs all over this country. And it was on north of here that I met Lanta——” He stopped then, put his lips together tightly.

Doc stood the plane on its nose, flattened out, and skimmed over the surface of the landing field—lake or meadow or whatever it might be—to make sure there were no obstructions. The wind was rather strong, he saw; it carried little white woolly bears of swirling flakes across the surface, and the trees were bowing slowly in unison.

Nothing moved around Decimo Tercio’s plane.

Doc took it easy, landing. The snow was deep, soft as froth, bogged the plane like mud. Fortunate, the bronze man reflected, that the stuff was not deeper, or they might have trouble getting off again.

With great whooping gusts of propeller stream, he sent their ship to a spot alongside the other plane. He let the motor idle and climbed out. Chris Columbus was already on the ground.

They waded through the snow toward the other plane, and the plane door flew open and Two Wink Danton and Wilmer Fancife leaned out, repeating rifles already aimed at Doc and Chris!

Chapter X

BLAST IN THE ARCTIC

ASTONISHMENT jerked Chris Columbus into a rigid statue, Doc Savage was equally surprised, having had no suspicion that Two Wink and Fancife were any nearer than St. Louis.

Chris said out of the side of his mouth, "This is my fault for not talking."

"What do you mean?"

"I knew they had made Tercio talk."

Fancife said, "Either one of you gentlemen can move if you want to! It will give us an excuse."

Doc did not stir. Chris had his lips parted, his breath making slow steam in the bitterly-cold arctic air.

Two Wink held a rifle on them, and Fancife began searching their clothing. He took object after object from Doc Savage's pockets, scowling at some of the gadgets because he did not know what they were; then he slapped the bronze man's garments and realized there was stuff all through his clothing.

"Hell, we'll have to take your clothes," he growled.

He went over to Two Wink and the two of them consulted in a voice too low to be overheard. Result of the palaver did not seem agreeable to Two Wink, because he was scowling, although Fancife wore a widely grim grin when they came back.

"Two Wink is gonna stand lookout," Fancife advised them coldly, "while I make you change clothes. I'll take you in the plane where it's warm."

He backed into the plane with the rifle, menaced them with the weapon while they also clambered inside.

"Look!" Chris barked.

He meant Decimo Tercio. The man sat in one of the plane seats. There were ropes around his ankles, more ropes about his chest and the seat which he occupied, holding him securely. It was cold in the plane, and his breath was a series of angry spurts.

"How'd they get you, Tercio?" Chris asked swiftly.

Tercio scowled at him, said nothing.

"I'm . . . a friend of Lanta," Chris said.

That had no effect, either.

"He's a little irritated," Fancife said, and chuckled. "You see, he underestimated our brains, like you fellows did. He's mad about that."

Tercio swore in some native tongue; they did not have to understand it to appreciate the violence of what he said.

"You see?" Fancife chuckled again. "Never occurred to him that we would grab the fastest plane we could get as soon as he escaped from us. Grab a racing plane and whirl

right up here to Target Mountain and wait for him to show up.”

Fancife walked over to Tercio and gave his head a shove. “Forgot you told us Target Mountain was one of the landmarks you had to find on your way back, didn’t you?”

Doc said, “You beat us all here with a very fast plane, and when Tercio appeared, you forced him down? Is that the way it was?”

“With rifles.” Fancife nodded. He moved his rifle menacingly. “We’re very good with these things. If you don’t want to know how good, get out of those clothes.”

Chris yelled, “We’ll freeze to death!”

“That’ll be swell,” Fancife told him. “Hurry up and get out of those clothes.”

Both Doc and Chris Columbus stripped to underwear shorts before Fancife said, “That’ll do,” after glancing sidewise at Two Wink, who had put his head in the plane door to watch. “You see anybody, Two Wink?”

“Nobody else in sight. Guess they came alone.”

Doc Savage drew a breath of relief at that. He had instructed Monk and Ham and the others to fly a course at least fifteen miles to the right of his own, and the precaution was now proving fortunate.

Fancife planted himself in front of Doc and Chris and made a grim-sounding speech.

“We’re not going to kill you, like some guys would,” he said.

Having paused for a few moments so that they could get the dramatic effect of his opening, Fancife continued. “Some guys would bump you off, but not us. We’re just trying to get along and be left alone. We’re taking your clothes and putting you in your plane. We’ve searched your plane to be sure there are no more clothes in it. We’ve also made sure the plane is heated.” He turned to Two Wink. “It *is* heated, ain’t it?”

“That plane,” said Two Wink, “has got everything.”

“Swell.” Fancife grinned at Doc and Two Wink. “You two won’t freeze to death in the plane. And you won’t be likely to go jumping out in your union suits to cause us trouble.”

Chris scowled at Fancife. “Something fishy about this.”

“Think you know me better than that, don’t you?” Fancife asked.

“I do. I know you’re the guy they meant when they invented the word *skunk*.”

Fancife grinned at that. “I know you’ll be disappointed to find out how wrong you’ve been.”

Chris snarled, “We made this North country together, trading for furs. Only you were swindling. I got to know you mighty well during those days two years ago, Fancife. I found out that you were the lowest form of life. And finally, after we met Lanta, and you——”

“Shut up!” Fancife’s teeth were showing and his eyes were not pleasant. “Get over there and take off in that plane of yours—before I change my mind!”

Doc Savage had learned to judge men; he knew it would be poor policy to cross Fancife at the moment. There was something strange in the man's manner. Fancife wanted to kill them—there was even an undertone in his manner, something sinister that was hard to define, that was not pleasant. Possibly it was his complete confidence. And he seemed to be turning them loose, which was not like the man.

As they moved back toward Doc's plane, the bronze man's flake-gold eyes probed the darkness—it seemed much darker here on the ground than in the air—until he located Fancife's plane. The craft stood more than a hundred yards distant. Evidently they had made a poor landing and coasted in among the trees, but the ship did not seem to have been damaged. It was painted silver, hence almost unnoticeable in the murk and swirling, wind-driven snow.

Doc and Chris Columbus climbed into the bronze man's plane.

Fancife waved an arm in the direction of the far end of the clearing, which was lost in the gloom.

"Taxi down there and take off into the wind," he ordered. "We don't want you cracking up here and maybe breaking your necks!" He flourished his rifle. "And don't try gunning us from the air. You wouldn't have a chance."

He stepped back then, got behind a tree, kept his rifle ready. But no hostile gesture came from Doc's plane. The ship taxied, engine moaning and prop throwing up great clouds of snow, far down the field until the ship was hardly discernible. Then there was a delay while the engine howled and labored.

"What's wrong?" Two Wink gasped uneasily.

"They're just havin' some trouble turnin' around in the snow," Fancife assured him. "They'll make it."

A moment later, the engine bawl loudened and the plane crawled across the field and slanted up into the sky.

Fancife turned to Two Wink. "You see!"

Two Wink was pale. His trembling was not from the cold. He stood there, fingers clinched, listening—listening. And when the explosion came, he jumped as if struck and a look of unutterable horror washed his face.

The explosion was loud. It came from the west, the direction Doc's plane had flown. There was some flash, not much. The echoes bounced back from Target Mountain, a series of gobbling noises. Then other sounds came, noise of the blasted plane crashing the earth.

Two Wink croaked, "You—you think we had better—better——"

"Look at them?" Fancife shook his head. "Hell, no. Savage and Chris are dead."

"Where'd you—put the bomb?" Two Wink asked tensely.

"Under their dunnage in the plane. That's why they didn't find it."

Chapter XI

THE BIG BIRDS

FANCIFE walked back to the plane, climbed inside and seized Tercio. “Give me a hand.”

They dragged Tercio through the snow to their own ship, and thrust the man inside. Fancife stood scowling at Tercio, then thought of a torture idea. He thrust his rifle barrel into Tercio’s mouth, and the man’s tongue and lips stuck agonizingly to the cold steel. Fancife twisted, jerked. Tercio moaned.

“You saw what just happened—we killed Savage and Chris Columbus.” Fancife got down on his knees to glare into Tercio’s eyes. “We’re through kidding. We’ve gone too far with this to back out. So you better talk.”

Tercio glared hate, said nothing.

“We’ll have to kill you to shut you up,” Fancife said. “Why be a fool, Tercio? Take us the rest of the way in.”

“What happens to me then?” Tercio asked thinly.

“We turn you loose.”

“That doesn’t sound reasonable. I’ll still know you’re murderers, won’t I?”

“Naturally, but you’ll be staying there yourself. Didn’t you tell us you never intended to come back again? You said you spent a year distilling fuel for your plane so you could take some of those furs, fly out and sell them, and buy rifles and ammunition and fly back?”

Tercio thought it over. His facial expression showed that he was thinking. What choice had he?

“All right,” he growled.

They untied his wrists—his wrists only—and placed him in one of the cockpit seats.

“You stay back in the cabin,” Fancife told Two Wink, “and keep a gun in your hand, in case this fellow tries something funny.”

Two Wink nodded.

Fancife then carried Tercio’s rifles and ammunition—the stuff he had bought with proceeds of the fur sale—to the plane. It took him some time. There were a lot of the guns.

The plane motor had cooled somewhat; it failed to start for a time, and Fancife swore violently at the prospects of getting out with a canvas hood and a blowtorch and heating the cylinders. The engine took, and its rumble filled the clearing.

Fancife jockeyed the ship across the clearing. Once his eyes gaped and his hair all but stood on end as he thought he wasn’t going to make it. Then he got the ship into the air.

He looked at Tercio and scowled.

“You must weigh a ton,” he said. “I damn near didn’t get her off.”

“The snow was deep,” Tercio said. He pointed at Target Mountain. “You take a bearing directly north a quarter west from that mountain.”

The plane moaned ahead. The sun came up, and the arctic wilderness was a waste of blinding white. They were in a great valley, with mountains to left and right.

Two Wink sat hunched forward, trying to figure out how Doc Savage had managed to follow Tercio north, and swearing over the baffling problem.

Once Tercio turned around and looked at him with a thin grin. “In the next half hour, you’re going to stop thinking about a little thing such as that,” he said.

There was excitement in Tercio’s manner. He pressed his face against the windows, even yanked the glass back and thrust his head out in the ripping cold slipstream, in order to see better. He spotted landmarks that were familiar, grunted. He became more and more pleased. Finally he was grinning.

“Good, good!” he chortled. “I remember a way back without any trouble.”

At Tercio’s grunted command and a leveled arm, Fancife banked the plane left, headed by the mountains on that side. Jagged foothill peaks thrust up at them. The mountains were very steep. Once he had to circle for additional altitude. He grew uneasy.

“Hell, if we’re goin’ over those mountains, we better find a pass,” he said. “This job hasn’t got a supercharger, and it may not work so good up in this thin air.”

Tercio’s grin was showing all his teeth.

“We don’t go over,” he said.

Two Wink stared at Tercio, then at the mountains, and shuddered.

The plane was laboring, panting like a climber. The air was rough, incredibly so. Once they went into a spin and Fancife got straightened out barely in time.

If hell were ice and snow, it would be something like what was below them now. There was no snow. There was too much wind for snow to stay on. Everything was ice, dirty-looking ice that was as formidable as tiger fangs, and looked somewhat like great tiger fangs. Bright slanting blades of the cold sunlight cast sprawling shadows as dark as frozen monsters.

The plane panted and labored as if trying to keep away from what was below.

A canyon opened suddenly. It was a strange canyon. It was not a gash sinking perpendicular-walled into the mountain. It seemed more of a slanting cut, as though a great ax might have chopped down at a forty-five degree angle into the mountain, and this was the hole that had resulted.

Tercio spoke. His voice was almost a screech of delight.

“Into the pass,” he howled.

Fancife turned on him. Fancife’s face was plastered with fear.

“You fool!” he barked. “It’s dark down in there. We’ll crash!”

“Fly into it,” Tercio yelled.

Fancife visibly grabbed his courage and put the nose of the plane into the giant crevasse. He was scared. He used the wing flaps to cut their flying speed.

They sank down and down and darkness closed about them as if they had gone into a deep throat. Fancife had switched on the wingtip floodlights. They poked out a pale glow that soon surrendered against blackness.

Fancife yelled out then. There was utter fright in his voice. He started to yank the plane back and end it up.

Tercio struck him. He used his right fist, hit a blow hard enough to jar Fancife from head to toes.

“You don’t go back!” Tercio snarled. “I’ve gone through hell to get here, and we’re going on!”

Fancife got his nerve back. He flew on downward for what seemed a distance of miles. Twice, the wall of jagged stone loomed distantly in the floods, and Fancife banked frantically.

“There’s plenty of room,” Tercio said. “Just be careful. Remember, when I blew in here the first time, it was by accident. I thought I was inside a volcanic cone, and I kept trying to reach the bottom.”

Two Wink had been peering about, and suddenly he stiffened.

“It’s getting light again!” he yelled.

They could, they realized, discern the walls of the shaftlike affair down which they had been flying. This was particularly remarkable since the walls were at least a quarter of a mile distant.

And then, quite suddenly, there were no walls, only a great dome of a ceiling above, and a slanting wall of stone on the right, and on the other side the vastness of a strangely illuminated space. The plane turned into that vastness. It was like flying through moonlight, and this luminance got brighter and brighter until they were flying in light as brilliant as sunlight.

“Look!” Two Wink pointed. “The sun!”

The man was indicating a great source of light in the distance, a light utterly blinding.

Fancife barked. “It wouldn’t be the sun, you fool. *We’re inside the earth!*”

Below, there was vegetation. Pine trees and cedar, birch and other growth typical to the Canadian wilderness. This growth was changing. The Northern varieties of evergreens became scarcer, replaced by oak and elm, or trees that looked somewhat similar to these. Then there were palms and great ferns, dense jungle below.

It was as if they had flown from the Northern Canada woods across the middle Western tree belt and to the tropical jungles, all in the course of a few minutes. The distance could not have been more than twenty miles.

Now there was different growth ahead. Fantastic jungle composed of monstrous things that were more like ferns and weeds than trees.

The air had become warm. Compared to the bitter cold of the arctic, the heat seemed stifling.

Tercio said, "Fly higher. Fly as high as you can."

Fancife's fear was gone. Excitement had gripped him.

"Hell with you!" he barked. "I'm going to fly close to the ground and look the place over."

Tercio reached angrily for the controls. Fancife snatched out a revolver and struck him. Because Fancife was excited, he hit Tercio harder than he had intended. Tercio slumped senseless.

"Serves him right," Fancife muttered. "He'll come to his senses later, and maybe he'll have some gumption."

Three or four minutes later, Two Wink shrieked. It was a wordless kind of a cry. Fancife whirled, snarled, "What the hell ails *you*?"

"*Look!*"

Fancife stared.

"Great blazes!" he yelled. He gave the throttle a bat with his palm and knocked it open to the last notch.

The plane made a loud, tired noise and lunged forward. "We outrunnin' 'em?" Fancife shouted.

Two Wink looked back, shuddered, said, "They're gaining. There's hundreds of 'em!"

He meant the things that were like birds, and yet not birds, for they were covered with a reptilian hide instead of feathers, the wings being membranous after the fashion of bats, but resembling bats in hardly any other particular—certainly not in size, for the smallest of these things had a wingspread of not less than twenty feet.

There was a vast black cloud of the aerial horrors, and they flew with the speed of aerial express trains.

"They're gonna catch us!" Two Wink shrieked.

It was then that Doc Savage and Chris Columbus came crawling out of the rear of the plane—there was a hatch into the aft portion of the fuselage; they scrambled through that. And the bronze man seized Fancife, while Chris grabbed Two Wink. The fight was as short as it was violent. Doc tore all the pockets out of Fancife's suit, let guns, cartridges and other contents spill.

"We might have remained hidden back there a while longer," the bronze man said, "but we didn't want you getting us killed."

The bronze man leaned out of the window and stared back.

Chris Columbus did likewise.

"Them things'll get us!" Chris shouted.

"They have a chance at that," Doc admitted grimly.

Chapter XII

THE PREHISTORIC WORLD

FANCIFE and Two Wink remained on the floor of the plane cabin, where they had been hurled. Both were so astonished that their expressions were blankly stupid.

Finally Fancife snarled: “How’d you—what—weren’t you in the plane when it blew up?”

Doc ignored them. The bronze man was working with the plane controls. Fancife had been too excited to realize that the wing flaps were set, cutting the speed of the ship a great deal. Doc remedied that error. Then, although the plane would have gone much faster, he deliberately cut the speed to let the pursuing horrors catch up with them.

Chris Columbus had taken one of Fancife’s pistols. He menaced Fancife and Two Wink with the weapon.

“Little surprised to see us, ain’t you?” he asked.

Fancife licked his lips. Surprised was no word for it.

“Doc Savage here”—Chris nodded at the bronze man—“figured back there in that clearing in the arctic that you had tampered with our plane so it would crash. It wasn’t reasonable to think you would let us go free.”

“How’d you get here?”

“Merely jumped out of Doc’s plane while it was at the far end of the clearing. It was too dark for you to see us. We took some equipment along. Doc’s plane was fixed with a robot and the controls could be locked. For a while we thought the plane wouldn’t take off by itself in that deep snow. But it did.”

“But how’d you get in this plane?” Fancife snarled.

“Simple. Plane was among the trees, you remember. We just hightailed it around to the bus, and climbed aboard. Nice big inspection port you’ve got back there into the rear of the fuselage. We crawled through that.”

Fancife swore.

Chris grinned. “After you got in the air, we cut some holes in the fuselage so we could see where you were goin’. Saw them big birds chasin’ us, and figured we’d better save our necks.”

Chris then peered out of the window. He paled.

“Hey!” he roared. “Them things has about got us!”

The whole thing might have been a sort of comic-paper affair of a plane being pursued by impossibly big and hideous birds—except that the thing was real. It was happening. It was not reasonable, not even close to the bounds of credibility, but here they were in the plane—and there were the fantastic flying things.

“They’re equipped with teeth!” Chris gulped.

Teeth was a mild word for the armament in the long, somewhat parrotlike jaws of the flying things. They were somewhat like magnified shark maws. The birds—they were at close range now, unpleasantly illuminated by the strange “sunlight”—were totally hideous.

Doc suddenly jammed the plane into a dive. One moment they were flying level; then they were roaring earthward.

The squadron of weird flying monsters went winging on, apparently unaware that their quarry was not ahead of them.

“They weren’t after us at all!” Chris exclaimed.

“Don’t fool yourself,” Doc said. “They were chasing us all right.”

Chris peered upward. “But look at the silly things. They’re flying as if we were still ahead of them.”

“They’re a species of pterodactyl.”

“Put-what?”

“One of the prehistoric forms of flying life—pterodactyl,” the bronze man explained. “Like most primitive life forms, they probably have almost no brain, and very slow reactions.”

“You mean,” said Chris, “that those put . . . put . . . them funny-lookin’ flyin’ animals—still think they’re chasin’ us?”

“That is the general idea.”

Doc Savage pulled the plane level and flew at an altitude of not much more than five hundred feet. At this height, he was hardly above the highest of the fantastic tree growth below. He stared downward, his scientific interest racing.

When the plane came to a level clearing which was more than half a mile in each dimension, the bronze man suddenly pointed the craft downward.

“We will land,” he said. “It doesn’t seem possible this place can be real.”

The wheels swished through foot-high grass, and eventually stopped. Doc climbed out. The grass was incredibly coarse, each blade about the size and shape of a segment of a palm frond.

“What we gonna do with the prisoners?” Chris asked.

Reluctantly, Doc postponed examining their surroundings. The bronze man had devoted a great deal of his life to science. And no scientist, in a place like this, could think of much else.

They found some bundles of supplies in the plane which were tied with quarter-inch manila rope; they used this line to securely bind Fancife and Two Wink.

“What about Tercio?” Chris queried.

Doc frowned at Tercio. The man had not been very cooperative at any time.

“We will tie him, too.”

They finished roping Tercio without anything happening. The air was warm and moist, much like a tropical jungle. The light was bright, but since it did not come from overhead, it was more like sunlight of late afternoon, except that now that their eyes

had become accustomed to it, they realized there was a definite bluish quality to the luminance.

Chris Columbus looked all around, obviously trying to find words to express what he thought of the spot. He grinned foolishly, because he could think of nothing adequate.

“Isn’t this the damnedest place?” he muttered finally.

There was no sky overhead; only a somber darkness, almost indistinguishable in the mists of distance, showed them where there must be the arching stone of the ceiling.

“What keeps the ceiling from falling down?” Chris asked hollowly.

Instead of answering, Doc Savage took several tentative steps. He had noticed that he felt remarkably light on his feet. He jumped. The little leap sent him sailing several feet, although he did not put forth much effort.

“Try jumping,” he suggested.

Chris leaped—and managed to jump fully as high as his own head from a flat-footed start. “For the love of a kangaroo!” he exploded.

“Gravity probably keeps the ceiling up,” Doc Savage said slowly. “Science, to tell the truth, has very few proven theories about gravity. One of the theories that gravity is the attraction of mass—in other words, you get a sufficiently large body of matter together, and you have gravity. Once the theory was even advanced that if the world was hollow, you could walk around on the inside of the shell, due to gravity being a mass attraction.”

“In other words, the mass of stone over the ceiling is sufficient to create its own gravity and become self-supporting?”

“To a certain extent.”

Decimo Tercio grunted, said, “That probably explains it. You can climb up the walls, and even crawl around on the ceiling, if you have handholds that will support you. Some of the animals do that, and I’ve watched them. If they come loose, they barely fall for a time, then fall faster as they get away from the mass attraction of the ceiling.”

“How big is this place?” Doc asked.

“It’s another world, almost.” Tercio frowned. “You can believe that, or not, as you wish.”

Doc Savage looked at Tercio. “We might as well straighten out your part in this. You have been here before, haven’t you?”

Tercio hesitated.

“Yes,” he said finally. “I see no need of keeping the existence of the place secret.”

“How did you get here?”

“I was attempting a transpolar flight from Russia to the United States ten years or so ago,” Tercio advised, “and I got into that canyon which is the entrance to this place. My plane wings had iced up and I couldn’t lift the crate out of the canyon. I flew around in there, the wings icing up, and finally knew I would have to land on what I thought was the bottom of the canyon.”

Tercio looked at them and grinned.

“I had several very powerful flares for making an emergency landing at night,” he said. “I simply tossed them out, one at a time, and flew down and down by the light the flares gave. Eventually, of course, I ran out of flares. But I had landing lights on the plane, and those helped. Eventually I got inside.”

“But you turned up in St. Louis,” Doc reminded.

“Sure.” Tercio moved his jaw to indicate the weird world surrounding them. “You’ve seen those flying things. You think you’ve seen something. Well, you haven’t. Not yet. This is an incredible place, and without a high-powered rifle, you’re helpless. There’s even lots of places where a rifle won’t help you. But to clip a lot of explanation—I need rifles and ammunition. So I trapped some furs, distilled some fuel for my plane myself—I’m a chemist of sorts—and headed for the outside world. I made it, landed in St. Louis, and was trying to peddle the furs when”—he glared at Fancife, Two Wink and Chris Columbus—“this trouble all started.”

Doc glanced at Chris, who nodded.

“That’s probably the truth,” Chris said.

The bronze man stared about, and his scientific curiosity got the better of him.

“Before we go any farther,” he said abruptly, “I am going to take a look at this place. Chris, can you fly a plane?”

“Fairly well,” Chris admitted. “I did fur trading in the north, flying a great deal in one of the company planes. That was when I first met Fancife. Our companies teamed us up in order to save money.”

Doc said, “In case of an emergency—if some large animal should rush out into the clearing—you can take the plane into the air, and return later to pick me up?”

“Right.”

The bronze man removed one of his equipment boxes—it contained everything he had saved from his plane—from the rear portion of the ship where he and Chris had been hidden. He noticed Chris staring at him, so he patted the box and said, “Machine pistol and ammunition,” in explanation.

Chris nodded and watched the bronze man walk across the clearing and vanish into the strange jungle, much of which was comprised of fernlike plants attaining a height of fifty and sixty feet.

Chris Columbus, once Doc Savage was out of sight, became suddenly conscious that he was very much alone in a remarkably queer world. He frowned and put out his jaw at his own fears. But it was a little difficult to self-administer a hypodermic of nerve.

There was not stillness. There had not, at any time since they stopped the plane motor, been stillness. There was a steady and monotonous undertone of sound, such a far-off bedlam as might have been made by a waterfall in a deep canyon.

Tercio noticed Chris listening. “That’s the animals,” he said.

“Huh?” Chris stared blankly.

“The noise never stops,” Tercio said dryly. “It goes on and on, and sometimes it is louder. You see, the sounds travel up and are reflected back from the stone ceiling, I guess. Anyway, there’s always a kind of roaring in this place. You get used to it.”

“Is it—dangerous?”

Tercio laughed. Not pleasantly. “It’s about the most dangerous damn place you can imagine.”

“Why?”

“You remember reading about how the world was millions of years ago, when prehistoric monsters as big as office buildings were wandering around? You probably imagined what a tough time the poor caveman was having along about then, didn’t you? Well, it gives you some idea.”

“Animals the size of office buildings? You’re exaggerating, aren’t you?”

“Maybe. You be your own judge.”

Fancife had been lying there, utter hate in his eyes as he watched Chris. Now something else came over his face. A cunning expression.

“Lanta,” Fancife said, “was nice, too.”

Chris jumped, glowered. “All right!” he snapped. “Leave her out of it!”

Fancife began laughing then, in a way that drove Chris into a maddened rage. Chris flung over, struck Fancife in the face.

Fancife blew blood off his crushed lips, said, “If I wasn’t tied up, you couldn’t do that!”

Chris snarled, “I’m gonna untie you! Then I’m gonna beat you to death!”

Chris then wrenched the rope off Fancife’s wrists and ankles. He kicked Fancife contemptuously, said, “Get up, you dirty wart!”

Without rising, Fancife lunged. His fingers clamped Chris’ ankles. He wrenched; Chris went down. Ordinarily, that would have been merely the beginning of a rough-and-tumble fight.

But Two Wink was ready, had his legs drawn up. Two Wink was wearing heavy shoes. When he kicked, the shoes crashed against Chris’ head like two clubs. Chris sagged. Fancife hit him, swung terrific rights and lefts as fast as he could. Two Wink kept kicking.

“You’ll kill him!” Tercio yelled.

“Swell,” Fancife snarled, and kept on kicking.

Exhaustion did more than pity to make the two men finally stop beating Chris. They sprawled back, and Fancife began untying Two Wink. Chris was a twisted ruin from which strings of scarlet dribbled.

Two Wink pointed at Chris, asked, “We gonna leave him here for some animal to eat?”

“No.” Fancife shook his head. “Heave him in the plane. If he wakes up, we’ll put the screws on him. I would like to know if he left any written record back in the United States that might cause the law to put the shuck on us later.”

“What about Doc Savage?”

“We should worry about him.” Fancife got behind the controls.

Tercio said sharply: “This is terrible country! Savage won’t live long if you go away and leave him alone here!”

“That’ll be great!” Fancife said.

The plane crawled moaning across the clearing and slanted up into the air.

Chapter XIII

THE CAVE

DOC SAVAGE did not dash out into the clearing, although he heard the plane motor give its first noisy growl. He remembered that he had warned Chris to take the air if any dangerous animal appeared. He supposed that was what was happening. Discovery that he was mistaken came when he reached the edge of the jungle and stared out.

The plane was not circling; it slanted steadily upward, departing. There was no animal in the clearing, no visible danger. The plane kept going. Finally it disappeared.

Marooned! There wasn't the slightest doubt of it.

The bronze man drew back in the jungle, moving with care not to make any sound. Rankness of the growth about him was astounding. And most of it would have been completely strange, except that he had given a great deal of attention to studying prehistoric forms of plant life. Because his previous knowledge was limited to what scientists had been able to deduce from fossilized fragments, specimens found preserved in asphalt pits or elsewhere, the bronze man's interest in studying the surroundings firsthand was intense.

He had—literally, except for time—been transported to a prehistoric world. On every hand, wherever he looked, there were growing plants, the nature of which it had taken scientists long study to determine. And science, Doc Savage was interested in noting, had made a sizable number of mistakes.

For the most part, the growth was composed of ferns or fernlike plants, the size of these ranging from tiny things a fraction of an inch in length, up to monsters that were the size of any tree on the outer earth. There were creepers, amazing tangles of them. And because there was a great deal of moisture—the air seemed damply saturated, and frequently light mists fell—there was a quantity of fungus growth similar to mushrooms, although some of these also attained almost comical size.

The bronze man had by now formed a theory of how the strange world could exist. The matter of light, for instance—if he was not mistaken, it came from some volcanic crevasse, where vapors escaped with blazing incandescence that reached such a temperature that the light had most of the qualities of ordinary sunlight.

Plant life ordinarily did not flourish without sunlight. Therefore, this light must have the properties of sunbeams. Moreover, the intense flame—he removed his watch crystal and carefully smoked it, then examined the distant “sun” through this makeshift sunglass—appeared to be blazing atop a cone that extended, like the peak of a volcano, several thousand feet above the floor of the strange world.

Light must come from the thing continuously, so that there was no night, but always daytime. That this was true was indicated by the distorted fashion in which the vegetation grew. Like plants in the outer world, all green growth here extended toward the sun to some extent, which meant that trees and ferns grew upward, then sharply in the direction of the light. The effect was that of a terrific wind sweeping the place.

The bronze man's interest in the unique surroundings nearly cost his life.

Came a loud crashing behind him. He sprang aside, barely managed to let a great form go crashing past.

The instant the bronze man saw the thing, he felt a cold wash of horror, and awareness that death was very close.

The animal resembled a starved cat, except that its length was fully sixteen feet from blunt whiskers to the tip of its tail. It had an oversized head, definitely feline, with huge jaws equipped with fangs that projected fully a foot past the gums.

The bronze man thought, "Sabertooth!" and moved as he had never moved before.

The tiger—it was undoubtedly a type of prehistoric sabertooth tiger—had landed in a huge bed of coarse ferns. It wallowed there for a moment. Plainly the giant cat was confused, being unaccustomed to having quarry evade it by a process of thinking. These prehistoric animals, having very little brain capacity, probably did not have sufficient gumption to dodge a foe. And certainly they did not move quickly. This big cat was slow getting organized and relocating its quarry.

Doc had taken to the tallest handy tree fern. The thing towered all of fifty feet, but he doubted that its height was sufficient. His doubts proved correct. The sabertooth leaped, failed to quite reach him. But the great weight of the cat crashing into the tree all but dislodged the bronze man.

As the giant cat slammed back to earth, Doc was probably more frightened than at any time in his career. It was as if he was undergoing a hideous experience from a nightmare.

Doc had thrust one of the supermachine pistols into his belt, first removing the drum of mercy bullets from it and charging it with explosive slugs. He unlimbered the weapon now—latching it in single-shot position, because he had no idea how long his supply of cartridges must last—and fired.

The blast of the exploding bullet was much louder than the report as it was discharged. The slug struck the tiger squarely, and the blast ripped away a good part of the skull.

Smallness of the brain capacity of the animal was instantly evident by the slowness with which the frightful monster died. It pitched around furiously, even made another leap at the fern, once more almost dislodging Doc. It was making noises now, great bawlings and roarings and snarlings.

Doc held the machine pistol ready, in case he should have to fire again—which was unfortunate. Had he thrust the gun in his belt, he might have saved it.

With a great uproar in the underbrush, a reptilian hulk appeared. This one was huge, as dark and animated as a freight locomotive, and about the same size. It also made similar snorting noises. No doubt the sounds made by the injured sabertooth had attracted this reptilian monstrosity.

Doc eyed the onrushing hobgoblin of a thing with wide-eyed astonishment. It must be a tyrannosaurus, a species of carnivorous reptile believed by science to be one of the most fearsome killing machines that ever stalked the earth. This one differed in some respects from the animals science had created, but in major respects it was the same.

The length of this one was more than thirty feet, which gave no real idea of the thing. It had a body thicker and longer than any elephant Doc had ever seen. The body was not fat, but gaunt and starved. Its covering was a plated armor somewhat similar to scales. The two rear legs were enormously overdeveloped, like a kangaroo's, and also after the fashion of a kangaroo, this thing used its thick tail to balance itself. Both front legs were less developed, and terminated in hideously long steel-hard claws which turned inward; the front legs, it was plain, were used for grasping and holding prey.

The head was revolving. With the mouth closed, it resembled the head of a fantastic snake. The jaws, when they opened, proved to hold innumerable teeth that were like a bed of dirty white needles, each as long and thick as a good-sized dagger.

The tyrannosaurus evidently was mortal enemy of the sabertooth. It charged, trampled the sabertooth, and came on to crash into the tree fern.

The shock of the monster hitting the tree fern was greater than anything Doc Savage had expected. There was a horrible instant when the bronze man was sure he had been torn entirely free. He clutched frantically. So frantically that he had to drop the machine pistol.

The machine pistol fell and landed on the ground. The tyrannosaurus proceeded to trample it. The pistol mechanism was delicate. The prehistoric reptilian creature must have weighed dozens of tons.

Loss of the pistol would be—if the tyrannosaurus chanced to notice Doc—a minor difficulty. Doc remained very still, arms clamped about the fern. He was above the reptile, higher than the thing could reach when it stood on its powerful rear legs. But it could get him with a slight jump. Or, with its fabulous weight, it could easily ride down the fern, to the uppermost fronds of which Doc clung.

But the tyrannosaurus was interested in the sabertooth. It reached down and bit the tiger, crunching the heavy bones of the thing so that they broke with audible noises.

It emitted a roar, an earsplitting frightsome noise that was a combination of steamship siren and dying dog. That noise, Doc reflected, was an interesting scientific phenomenon. It had been believed by some authorities that these reptilian monsters were incapable of making a noise; evidently that was an error.

The tyrannosaurus abruptly picked up the tiger body in its great jaws and bounded away, traveling with ungainly leaps, stopping frequently to peer about.

Cautiously—he now had about as much respect for this place as a man could get—Doc clambered down out of the fern.

The machine pistol, when he finally found it, was hopelessly ruined!

It was his only weapon!

The bronze man had concealed his equipment case in the jungle not far distant. He went to it. The case contained nothing that would serve as a weapon, unfortunately, so he did not open it. He slung the case over his back, pack fashion, using the straps provided for that purpose.

The idea of being unarmed in this phantasmagoria of a place was not pleasant. As he crept along—he was as human as the next man—he had a great deal of difficulty with his courage. Fear wanted to overwhelm him. Complete panic surged at his nerves.

He had an almost overwhelming desire to surrender sanity and plunge shrieking through the fabulous jungle.

When he discovered that something was following him, it was almost a relief. It was genuine danger, something solid that his senses could recognize and grapple.

There were two of the animals, he thought at first. Then he knew there were more of them. Thirty or forty at least.

They were not large. Two feet long, perhaps, with lean arched bodies. Somewhat like weasels, although the heads were shaped differently, the snouts being turned back, bulldog fashion, and the teeth projecting outward rather than down.

He stared when he saw the first one.

The fur! It was amazingly luxurious fur, and familiar. The truth struck him, and somehow it was as astonishing as anything else that had happened.

These were the animals that bore skins such as Decimo Tercio had brought to the St. Louis fur market!

One of the animals came close, stared at Doc with small evil eyes. Then it leaped. Its leap was prodigious, and it came headfirst, its head extended and jaws wide, so that the strange teeth would be driven into his body by the striking impact.

The bronze man had picked up a club. He used that, knocked the weasel-like animal aside. It landed in the nearby brush, kicked around, then came out again.

Another animal appeared. That one also leaped, and Doc used the club. That one, too, seemed little affected by the club blow.

The unpleasant realization dawned on the bronze man that these things were very difficult to kill, no doubt due to the underdeveloped mental and nervous systems.

He shouted, thrashed about with the club. The noise did not disturb them.

Doc took to the most convenient tree fern. He selected one with no branches for some distance, a trunk so smooth that he shinned up only with difficulty. Also, he picked a refuge that was close to other trees into which he could swing if it became necessary. That was fortunate.

The animals climbed up after him with less trouble than he had encountered.

From his height, the bronze man could distinguish many more of the animals that had come up silently. A huge pack of them, numbering scores.

The animals, he had concluded, were some prehistoric and distorted form of bloodsucking rodent, possibly ancestor to the weasel. From the unique shape of their jaws, he could guess how they killed—they simply attacked a larger animal by striking, after which they hung on like huge leeches and sucked sustenance.

Doc ran lightly along a frond, leaped, landed in the adjacent tree fern. From that, he swung to another fern. This form of progress did not bother him greatly; he managed it with almost simian ability. The greatest danger was that he might misjudge the strength of a handhold, not knowing the exact nature of the growth, and go crashing a dizzy distance to earth.

His enormous physical strength was standing him well; without the physical training, two hours of intense exercise each day since childhood, which had given him

muscular development of almost animal ability, he would have faced a large handicap.

However, he tired eventually, and paused to rest. Immediately, the hideous little animals began climbing up to him.

Conscious of a growing desperation, the bronze man went on, slid suddenly to the ground, and went racing through the jungle. It was his hope that he might outrun the things. But that failed. The animals were equipped with the scent-following ability of hounds.

More and more worried, he sought vainly for a stream. He could enter water, throw the things off the scent in that fashion. But he came upon no stream.

Realizing he could not outrun the bloodthirsty little animal vampires on the ground—they were almost upon him—the bronze man again took to the trees. He moved slowly, conserving his strength, waiting until the animals climbed up into one tree before he swung into another. It was exasperating, as well as frightening, with all his scientific ability, he could not devise a method of escaping the animals.

There was higher ground ahead, a wilderness of rocks that thrust above the adjacent prehistoric jungle, naked except for scattered spots of rank moss.

Doc noted crevices high among the rocks, apertures that seemed to be natural caves. He made for them. If he could get inside a cave, and perhaps bar the entrance with stones, he might get some badly needed rest.

Eventually reaching the stony peak, he quitted the last of the trees, and summoning strength, dashed forward. Almost at once, he found a cave such as he desired. Literally not more than a hole in the stone.

He grasped his club for defense against the animals, should one come, turned around and backed into the cave, and almost at once he was seized with great violence.

Chapter XIV

LANTA

THE bronze man had listened and heard nothing. He had sniffed, and detected no animal odor. So he had naturally presumed the cave to be empty. When hands took hold of him, he was completely astounded.

Hands! They *were* hands! He whirled—thinking: What incredible creature could this be? And saw a vast torso draped in a sabertooth hide. Attached to that was a pair of arms that might have been walking beams for an oil-drill rig, with hands that were blunt-fingered and obviously apish, but incredibly strong. The head was a cone, somewhat hairy, with a mouth at the lower edge, ears that were rather animal-like and pointed, a nose that was not much.

Some kind of primitive man, slightly advanced from the ape stages, Doc decided; probably not much mentally, but an astounding physical specimen.

He struck at the fellow, a good left hook that landed squarely. The other barked, sat down. Instantly, there was a rush from behind, and hands pinioned the bronze man. The fight that followed was short, Doc landing only one blow; then he was flat on the stone floor, and at least six men were astride him.

One of the bloodthirsty little animals that had been following Doc now appeared in the door. It made a sound that was more hiss than whistle, and shot forward.

The primitive men whooped out in chorus—not in fright, but in glee. Other apish-looking fellows like themselves came dashing from the back of the cave.

They fell upon the bloodthirsty animals and wielded clubs. There was a good deal of gleeful howling.

Doc watched them closely and concluded the skins of the animals must be a particular prize for clothing. The slaughter of the bloodthirsty rodents continued until the things finally fled. The apish men pursued them a short distance, but not far, then returned to the cave.

They were as pleased as children, for which Doc was glad. When they had first seized him, their humor had been ferocious. He watched them gathering up the animals which they had killed, and dragging them together in a pile, evidently for a communal division of the spoils.

Finally, a man came over to him, looked down and made a gobbling noise that was probably some statement. The words were totally unintelligible. Their language seemed to consist of grunts, shouts and barks of varying volume.

The man must have remarked on Doc's clothes, for the others gathered around. They showed great interest in the cloth of which his garments were fashioned. Man after man fingered the whipcord of his shirt, and put fingers in his pockets, the pockets in particular seeming to intrigue them. Suddenly, over in a corner, a fight broke out.

The fight began, as might be expected, over division of the spoils of the recent slaughter fest among the vicious but fine-furred little animals. One of the gorilla-like men had walked over and calmly began to gather up all the animals he could carry, obviously with the idea of carrying them off.

There was immediately a rather pitiful silence. Doc Savage was puzzled for a moment, then understood the reason. This fellow who was appropriating more than his share was the bully of the tribe; the others were afraid of him.

His name, Doc concluded by listening, was "Aulf."

Aulf was a giant of near Doc Savage's stature. He had the most powerful type of shoulders—sloping rather than square—which are characteristic of apes and monkeys. He had almost no hips. His arms and legs were beams. He had practically no head above his eyebrows.

Aulf was not only the bully of the tribe. He was a temperamental fellow, it suddenly developed.

Apparently he didn't like the peculiar silence that had greeted his hogging the game. For he suddenly picked up a club—some of them carried short spears and atlatls, or throwing sticks, but most of them preferred clubs—and dashed for the nearest group. They scattered.

Aulf jumped up and down, beat his chest, flourished his club, and bellowed. He strutted a few circles to show his command of the situation, after which, greatly pleased with himself, he returned to his loot.

As an afterthought, Aulf strode over to Doc Savage's equipment case, which had been dislodged in the fight and was lying on the floor, and added this to his possessions.

Doc Savage was now seized by the arm and hauled along after the others. One apish fellow remained behind at the cave mouth, on guard.

The caves were partly natural, partly the result of handwork. The stone was a soft type, easily worked with crude tools.

Doc was hauled through several connecting passages, the way being lighted by old women who carried torches. The very old women seemed to have no duty except that of torch bearers; the elderly crones were continually dashing hither and yon in answer to howled demands for a torch given by some furry low-browed male cave dweller.

Aulf—he was leading the way—came to a large stone lying across an aperture in the floor and held in place by a heavy tree trunk. He leaned down, grasped the tree trunk and lifted it off the rock, then straightened and scowled around at the others as if daring any of them to perform such a feat of strength.

When the rock was moved aside, a hole in the floor was disclosed. Doc was jammed through this aperture, and dropped. He fell perhaps ten feet, landed on dust-covered stone.

"Hello," a strange voice said in English.

It was a woman's voice, and she spoke the word in a way that showed English was an unaccustomed tongue. Doc turned slowly, waiting for his eyes to become adapted to the deeper murk.

She was a long golden girl who would have been very appropriate on a magazine cover. Her figure—the abbreviated fur frock showed plenty of it—was exquisite. She was a girl who would have looked bright and intelligent in the most sophisticated company; after the bestial faces of the apish people, meeting this girl was like encountering sunlight after darkness.

“Lanta.” She tilted a finger at herself so Doc would understand. “I am Lanta.”

Doc looked beyond her.

“Who are the others?” he asked.

Lanta smiled sadly. “They are members of my tribe who have had bad luck, like myself.”

Doc examined the men and women who were beyond the girl. They were standing; apparently they had gathered to satisfy their curiosity as to who had been tossed down through the hole to join them.

They were well-built people, long-legged and long-armed, with rather high foreheads and other evidences of a fair grade of intelligence. Very similar to Americans, except that their physical development was greater than that of the average Yank. There were no double chins, no beer paunches among them.

“They speak English?” Doc asked.

“Some of them,” Lanta said.

The bronze man was bursting with one question and he had to get it out. “How do you happen to speak English?”

Changing to very poor Russian, the girl said: “Some of us speak this language as well.”

A possible answer struck the bronze man.

“Decimo Tercio?” he asked.

The girl looked completely blank.

“Veselich Vengarinskovi?” Doc suggested, using Decimo Tercio’s real name.

Lanta started: her eyes went wide. “You know him?”

“Yes.”

“He come to this place long ago,” the girl explained. “He know two languages and he teach them to us in return for being taught our own.”

That, Doc reflected, checks in with everything else. He looked about, decided they were all in what amounted to a prison. The only light came from a sputtering torch jammed in a niche in the wall. The air was fairly pure, so there must be ventilating apertures.

He inquired, “We are prisoners?”

“Yes.” Lanta nodded. “You are with us now. We are all prisoners. In your language, there is a word . . . slaves. Yes, that is it—slaves.”

“You mean slaves of these low-browed clowns?” Doc demanded.

“Yes.”

The bronze man shook his head incredulously. “But they have almost no brains at all! Why do you submit to being prisoners?”

Lanta was a little offended. “We are outnumbered,” she snapped. “And one person does not venture alone into the jungle to return to my people.”

Doc Savage studied the others for a while and formed his own private opinion that their spirit had been broken, that they were shy on courage. The girl, Lanta, seemed to be an exception, however.

The bronze man got up and tugged the torch from its niche and made a search of the prison. Except for the darkness, the place was not unpleasant, although by no stretch of the imagination could it be called luxurious. If there was any escape, it would have to be through the ceiling hole.

Doc questioned Lanta, learning much that interested him. Primarily, he discovered that the girl and the other prisoners belonged to a tribe of much more advanced caliber which resided to the right and toward the Light. The people lived in a valley, it seemed, which they had barricaded against the prehistoric monsters that inhabited this strange world.

They lived by farming, and by raising certain animals which they had domesticated, their existence being idyllic and comfortable, untroubled by danger except from occasional huge pterodactyls which came prowling singly or in groups. Safety from the pterodactyls was secured by dashing under shelters that were erected conveniently. The stupidity of the flying monsters made them easily avoided.

Doc had an archaeologist’s interest in the origin of the two races—how Lanta’s people came to differ so greatly in intelligence from the stupid cavemen who now held them prisoners. Questioning evolved a theory in his mind.

Legends of Lanta’s tribe had it that their ancestors had been sent by a deity, the name of which roughly translated to the Frozen Lord of All that is Elsewhere, sent as a peace offering to the deity of the Light.

It took no great stretch of imagination to surmise that Lanta’s ancestors had wandered in from the arctic wilderness.

As for the apish fellows who held them prisoner, they were true natives of the place. They were ancestors of the human race who had reached caveman status, and advanced no further, due to the fact that conditions in which they lived had never changed.

The altering condition of the world, evolutionists agreed—the passing of the warm age and the coming of the ice age, the end of the ice age and the ensuing cycles of climatic change—were largely responsible for the change in animal and plant life which occupied the surface of the planet.

Doc asked Lanta abruptly, “Do you know Chris Columbus?”

“I—yes,” the girl said. Then suddenly she was gripping the bronze man’s arm. “Where is he? He isn’t here?”

Chapter XV

THE FIGHT

LANTA'S intense interest, the tight emotion in her voice, was disturbing. Doc hesitated, uncertain just what he should say.

"Where is he?" Lanta asked tensely.

"Then you know him?" Doc parried.

Lanta nodded. Her eyes were bright. There was joy back of her excitement.

"A long time ago"—she paused and the movement of her lips indicated she was estimating the time measured in English terms—"it must have been nearly two years ago, I was made a prisoner by these cavemen. I escaped, and tried to make my way through the jungle. I had a terrible time, and finally was forced to flee. I fled for a long distance, and finally came to where the air was very cold, and there was a great crevasse. I climbed up this. I climbed for a long time, until my food and the water I had brought were almost exhausted. And finally I was out in a different world." She gazed at the bronze man. "Your own world."

"Tercio—the Russian flier—must have told you of such an outer world," Doc suggested.

"Yes. That is why I kept going up the crevasse. It was hard climbing, but I wanted to reach the other world of which he had told us."

"And what happened?"

"I did not like it. The air was very cold. And there was—what you call it?—snow. White frozen water—snow. And the animals for food—they were very hard to catch. I was very discouraged. And . . . and then I met two men."

"Two?"

"One was Chris Columbus." Lanta's voice softened and her eyes were gentle as she spoke Chris' name.

"And the other?"

"One named Wilmer Fancife." A coldness and an utter hate came into the girl's manner. "He was a terrible man, this Fancife. He was worse than . . . than Aulf, the bully of this tribe of cavern men."

Doc had reached some conclusions by now. And thereby a great many things were made clear.

"You fell in love with Chris Columbus," he suggested.

Lanta nodded gently. "I am not ashamed of it. He was very good, and nice." She put up her chin. "And he loved me. I am sure of it."

Doc said quietly, "Yes, he loves you. He has been trying to find this place ever since, that he might return to you. He has risked his life in doing so."

The girl, deeply moved, murmured, "I am glad."

“But what happened? What separated you?”

“Fancife,” Lanta said grimly.

“He wanted the furs?”

“The furs I was wearing—yes, the whole trouble was over those. Fancife seemed to think furs such as those would be terribly valuable in your world. So he asked me to tell him where he could find more of the furs. He suggested that we murder Chris, and together have the furs to ourselves. He—he was hideous.”

The girl was silent for a moment. She shuddered at the memory.

“I told Chris, and the two men fought. I thought Fancife had killed Chris, so I fled. I came back into the crevasse, and descended, and tried to reach my people. But I was seized by these cavern men, and I have been a slave since.”

Doc nodded slowly. The girl’s story explained Chris Columbus’ part in the fantastic affair, and explained also the deadly enmity between Chris and Wilmer Fancife.

Both Fancife and Chris had known of the existence of this fantastic world, but had not been able to locate the entrance. Both had been searching for it, and they had left word at the leading fur markets of the world to be notified at the appearance of a fur such as Lanta had worn. When such a fur had come on the market in St. Louis, both had rushed to the spot. Naturally, they had fought on sight.

Only their motivations differed. Fancife wanted the rare fur for what it was worth, which would be considerable if he could bring out breeding pairs of the animals.

Chris had been seeking Lanta, whom he loved.

“You understand everything?” Lanta asked softly.

“Everything,” Doc admitted dryly, “except how we are going to get out of here.”

“You plan escape?”

“Naturally.”

Lanta nodded at her fellow tribesmen. “Many of them have tried. Usually those who attempt it die. They have decided it is better to go on being slaves.”

The bronze man said nothing, but stretched out on the dusty floor. It was not comfortable, but he was tired and needed rest. He was asleep shortly.

His sleep was troubled, which was something out of the ordinary, for he had succeeded in accomplishing one of the most difficult feats with which man is confronted—he had mastered the ability to attain complete nervous placidity in the face of most circumstances. He could keep excitement from arousing him, for excitement and tension were an exhausting force upon his nerves. To express it simply, nothing worried him—if he could help it. He had managed to accomplish this control of nerve placidity, and at the same time retain his ambition and drive, which was a difficult separation in itself, the two being different qualities, but so closely associated that few succeeded in making the division.

He awakened refreshed, very hungry. The hunger was not important, because he had not yet gone without food for any serious length of time.

Investigation showed him that the roof hole was too high to reach, even standing on tiptoes. Moreover, it was closed with the rock, and atop this rested the heavy log which Aulf had been so proud to be able to move.

“Come here,” Doc directed some of the others. “We will form a pyramid, and by standing on your shoulders, I can possibly move the rock.”

To his astonishment there were no takers. Escape was something with which none of them cared to meddle. He tried urging. No success.

“Let me talk to them,” Lanta said grimly.

The girl confronted the others and said a great deal, most of it sounding as if it was partly vitriol. She used words to whip, cajole, shame and urge. Eventually she got a small froth of courage lashed up.

The men formed the pyramid. Doc got on their shoulders, exerted force, rocked the stone until the log rolled off, then shoved the boulder aside and clambered out.

Below him, his helpers hastily scattered to farther recesses of the slave cave.

The log had made quite a crash in falling. It alarmed the cavern men, and several came running. Aulf was among the leaders.

There being no avenue of flight except back into the slave quarters, Doc confronted them.

Aulf gripped his club, and came forward menacingly.

Doc Savage had determined upon a course of action that might—or might not—work. The cavern men had primitive intellects, and from what he had seen of them, he judged that they admired physical bravery and strength above all else. At least, they were impressed by it. The domination which the huge, oafish Aulf exerted over them showed that.

Aulf jumped up and down, ape-fashion. He made faces. He threw back his head and roared.

Doc did the same thing—with trimmings. Instead of merely jumping, he turned several flips and handsprings, an accomplishment which was made even easier because of the appreciably lessened force of gravity. He made faces—they must have been very ferocious, judging from the effects. And he yelled.

Aulf was as amazed as the others. Then it dawned on him that he had been outdone, and he launched into a fresh exhibition.

When it came Doc’s turn, he bested his previous effort. Particularly on the yelling part—he added whistles, howls and several Bronx cheers for effect.

Unfortunately, in the middle of the display, it occurred to him how silly the whole thing would look to a bystander, and he stopped, embarrassed.

Aulf took the bronze man’s hesitancy as a sign of defeat.

Bellowing his frightening best, Aulf lunged in and delivered a tremendous blow with his club. It was a long-armed swing, and Doc ducked under it. Having ducked, he stepped in and drove his fist against Aulf’s solar plexus. Aulf’s stomach muscles felt as hard as metal, giving him some idea of how tough the fight was going to be.

Aulf snorted, used his club again. Once more, he missed. Doc got his arms, began working with jujitsu. Aulf’s apish bones and ligaments were as subject to jujitsu manipulation as those of an ordinary man.

The squalling which Aulf did was remarkable. He clung to the club stubbornly, but finally had to let go.

He had been hurt. He fell on the floor and had a species of screaming spasm, evidently intended to show just how angry he was.

In the middle of Aulf's temperamental display, Doc walked over unkindly and cracked him behind the ear with a fist. Aulf shot to his feet, roared and rushed.

The fight now was distinctly one-sided, Aulf having no knowledge of boxing science. Once he did get hold of Doc Savage, and attempted to sink his teeth into the bronze man's jugular, which appeared to be inside the local Queensberry rules, for the spectators jumped up and down and howled in excitement, thinking the fight was over.

Aulf had a glass jaw. Doc was rather glad when he discovered that, for Aulf had him outclassed as to strength and endurance of an animal kind.

A right to the jaw put Aulf down on his pants. He batted his eyes, looked surprised. He got up, was down again. Cunningly, he tried to keep one hand over the end of his jaw when he got up the next time. However, he moved the hand instinctively when Doc fainted at his eyes, and the bronze man sat him down again.

This time, Aulf remained sitting there with his eyes closed. Doc gave him a shove, and he upset, but did not move otherwise. Aulf was kayoed.

The next few minutes, Doc knew, would be the most difficult of all. A wrong gesture would bring the cavern men upon him in a pack, and he could not hope to defeat all of them.

Doc calmly stood on Aulf's chest, and made the loudest roaring noise he could manage. He walked over, picked up Aulf's club, which was almost as formidable as a wagon tongue, and shouldered the weapon. He roared again.

He was careful to make his howling sound formidable, but not insulting. And he kept his eyes on the ring of stupid-looking faces, watching for a sign of hostility.

When nothing happened—they had not accepted the fact that he was to remain at liberty; they were just thinking it over in their snail-pace way—Doc walked over to his equipment case which Aulf had appropriated.

He also took possession of Aulf's pile of animals, and picking them up one at a time, began tossing them among the crowd of cavern men. The offerings were seized with pleased grunts, proving the donation was a good idea.

Doc then opened his equipment case. Aulf had not succeeded in opening the thing, the matter of the lock having defied his simple mind.

Inside the case was a portable radio transmitter-receiver, and some other articles, among which was a box of ordinary safety matches.

Doc put the matches in his mouth, being sure he was not noticed. Then he went out and confronted the dubious cavern men. He performed some preliminary chest beating and handsprings, largely to get attention.

Then he took a match out of the box in his mouth and struck it, exhibiting the flame.

Results of the performance were entirely satisfactory. Three cavern men lost their nerve and ran.

Doc returned to the mouth of the slave cave and helped Lanta out.

“You speak their language?” he asked.

“A little. It is mostly grunts and barks.”

“Do they believe in any kind of a deity?” Doc asked.

“Only in an evil spirit. They blame him for all their bad luck.”

“Tell them,” Doc said, “that I’m him—the evil spirit. Tell them they are going to have some very bad luck indeed if they mess with me.”

Lanta spoke—her voice was pleasant even when delivering the remarkable conglomerate of noises that was the cavern-man language—and conveyed the idea. She got an answer.

“They say,” she translated, “that they will all get clubs and beat you to death if you do not leave.”

“That’s not so good.” The bronze man pondered. “Tell them,” he suggested, “that I will go away peacefully if they give me an offering. I want all the slaves they have.”

The girl conveyed this news, and was answered.

“They don’t like the idea of losing the slaves,” she said. “They want to know what need you have for slaves.”

“Tell them I don’t like to walk. I want the slaves to carry me.”

While Lanta was explaining this, Doc Savage got a smoke grenade out of the equipment case. There were a few of these, quite useless as weapons—the case, in fact, contained nothing that was of any value as a weapon—and he thought now would be a good time to use one.

He let the grenade ripen at his feet, let the cloud of intense black smoke come up and envelop him in what must have been quite a spectacular effect.

“Tell them,” he called, “that from smoke I shall become a great fire and consume them if they do not listen to reason.”

That did the trick.

“All right,” the girl said. “They will let you take all the slaves with you.”

The bronze man put a question that was more serious. “Now that we’re going to get free, do you think we can make it back to your tribe?”

The girl hesitated. “It is a terrible journey.”

“Far?”

“Not very. But it is through the jungle where the monsters are the largest and most terrible. It will take many days—and probably many lives.”

Doc Savage nodded slowly. He was thinking of his men, Monk and Ham and the others, who must be wandering around somewhere in the arctic vastness, wondering what had happened to him. They were in the other plane—they might be able to fly down through the crevasse into the fantastic lost world.

Purposely Doc had refrained from any effort to communicate with his men. That was because of the danger involved in any attempt to enter the crevasse. When the

bronze man had come in, Decimo Tercio had guided the plane.

But it began to seem that coping with the situation here was going to be more than a one-man job.

He got the portable radio out of the case and moved outside.

Considering the extreme power of the little radio—it was capable of communication halfway around the world—Monk’s voice was remarkably faint through the earphones.

“Blazes, Doc!” Monk exploded. “What’s happened to you? We found pieces of your plane scattered all over the country up here. Looked as if it had been blown up. And we found that Tercio’s plane, deserted. What’s up?”

“Everything all right with you fellows?” Doc asked.

“Sure. Where are you? You sound as if you were in China.”

“Hold your hat.”

“Eh?”

“Hold your hat,” Doc Savage said, “because you’re going to hear something that’ll be a little hard to believe.”

Chapter XVI

THE DISASTER

LIEUTENANT COLONEL ANDREW BLODGETT MONK MAYFAIR was furred over with a remarkable growth of red hair that was perpetually erect—hence his hair was not actually standing on end when he stepped out of Doc Savage’s plane. But all of his emotions were, figuratively, on end.

Big-fisted Renny Renwick, the engineer, got out of the plane and peered around and muttered, “Holy cow!”

Ham alighted looking rather dapper and dubious, twirling his sword cane in a self-conscious fashion. He had nothing to say.

Johnny Littlejohn, the archaeologist and geologist, made an immediate dive for rock specimens underfoot and began inspecting them, and peering in a baffled fashion at the surrounding strange-looking flora and fauna.

“Doc,” he gulped, “this can’t be real! This is the world as it was sixty million years ago!”

“Don’t make the mistake,” the bronze man suggested dryly, “of treating any of these animals around here as if they weren’t real.”

Long Tom Roberts, the electrical wizard, was the last man out of the plane. He was quite calm about it. “There’s a devil of a lot of static in here,” he said. Nothing ever perturbed Long Tom at the right time.

Doc asked, “You fellows have any trouble getting down that crevasse?”

“Lots of it,” Renny rumbled.

The two pets—Habeas Corpus, the pet pig, Chemistry, the pet chimpanzee—now climbed out of the plane. They looked around. Evidently they did not approve of the place. They turned around suddenly and climbed back into the plane.

Monk also peered about.

“Habeas has the right idea, if you ask me,” the homely chemist muttered. “Say, how do you get out of this place?”

Johnny said excitedly, “Doc, we saw pterodactyls when we came in. And a dozen different types of dinosaurs. Why, this place is an archaeologist’s dream. A dream, I tell you!”

“Nightmare is more like it,” Renny boomed.

At this point, Ham suddenly broke into an exaggerated howl, began to jump around and clutch at his eyes.

“What’s the matter with *you*?” Long Tom asked.

Ham pointed.

“I’m seeing a whole tribe of Monks!” he yelled.

The cavern men had come and were standing at a safe distance, fearfully eyeing the plane. What Ham had said was true. Monk could have removed most of his clothing and gone over and stood among them and distinctly become one of them.

Monk did not appreciate the comparison. He scowled at Ham.

Doc Savage, sensing an imminent and lusty quarrel, interrupted hastily.

“We are going to do some ferry duty,” he explained.

“Ferry duty?”

The bronze man explained the situation, and finished, “The slaves are free, and we’re taking them back to their tribe.”

Renny blocked out his big fists and scrutinized them thoughtfully. “You say that Fancife and Two Wink are flying around in here somewhere?”

“Yes.”

“They may give us trouble.”

“That is very possible,” Doc admitted. “On the other hand, they may capture some of the fur animals and be satisfied to leave the place.”

“In that case—what about Chris Columbus?”

Doc Savage glanced about to be sure Lanta was not in earshot. She wasn’t. As a matter of fact, the others hadn’t met Lanta yet.

“The only chance Chris has to keep alive,” the bronze man surmised grimly, “is to refuse to tell Fancife and Two Wink whether he left any documents back in St. Louis or New York that would incriminate them. Oh, if he is clever, he may tell them that the documents are in a safe-deposit box which he has to open himself, and which will be opened if he does not return in a prescribed length of time. That might save his life.”

“What gets me,” Monk said, “is why Chris Columbus was so anxious to get here in the first place. He didn’t seem much concerned about that strange fur.”

Doc said, “Here comes the reason now.”

Lanta approached. She was smiling, and self-possessed, not afraid of the plane because she had seen planes before—the one flown into the lost world by the Russian flier, Tercio.

“Lanta,” Doc introduced.

The girl produced the customary effect upon Monk and Ham, both of whom were susceptible to feminine pulchritude. Lanta’s effect was somewhat more explosive than ordinary, rendering them practically speechless for several moments—after which they began to talk like phonographs which had lost their governors.

The young woman, being entirely feminine, was not averse to the kind of flattery which Monk and Ham could produce with flowery abandon.

“Those two mashers!” big-fisted Renny said disgustedly. “Some day they’re gonna get hooked. Wouldn’t either one of them know what to do with a wife?”

The situation seemed to worry Renny, who was a professed woman hater. He got Monk aside. “Holy cow! Didn’t you hear Doc say she was Chris’ girl?”

“What of it?” Monk grinned. “Chris isn’t here, is he? Anyway, the girl’s too nice for that clunk.”

Doc Savage was watching Aulf. The big fellow had regained his senses, and had approached to a spot much nearer to the plane and Doc’s group than the others had dared to venture. At least, he had courage.

Aulf also had, it was soon apparent, admiration for the bronze man. He shouted something in his strange gobbling, barking tongue.

“He sounds like a dog fight,” Monk suggested.

Lanta translated for them.

“Aulf says,” she told Doc, “that he understands you are an evil spirit, and he has a great admiration for you. It seems that Aulf considered he was somewhat of an evil spirit himself, but that he now sees he has a great deal to learn. He wants to join you and become your student, I take it.”

Monk snorted mirth, said, “Since when did you become a tutor in evil-spiriting, Doc?”

“Tell Aulf,” Doc instructed Lanta, “that we will leave him here in charge of the slaves until we return later for them.”

“You aren’t going to take the slaves with you now?” Lanta asked.

“We couldn’t haul them all at once,” Doc reminded her. “We will have to make several trips, and it would not be sensible to start until we have located a landing field close to the place where your tribe lives.”

“That’s true.”

“Can you guide us from the air?”

“It may be difficult. I’ll do my best.”

As the plane raced across the level clearing at the edge of the jungle where it had landed, the coarse primitive grass made a rasping roar against the wheels. The ship climbed slowly.

“That way,” Lanta said, and pointed.

Long Tom came forward to the cockpit. He was interested in knowing what effect the surroundings were having upon the magnetic compass. He had his own theories to advance, and he collared Renny, the engineer, as a listener. Renny proved to be a reluctant auditor, being more interested in the physical wonders of the lost world than in any of the more obtuse phenomena to be encountered there.

Monk craned his head out of a window. Suddenly he yanked it back.

“Blazes!” he yelled. “There’s an animal down there with a neck a mile long!”

Ham peered. “Exaggerated a little, didn’t you? The thing doesn’t look to me as if its neck was over forty feet long.”

“Brontosaurus,” lengthy Johnny said.

“Now look here,” Monk snapped. “This is no time to start pulling them jawbreaker words of yours that nobody knows. Be reasonable. Say something somebody can understand.”

“Brontosaurus,” Johnny said with dignity, “is the name of the type of animal you see down there. It was a fairly prevalent variety of prehistoric dinosaur, and one of the largest. Its size made it impressive, but the monster is comparatively harmless, being herbivorous by nature. The word herbivorous,” Johnny finished severely, “means simply that it is a plant eater. It consumes grass and leaves, like a cow.”

Long Tom—he had realized Renny was not listening to him—came back into the cabin. He poked Monk excitedly.

“Listen!” barked the electrical wizard. “I’ve got the sun all figured out. I mean—this sun they’ve got in here.”

“Yes?”

“It’s a result of subterranean, or volcanic activity,” Long Tom explained. “Gases are created under terrific pressure, and they escape through the top of the crater yonder, bursting into flame as they do so. The result is like a blazing gas well, only the heat is of enormously greater intensity. The stuff is really incandescent gas—and you know they claim our sun is nothing but a ball of incandescently hot gas.”

“Very simple,” Monk said, “except for one slight chemical drawback.”

“What’s that?”

“To have a fire, you gotta have oxygen. Where would the enormous amount of oxygen used by this flaming sun of yours come from?”

Long Tom answered that.

“The flame theory is correct,” he said. “And as for oxygen—it is very scarce near the crater. And there are terrific winds that rush upward all the time, making life near the crater impossible, even if it were not for the heat.”

The plane droned on through the strangely luminous air. They encountered a rainstorm which was very much like earthly storms, except for the lack of lightning and thunder. Their plane was pummeled around by gale and rain until they finally found their way out of it.

Later, Lanta touched the bronze man’s arm.

“It seems incredible,” she said, “that we have covered in so short a time a distance that it would have taken us days and days to travel afoot. My country. Yonder.”

It was a great rocky canyon; or, rather, a labyrinth of canyons, all running into one central gorge which was astoundingly narrow. They could see, after the plane drifted lower, the gigantic gates of wooden timbers which closed the outer mouth of the canyon. Gates so huge that it was unbelievable that human hands could have constructed them.

Moreover, for at least a mile in front of the gates, the thicker jungle had been cut down, and there were sharpened poles sticking in the ground in a slanting fashion so that the points offered a formidable handicap to any huge prehistoric animal which tried to approach.

“Can we land inside the canyons?” Doc asked.

“No. There is no room.”

“Then where——?”

The girl pointed at the defensive array of pointed poles. Before them, and more than a mile from the gate, there was cleared ground which extended to a great trench with steep-walled sides that was evidently another portion of the defenses against the dinosaurs.

“You can land there,” she said.

Doc put the plane down without difficulty. They alighted. The surroundings were not nearly as visible as they had been from the air, due to the deceptive size of the jungle brush.

Doc said, “Renny and I will return and ferry the slaves here. I would suggest that Lanta and Monk and Ham proceed to the gates and make sure we’re welcome.”

“Swell idea,” said Monk, looking forward to the walk with Lanta with pleasure.

Lanta, Monk and Ham departed in the direction of the gates, working their way through the wilderness of pointed stakes, most of them larger than telephone poles.

Renny, Long Tom and Johnny remained at the landing spot, equipped with supermachine pistols, plenty of ammunition, and an acute knowledge that they had better keep a sharp lookout.

Doc took the plane into the air.

He had no difficulty flying back to the village of the cavern men, and picking up part of the slaves. Due to the size of the plane, the bronze man calculated that it would be possible to carry the entire group of slaves in two trips. He loaded half of them, took off carefully, and flew high and fast to shorten the trip and lessen its danger.

Long Tom met the plane. He was excited.

“Look, Doc. We’ve got visitors.”

There were four of Lanta’s people staring at the plane. Doc studied them, reflected again upon what unusually perfect physical specimens they were.

“Lanta and Monk and Ham got through,” Long Tom explained.

The four visitors advanced, and one of them spoke slowly, making each word with care.

“Lanta and the other two are safe,” the man advised. “You are welcome. They are preparing a great feast for you.”

Doc, who was ever cautious, turned to one of the slaves whom he had rescued and asked, “You know this man?”

The slave nodded, smiling. “He is my cousin.”

Everything seemed all right.

Doc said, “Wait here, and I will make another trip for the rest of the slaves.”

He took off and reached the landing field near the cavern-men caves without trouble. And no difficulty was encountered in loading the remainder of the slaves—on the first trip, it had been necessary to slug some of them into unconsciousness to get them aboard the plane.

Aulf developed into a problem, however. He wanted to go along. He wanted, furthermore, to take charge of the flying of the plane, being just blockheaded enough to think he could manage that without any previous instruction whatever.

Aulf's tribe being bitter enemies of Lanta's people, Doc knew it would not do to take the big fellow along.

The difficulty was solved when Doc, with one of the slaves who could speak a little English serving as interpreter, prevailed upon Aulf to remain with his cave-dweller fellows, and continue to be a sort of chief evil spirit.

Doc then flew the other slaves back and landed on the level ground where Renny, Long Tom, Johnny, the other slaves, and the four visitors waited. There was a brief reunion.

"What about the plane?" Doc asked. "We can not leave it here."

One of the visitors smiled.

"I will call help," he said, "and we will carry the plane to a place where it will be safe from the animals."

He lifted his voice, emitted a bellowing call that carried like a locomotive whistle. It was answered in fashion.

Men began filing out of the brush. Four or five in the first group, then in larger clusters. In a remarkably short time, they were completely surrounded by a human ring.

Doc, suddenly suspicious, rapped, "Don't like this! Get in the plane!"

His command was too late. A leader—one of the four men who had pretended to be messengers of welcome—ripped out an order. Instantly, pandemonium erupted. Clubs swung. Knives were flourished—short vicious knives with blades made of some type of glasslike stone.

The slaves behaved rather like sheep. They merely changed masters, putting up no fight.

Doc Savage, Renny, Long Tom and Johnny were cornered. Their foes evidently had previous instructions to keep them from getting anything in their hands, because the moment they drew machine pistols, the weapons were crashed out of their fingers with clubs.

A human tide swept over them. They were overwhelmed, buried under pounding, yelling bodies. Against a dozen foes, they might have held their own. Possibly against a score. But they were engulfed in this horde.

After a while, lines were passed into the mass of bodies and Doc and the others were tied.

Wilmer Fancife appeared then.

"Bring them inside the gates," Fancife yelled. "Bring 'em right in!"

Chapter XVII

THE FRIGHTENED PEOPLE

THE gates were even more monster things than they had appeared from a distance, and some ingenuity had been used in their construction. Not one man could open them, or twenty men for that matter, and the opening was contrived by an array of winches to which were attached great cables made of thick dinosaur hide.

Fancife marched at the head of the procession. He carried a high-powered automatic rifle under either arm, and revolvers stuck in his belt.

Just inside the gate, he was met by Two Wink, who was likewise heavily armed, but did not seem as pleased with the whole affair. He put in much of his time looking behind him.

“What if they turn on us?” Two Wink blurted. “There’s hundreds of ’em—and only two of us.”

“We got ’em bluffed,” Fancife snapped. “Act like you was confident. That’s half the business.”

Big-fisted Renny got the idea, and suddenly lifted his big voice. “These fellows are thieves!” Renny pointed at Fancife. “That man is as big a rascal as ever walked! He came here to rob you—”

Fancife leaped at Renny, struck with his rifle barrel. Renny’s arms were pinned by his captors, and he failed to dodge; his big frame became loose, his head dropped forward and scarlet dripped from his nostrils.

Fancife scowled at the others, said, “You guys get funny and you won’t live to see the final fireworks.”

Johnny and Long Tom, maddened by the cold-blooded attack upon Renny, were plainly tempted to forget discretion.

“He means it,” Doc warned. “Do as he says.”

Fancife showed his teeth unpleasantly. “Now you’re being smart.”

The procession proceeded. Soon after they were inside the gate, canyon walls shoved up alongside them, so sheer that to gaze upward was to get the impression that the walls came together far above, except for a narrow knife of light. It was gloomy, although not dark, for it now became apparent that a great deal of light was reflected down from the stone sky of this fantastic world.

The pinnacles, in fact, were bathed in glaring light, and what must be intense heat, for nothing whatever grew on the heights. Down here, however, it was cool, with a distinct breeze.

“This place,” Johnny vouchsafed, “is probably close enough to that volcano thing where they get their heat and light that the stone peaks are too hot even for those pterodactyls, which seem to be the most dangerous form of flying life here. But down

here in the valleys, it's cool, due to the cold air moving in close to the ground, drawn by the heat from their volcanic sun."

"I would feel better," Long Tom interjected, "if you were using that great brain of yours to figure a way out of this."

They turned off into another canyon, which was wider, and so low on one side that much of the floor was bathed in direct rays from the Light. Here there were intensely cultivated fields, most of the growing plants being of an entirely unfamiliar variety.

Long Tom, after looking over the crops dubiously, said, "Not a watermelon in sight. And brothers, am I thirsty!"

They were taken to a high stockade. The gate of this was swung open, and they were shoved inside.

Johnny took one gap-eyed look at the other occupants of the pen, and lit out running.

Johnny was hardly moving before one of the enormous animals in the pen went lumbering after him. The thing weighed at least four or five tons. It was apparent, too, that it would soon tire Johnny and overtake him.

Doc Savage, greatly alarmed, seized Renny, who was still unconscious. With the big engineer balanced across his shoulders, he was about to take flight when a howl of mirth from Monk stopped him. The thing couldn't be very serious if Monk was laughing.

"Run, Johnny, run!" Monk yelled. "It's right after you!"

Johnny did not need the advice. He was traveling with amazing long-legged speed around the inside of the inclosure, the monster in immediate pursuit.

The animal had a long neck and a longer tail, and remarkably short legs for the pace it was traveling. Its weight was indicated by the way it shook the earth with its pounding feet.

Monk, Ham, Chris Columbus and Decimo Tercio were standing in the center of the stockade, and the huge animals—there were several of the things in the inclosure—were paying no attention to them.

Ham began trying to help the frightened Johnny.

"Stand still, Johnny!" Ham shouted.

"What do you mean—stand still?" puffed the fast-traveling Johnny. "That's what I feel like I'm doing."

"Stop and let the thing catch you," Ham explained. "It thinks you are here to feed it."

"That's what I'm afraid it thinks!"

"No, no, it won't eat a man. These things are vegetarians. Tercio, here, explained that to us."

Johnny reluctantly slowed up—he was very dubious about the idea—and let the dinosaur overtake him. The monster muzzled Johnny hopefully until it concluded Johnny was not an animated vegetable, after which it halted. Johnny stopped, puffed, wiped off rivers of perspiration, mumbled, "I'll be superamalgamated!"

Decimo Tercio explained, “These dinosaurs are work animals. They have been domesticated for centuries, I presume.”

“How do they manage the beasts?” Doc asked. “They surely haven’t sufficient brain capacity to be trained.”

Tercio smiled. “It is very simple. Someone merely walks ahead of them with food. They will follow a bag of food all day, providing they are fed a bite from time to time.”

Doc Savage turned his attention back to more important aspects of the situation.

“Fancife and Two Wink seem to have control of the situation,” the bronze man said. “How did they manage?”

“They landed the plane in one of these canyons,” Tercio explained, “after flying around and frightening the people. Being primitive, the people think that anyone who flies is some kind of supernatural being.”

Tercio grimaced distastefully.

“After they landed,” he continued, “Fancife and Two Wink immediately shot down two of the chiefs. They explained to the people that they had come to take the chiefs’ place. They made it stick.”

“You mean they’re running the tribe?”

“Exactly.”

“That doesn’t make me very happy,” Monk said gloomily.

At this point, there was an interruption. It was foreshadowed by much loud talk outside the stockade—angry talk, it appeared—following which the gates were jerked open and a slender figure was shoved sprawling inside.

“Lanta!” Monk exclaimed.

The girl got up from where she had sprawled and said something not very complimentary while the gate was being closed. Then she turned and saw Chris Columbus.

The girl lost color and stood very still. Then her lips parted and she said something, but it was not audible. She became quite rigid, and the exultation flowing through her was almost visible.

At last, “Chris!” she gasped.

Chris’ face was strangely gentle and completely joyful. He said something, words that they could not understand, but which must be some phrase of love that Lanta had taught him.

And after that, suddenly, they were in each other’s arms, not kissing but just holding each other tightly, with tears in their eyes.

Monk, abruptly realizing what small chance he had with this girl, uttered under his breath, “Blast the luck! Some other guy always beats me to the prettiest ones!”

Lanta and Chris moved to one side of the stockade, away from the others. For long moments, they seemed to have nothing much to say to each other, but abruptly they were talking, each with more to say than they could find words to express, seized with delighted ecstasy over their reunion.

Later, Lanta approached Doc Savage.

“I did all I could for you,” she said apologetically. “But those men, Fancife and Two Wink, have my people terrified. We have no weapon as effective as rifles, you know. The upshot of my argument was that I was thrown in here with you. Did you hear the quarreling outside? Many of my people did not like it.” She hesitated, added, “I’m very sorry.”

Ham said gallantly, “You’ve done so much for us already that we’re embarrassed.”

“What are their plans?” Doc asked.

“About us, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“They haven’t said so,” Lanta explained, “but at the first opportunity, I think they are going to execute all of us.”

No one was particularly surprised, but that did not make it a prospect to induce anything but long faces. Conversation seemed to die of its own weight. The stockade piles cast a shadow, and they gathered there, sitting in almost complete silence. There was not the slightest doubt that everyone was thinking of the same thing—how to escape. They could peer through the small gaps between the stockade piling and see guards pacing.

Farther off, Two Wink was standing on a hillock with two loaded rifles at hand. He hardly took his eyes off the stockade. Later, Fancife replaced him.

“They’re not taking any chances,” Monk muttered.

“Holy cow! What’re they waiting on?” Renny rumbled.

Lanta explained that.

“This happens to be a sacred period,” she said. “It is the equivalent of what you call your . . . your holidays. Your holy holidays, I mean. Such as Christmas.”

“I don’t see——”

“To us our holidays have a deep significance,” the girl explained. “They mean more to us, I believe, than your own religious periods mean to your race. The fact is that Fancife and Two Wink have been ordered not to execute you during this period, and they are afraid to defy the order. Which shows they are smart. If they did kill us during the period, they would be—what you call it?—mobbed.”

“I would like to see ’em mobbed,” Monk said grimly, “but not under those circumstances.”

Big-fisted Renny got up and took a pacing tour of the stockade, only to return completely disgusted, impotent rage moving him to kick angrily at the untidy litter which flooded the stockade.

“Holy cow!” he complained. “With those guards watching the stockade, we haven’t got a chance of getting out of here. If it would turn dark, we might accomplish something.”

Doc Savage leaned over abruptly and picked up a handful of the ground litter. It consisted of coarse stems and finer leaves, old and dried. The working dinosaurs were fed in the inclosure, and this was stuff they had not consumed. The bronze man examined the stuff.

“These dinosaurs afraid of fire?” he asked suddenly.

Lanta nodded. “Frightened of fire—yes. They do not know enough to be scared of ordinary things. But in the presence of fire, they become maddened.”

“That gives us a chance then.”

The bronze man arose and ambled around the stockade, making a pretense of peering through the cracks at the guards. Actually, he found loose bits of wood which might serve his purpose, and brought these back to the others.

“Your shoestrings, Monk,” he suggested.

Homely Monk wore—he liked to irritate the clothes-conscious Ham by dressing as uncouthly as possible—large brogans which were laced with rawhide thongs.

Doc took one of the thongs and attached it to the piece of curved wood he had selected for his bow. The other sticks were two in number; one round and roughly pencil-shaped, the other flat.

Monk exclaimed, “The bow and drill gadget for making fire!”

Long Tom, a practical soul, said, “What makes you think they’ll stand for us making a fire? They’ll bust right in here.”

Doc had recognized that possibility. “Lanta,” he said, “you suggest loudly in your own language that we make ourselves some beds of the dry litter.”

The girl followed the suggestion. Later, when they began raking the dry stuff together, the guards gave them no more than a few glances.

“Use twigs to build the piles up as loosely as possible,” Doc advised. “The fire must spread fast, before they can stop it.”

The others positioned themselves, so that it would look as nearly as possible like a naturally conversing group, around the bronze man. He went to work with the firebow, giving the thong a twist around the round drill, then pulling the bow back and forth so that the drill spun rapidly. He got a wisp of smoke, finally hot glowing wood dust, which he fanned until it suddenly burst out in a tiny flame.

A moment later, they were working madly, spreading the flame all through the several piles of dry stuff they had gathered under the pretense of making beds. Flames crawled up with red hunger.

Smoke alarmed the guards. They yelled.

The dinosaurs suddenly made strange snorting sounds that were like men whooping. They milled. One monster became terrified and hit the stockade with the violence of a speeding truck. The stockade cracked, leaned.

“Blazes!” Monk exploded. “This may work!”

The guards expended some moments outside, howling orders to put out the fire. Once it dawned on them they had been ignored, they dashed for the huge barred gate.

Two Wink was on duty with the rifle at the moment. He had positioned himself some distance away, the better to cover all sides of the stockade. He raced forward.

Doc rapped, “Quick! Frighten the things with fire!”

He scooped up, with sticks, a mass of blazing fragments, rushed at the dinosaurs, pitched the stuff in the air. The dinosaurs made their noise, went completely hysterical with fright.

They hit the stockade, and a great section of the thing went down. The pack of working dinosaurs charged through.

“After them!” Doc yelled.

Johnny had demonstrated earlier that it was possible for a man to outrun the ponderous short-legged monsters.

“Keep among the things,” Doc warned. “Make it harder for Two Wink to hit us with the rifle.”

Chapter XVIII

DEATH AND A RACE

THERE was shooting—Two Wink had an automatic rifle and he emptied it as fast as he could trigger out the shots and insert new ammo clips. The bullets made no sound that was audible over the thunder of flight, but several of the dinosaurs squalled in a way that showed they were hit.

The stampede reached an area of rank grasslike growth that was higher than a man's head. Doc and his party veered off and stopped, letting the fright-crazed dinosaurs go on.

Chris Columbus said, "We gotta do somethin' fast. They'll have a hunt organized in a few minutes!"

The statement was hardly needed.

Doc grasped Lanta's arm. "They searched Monk and the others. Do you know where they put the stuff?"

"Probably in the house which Fancife and Two Wink appropriated for themselves."

"Do you know where it is?"

"I'll take you there. I think I may be able to do it without our being seen."

They circled through fields of rankly growing crops. At frequent intervals, they passed stoutly constructed canopies fashioned of poles, after the manner of big grapevines that had been erected as defense against the giant flying pterodactyls, the only dangerous type of prehistoric life that could penetrate past the ponderous defensive gates into the valleys.

"This way," Lanta breathed.

They had reached the houses of her people. These were of stone masonry, built in neat rows well away from the cliff face with its menace of falling rocks. Above both houses and streets was a great trellis construction of stout poles—defense against the pterodactyls, the same as in the fields.

Lanta stopped suddenly.

"Look!" she gasped. "Guards!"

Monk and Renny had picked up clubs somewhere. They flourished these. "Only four guys!" Renny rumbled. "We can bust through easy enough!"

They looked at Doc. The bronze man nodded, led them in the dash into the open.

The guards were armed with short spears and atlatls, or throwing sticks. There was no time to fit the throwing sticks. They set themselves with the spears.

Renny and Monk hurled their clubs, got two of the guards down. Doc Savage raced for a third man. Apparently he was going to deliberately impale himself on a spear point. But he twisted coming in, and in a maneuver that was so fast it was a little blurred to the eye, had the short spear.

The fourth guard lunged and jabbed, and Doc fenced with him a moment. Then the bronze man cracked him across the wrists, made him drop the spear. Long Tom, Ham, Johnny, Decimo Tercio and Chris Columbus fell onto the four, began using their fists to make the guards unconscious.

The guards screeched at the full pitch of their lungs.

Inside the square house, they found the stuff that had been removed from their pockets when they were searched. The articles included the machine pistols and assorted ammo drums.

Outside in the street, there was yelling. Monk and the others backed hastily inside.

“If you was figurin’ on goin’ some place else, better change your mind,” Renny rumbled. “Holy cow! The street is full of people. You got no idea how fast they showed up after them guards yelled.”

“Two Wink out there?”

“No. Fancife neither. But they’ll be here.”

Monk scooped up a machine pistol, clipped in an ammo drum, said, “If them guys thought a rifle was magic, wait until they see one of these gadgets talk.”

Doc stopped him. “Wait.”

“Eh?”

There was an ordinary automatic rifle leaning against the wall, and Doc picked this up to make sure it was loaded.

Next, he loaded three of the machine pistols with different types of ammunition. He thrust the weapons inside his belt—he still wore the shorts, which was the only garment Fancife and Two Wink had left him when they stripped him out in the arctic waste at the base of Target Mountain. The shorts were of elastic silk stuff, were really swim trunks.

“Let me use your coat,” he requested of Renny.

Renny was the only one of the group whose clothing came near being large enough for the bronze man. Doc used the coat to conceal the presence of the machine pistols.

“Your handkerchief,” he asked Monk.

Monk’s handkerchiefs were colored horrors. This one was flaming red in hue. Doc rolled it into a tight ball, pocketed it.

The bronze man walked out into the street carrying the rifle.

At least a hundred of Lanta’s people were in the street. To a man, they stopped when they saw the rifle. They understood what the weapon could do.

Lanta came out behind the bronze man to translate for him. They worked fast. Doc first went through a pantomime.

He flourished the rifle, handled it until every eye was drawn to the weapon.

Then, with a contemptuous gesture, he threw the rifle aside.

“Tell them,” he said, “that the rifle is the tool of those who are evil.”

Lanta translated this.

The bronze man then stepped forward, showed both his hands apparently empty, then produced Monk’s red handkerchief. The effect—it was as if the handkerchief came

out of the empty air—was a simple manipulation familiar to all magicians and consisted of keeping the tightly balled handkerchief concealed behind one hand or the other while making confusing passes designed to show the hand empty.

“Tell them,” Doc continued, “that their deities are disgusted with them and have sent a flame to aid us against them.”

While Lanta was putting that in the native language, Doc made more passes with the handkerchief, and contrived to get one of the machine pistols wrapped inside it.

“What next?” Lanta asked.

“Suggest that they watch the work of the flame.”

The machine pistol he held was charged with explosive bullets, tiny things of unearthly power. Doc aimed at a house, fired.

There was a terrible blast, and most of one wall and the roof of the house climbed into the air.

As soon as the echoes—they came gobbling back from the canyon walls in salvo after salvo—died down, the bronze man demolished another house.

During the confusion of that blast, he managed to change the machine pistol loaded with explosives for one which would fire tear-gas capsules.

“Now inform them,” he told Lanta, “that the flame will breathe the angry breath of its wrath upon them.”

The machine pistol made a bull-fiddle moan that, once it was mixing with the echoes, was a sound that might have been mistaken for anything. Doc swung the muzzle as he sprayed tear-gas capsules that struck and burst in the crowd.

Doc said, “Tell them—” then leaped suddenly, seized Lanta and flung her into the house where they had found the machine pistols. A rifle smashed out twice before they got under cover, but neither bullet touched them.

“Fancife got here!” Monk yelled.

There was uproar and confusion in the street.

Doc said, “Out the back way,” and they rushed into a pleasant little garden. They scrambled over a long stone wall, found themselves in a maze of other gardens and houses.

Fancife’s rifle snapped again. Renny rumbled, “Holy cow!” and turned completely around, then got himself organized and roared, “My arm! Hit me in the arm! Go on and get ’im!”

Doc leaped, seized one of the poles that formed the protective grille against pterodactyls, and swung atop this. The poles were not far apart; he could travel from one to the other.

Two Wink was crawling to Fancife’s aid, working through a garden, all his attention riveted ahead. Apparently it had never occurred to him that danger would be above.

He made a sound like a stepped-on frog when Doc dropped atop him. Then, after the bronze man hit him, Two Wink’s legs twitched, and kept on twitching all the time that he was unconscious, making the same kind of involuntary movements as a nervous sleeping dog.

Fancife—he was off to the right—suddenly yelled out. His howl was angry, threatening. Then his voice was frightened. And then he was emptying his rifle. Five times the gun whipped lead. After that, Fancife got up and ran.

The inhabitants of the strange lost-world valleys had turned upon him.

Fancife used a system in his flight. He would sprint until winded. Then he would stop, reload his rifle and empty the weapon.

His pursuers did not press him too hard. He was fleeing toward the great gates. They were satisfied to let him go.

Doc said, “We may be able to head him off from the gate.”

They failed to do it. Fancife had forced the gate guards to twist the giant windlass devices that opened the panels, and he was sprinting through the comparatively open area that was set with the sharpened timbers that formed the outer defense against dinosaurs.

Doc waited for Monk and the others.

“Careful!” the bronze man warned. “He will take shelter in the jungle and use that rifle on us.”

They got down—there was a cropped weedy growth about two feet high that concealed them—and crawled forward with infinite care until they heard Fancife’s rifle begin smashing as rapidly as the mechanism would function.

No bullets came near them, however.

“I wonder what he’s shootin’ at?” gaunt Johnny pondered. He raised his head cautiously, then erected his whole considerable length. “I’ll be superamalgamated!”

They could see Fancife, and what was wrong with him.

Johnny muttered, “I’ll be superamal——”

“You’ll be more than that if we don’t travel,” Monk interjected. “Here come some of the things this way! Come on!”

They put their chins up and tucked their elbows close to their sides and ran. The gates, fortunately, were still ajar. They piled through, worked frantically with the big winches.

A few of the animals—weasel-like, except that they were near two feet in length—got through before the gates could be closed. Long Tom and Renny disposed of them with clubs. They were the same type of bloodthirsty little terrors that had given Doc Savage such trouble earlier.

Renny came up, holding his arm, grimacing. “You know what happened back at the village?”

“What?”

“Two Wink—those people found him and somebody—well, Two Wink is dead!”

Out at the edge of the jungle, Fancife had stopped screaming. Renny took a look through the gates, then stepped back swiftly and looked as if he was going to be a little sick.

It was a long time before anything more was said.

“He came here looking for those animals,” Monk muttered finally, “and they found him.”

It took four days for a rather pleasant fact to dawn upon them. At least the interval was four days according to their watches, there being no other convenient method of judging the elapse of time. Not that a time measurement was needed—because life in the canyons was almost completely idyllic.

Chris Columbus expressed it most briefly.

“I’m not going back,” he said.

“Why not?” asked the astonished Monk.

Chris said, “I like the place. I’ve got a swell girl. Why should I go back?”

Decimo Tercio used somewhat more words, but it amounted to the same thing.

“Long ago, I have figure it out,” Tercio explained. “When I first get here, it is not because I want to come, and I am very impatient, because I do not know many things. I do not know that there is no disease here, and no war, because there is nobody much to fight, except an occasional stupid band of cave dwellers, and they never raid past the gates into the canyons. There is not much work, and the girls are pretty, and you die young if you do not live to be a hundred.”

Tercio closed his eyes dreamily.

“Here is everything a man could want,” he said. “There is peace and plenty inside the canyons, and if that palls on a man who is red-blooded, he can merely step outside the gates and have hunting.” Tercio smacked his lips. “And what hunting! You have see the dinosaurs, no?”

“Yes,” Monk said. “And no more. I don’t like the things.”

“You would not like to stay here?”

Monk considered the point. The place had its advantages.

“I might like to retire here some day,” Monk admitted. “But—well, it’s this way. I like my excitement sort of spread out. Not in big bunches.”

Tercio shook his head sadly. “You are getting old.”

“I’m just getting reasonable,” Monk corrected him. “I don’t mind hunting a bear, or even a lion—but these dinosaurs are a little too big for my caliber.”

Tercio knew that they had moved Doc Savage’s plane—the one in which Monk and the others had flown inside—into one of the canyons where there was room for a take-off, and reassembled the craft.

Tercio sought out Doc Savage.

“You go back outside?” he asked.

“If we can make it,” Doc admitted.

“You make it. Flying out much easier than flying in.” Tercio hesitated, gnawing his lower lip miserably. “And after that—oh, hell!” He spread his hands. “Think of what will happen to this place.”

“As far as we are concerned,” Doc said quietly, “no one will ever know this place exists.”

Tercio stared at him with joy, but not understanding. “Why—why will you do that?”

“This place is a treasure,” Doc Savage said slowly. “It is a treasure that we would like to give to some future generation of the world’s people. We say a future generation for two reasons. First, the human race has more archaeological discoveries today than it can classify. The need of explorers is not to find more wonders, but to classify and understand what has already been found.”

The bronze man was silent a moment.

“And the second reason: We are very dubious whether the human race is ready to receive a scientific treasure such as this place. It is possible that bombs and cannon would be rushed in to destroy the prehistoric animals that abound here. We are thinking of the buffalo that once roamed the Western United States by millions, and were slaughtered until now there are hardly more than a few zoo specimens. It would be horrible if something like that should happen here, for this—this world of sixty million years ago—should be preserved as a valuable thing, an incredible gift that has come down out of time to open to mankind the mysteries of other ages.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Other World* by Lester Dent (as Kenneth Robeson)]