

The Green Eagle

A Doc Savage Adventure
#24

Kenneth Robeson
[Lester Dent]
1941

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THE GREEN EAGLE

THE
GREEN EAGLE

A DOC SAVAGE ADVENTURE

BY KENNETH ROBESON

THE GREEN EAGLE

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THE GREEN EAGLE

Chapter 1

THE MYSTERIOUS McCAIN

It was not a suspicion of anything definite around the Broken Circle Dude Ranch that led Ben Duck to go riding in the early night. Ben had no definite suspicions at the beginning of the evening jog, although before the ride ended, it was a different story.

An intense inward rage really led Ben Duck to go riding.

One of the dude guests had said, "Donald Duck can guide us up to the Forks tomorrow."

Ben Duck overheard this. He got mad and went riding to cool off, and to take stock of himself.

Because Ben Duck was a genuine cowboy, it was hurting his dignity to work on a dude outfit. He particularly resented being called Donald Duck by guests who were almost strangers. Donald Duck! It gave him a slow burn.

He rode away alone. He rode the west trail, up through the jack pines that grew in thick green clusters on the mountainside. It was steep going. The iron shoes on his pinto pony struck sparks from the flinty rocks. "Easy does it, Patches," he muttered sympathetically to the horse. Later he got off and walked, digging in with the high heels of his boots, spurs jingling.

He sat on a hilltop and frowned at Wyoming in the night. In the west, the Teton Mountains were snow-covered and jaggedly majestic and white in the moonlight.

"I'm gonna tear into the next dude," Ben said, "that calls me Donald Duck."

And get fired. And be without a job. And jobs were scarce, even for a top hand. That wasn't the remedy. Ben shook his head slowly.

If he even looked like the movie Donald Duck, or sounded like him, it would have been different. He might have excused the dudes. But, although he had no great admiration for the entertaining Donald, he had no desire to emulate him in action or appearance. Furthermore, he didn't look in the least like the movie cartoon Donald Duck. Or did he?

If those dudes wanted to call him Donald Duck, he'd have to take it. The dudes paid eighteen dollars a day. For that money, they could call the hired help Donald Ducks if they wanted to.

Precious little of the eighteen dollars a day found its way into Ben's pocket.

No salary would be worse, however.

The remedy would be simple. Own a little ranch of his own, a spread in some valley with a few dogies. A valley that was not so high up in the mountains that there was killing cold in winter, but high enough that summer range could be had up around the timber line. There was just one difficulty. It took money to buy a spread. And money was one thing Ben did not have.

"A danged dude wrangler," he described himself disgustedly.

He thought of what his dad's opinion would have been of his present status in the world, and shuddered. Old Man Duck had chased the Indians out of western Montana to make room for a whopping big cow outfit, and he rode the crest until he picked a fight with a group of encroaching nesters, and didn't draw quick enough. Between the time they laid Old Man Duck in his grave, and the time Ben was big enough to do anything about it, the nesters took over the country and homesteaded all the Duck range. A bank eventually got the ranch, and an uncle got young Ben. Uncle Spud. About all Uncle Spud had been able to teach young Ben was to ride, fight, and be honest. Uncle Spud had trapped beaver for a living. Three years ago he had frozen to death in a March blizzard. Young Ben had gone out into the world and discovered it was hard to make a living punching cows.

"Donald Duck," Ben said. He said it through his teeth.

After an hour or so he was soothed by the vastness of Wyoming in the moonlight. He climbed on Patches and rode silently down the path. It was purely accident that he was so silent, but he managed to surprise a man on the path.

Ben pulled the horse to a stop and watched the man ahead. The man was turning around and around strangely—and strangely was a mild word for it—on the path. He was a long man dressed darkly, except for his chaps, which were made from the hide of a black-and-white pinto pony. Ben recognized the chaps. He had resented them, because the pony skin was the color of Patches' hide. The man was Albert Panzer, one of the Broken Circle dudes.

Ben watched Albert Panzer stop turning around and around and drop face-down on the path. He made a move to ride forward, but did not. Another man came out of the greasewood bushes beside the trail and stooped over the one who had fallen.

Ben Duck was quite calm. He liked to know exactly what he was doing before he did a thing. So he did not ride forward. He sat there and watched. The moonlight was bright. Very bright.

The man who had come out of the bushes was searching Albert Panzer. Thoroughly, too. Feeling out garment seams, scratching buttons with the point of a knife, thrusting a pin into hat felt and belt leather. Finally he pried off Albert Panzer's boot heels, examining them carefully, then hammered them back. He had thoughtfully prepared himself with a hammer and a piece of metal for the operation on the boot heels.

Ben Duck suddenly decided who the searcher was.

"McCain," Ben said, shaping the name soundlessly with his lips.

It must be McCain, although he could not see the man's face. McCain was one of the dudes. He had arrived at the Broken Circle four days ago, ostensibly from San Francisco. Ben Duck had an eerie feeling about the fellow from the first. McCain was so thorough about everything he did. It was unnatural. Ben had seen McCain practicing horseshoe pitching. McCain had tossed eleven ringers in succession. McCain had not known anyone was watching.

McCain's white hair made his age indeterminate, but he was a large man who walked with a definite limp. His blue eyes had a glasslike quality. He spoke very seldom in a rather nasal voice. Mostly he kept to himself, limping about the neighborhood of the ranch.

Limp— Limp— He wasn't limping now. Ben Duck frowned. It was McCain, all right. But McCain wasn't limping tonight.

Ben felt of his six-shooter. It was one of the dude-ranch props, and wearing it had embarrassed him. It was loaded with blanks, but genuine .45-caliber cartridges studded Ben's wide stamped leather belt.

Ben started to put genuine bullets in the six-gun in place of the blanks, then changed his mind. He was one cowboy who couldn't hit the side of a bunkhouse with a hand gun. Genuine cowboys of this day didn't wear six-guns. He had shot lots of coyotes on the run with a rifle. He didn't have a rifle, though.

McCain, and he wasn't limping.

McCain finished his examination of Albert Panzer. Apparently he had not taken anything. But what a thorough search he had given Panzer.

While Ben Duck was deciding to step forward and bluntly accost McCain, the latter suddenly vanished into the greasewood shadows. He went suddenly, silently, and after he disappeared there was no sound or movement to show what he had done. He might still be there. He might have gone.

Ben Duck moved his shoulders impatiently, because there was a creepy sensation up and down his back. He decided to put some real bullets in the six-gun anyway. He tilted the cylinder out and ejected the cylindrical brass blanks into his palm. The plump weight of the genuine bullets was reassuring as he stuffed them into the cylinder chambers.

He was conscious of feeling a little dizzy, and then it got quite dark. The darkness was pleasant, somewhat like sleep.

The next thing Ben Duck knew, a hand was slapping his face. A voice was saying, "Hey, wake up!" It was a familiar voice.

It was Albert Panzer's voice. Panzer was bending over Ben and slapping him and shaking his shoulders.

"That's enough," Ben said. He pushed Panzer away.

Panzer seemed to be all right. Panzer looked as if he felt fine. Ben felt all right, too, for that matter.

"I guess you fainted," Panzer said.

Ben hesitated. Finally, "I guess I did," he said.

Albert Panzer laughed shakily. "Maybe it was something we ate."

"Eh?"

"I fainted, too."

"You did?"

"Yes. After I came to my senses, I found you lying here."

Ben Duck looked around. He was in the same spot where he had been standing when he got dizzy and it became dark.

"How was it?" Ben asked.

"Was what?"

"Fainting. How'd it feel?"

Panzer said, “I got dizzy. I kept trying to stand up and couldn’t. I remember I thought it was the altitude. Say! Maybe it was the altitude!”

“It hit me the same way,” Ben said.

“Probably it was the altitude.”

There was a silence. Albert Panzer was probably thinking. Ben Duck was thinking, too—about Panzer. Albert Panzer had been a dude guest of the Broken Circle for almost two weeks. It would be two weeks tomorrow. He had registered from Chicago. He had said he operated a dressed-poultry business in Chicago, and he had talked a great deal about it. Ben decided he could not put his finger on anything out-of-the-way about Panzer.

“It must have been the altitude,” Albert Panzer said.

Ben got up and dusted off his tight fawn-colored whipcord breeches. Such movie cowboy pantaloons was another thing he detested.

“Uh-huh,” he said. “These high altitudes are funny.”

They weren’t that funny, he thought. He had hunted elk on the highest mountain peaks in Wyoming, and the only difference he had noticed was that you had to do a lot of breathing to get your air.

Albert Panzer bent and picked something off the ground. “Here, don’t forget this,” he said.

Ben looked at the object.

“Huh?” he said.

“You dropped it,” Panzer explained.

“I did?”

“It was lying on your chest,” Panzer added.

Ben took the thing. He was interested. The thing was about five inches square and half an inch thick. It was one of those puzzles where you roll BB-shot into holes. There were—he struck a match and counted them—ten shot, and ten holes for them. Bottom and sides were tin; the top was glass. There was a picture of an eagle, and the holes for the shot were in that. The eagle was green, with yellow beak, yellow talons. There was a verse. A rather goofy verse. It read:

Hand and eye, wandering,
Down and down, pondering,
Up and up, meandering,
North face,
Wins race.

The match he was holding burned Ben Duck’s fingers, and he dropped it, yelped and sucked a finger. “That poetry?” he asked.

“It’s kind of punk poetry,” Albert Panzer said.

“And it was lying on my chest?”

“Yes.”

“Very remarkable,” Ben Duck said.

Remarkable might not be the word for it; strange might be a better one. One sure thing, he had never seen that puzzle gadget before. He shook it, and the buckshot rattled around and two of them fell into holes. He said, "It's an easy puzzle, ain't it?" He put the thing inside his shirt, after finding it was a little too large for any of his pockets.

There was a flashlight in one of the saddlebags. Ben used light from this to examine the ground very carefully. Albert Panzer was made curious by Ben's search. "I lost a dime around somewhere," Ben said. The statement was not true. He wondered why he was deceiving Panzer.

There was no more sign of tracks than of a dime.

"You might as well give it up, Donald," Panzer said.

"My name ain't Donald," Ben Duck said.

He climbed on his horse.

The thing didn't end there. Ben had half suspected it wouldn't. He could not bring himself to believe that he had fainted there on the trail, he decided after he got back to the ranch. Nor had it been something they'd had for dinner. Nor the altitude.

Ben laid in his bunk and thought about it. The distant howling of coyotes made a lullaby that finally put him to sleep. The Broken Circle Ranch might be a phony dude outfit, and the cowhands phony dude wranglers, but at least this was the genuine West where the coyotes howled.

Ben awakened violently. Hands were around his throat, choking. There was weight across his legs.

It soaked into Ben's head eventually that two men were trying to choke him. He was a sound sleeper. It took some moments to get himself organized. Meanwhile, no air was entering his lungs.

He remembered that he'd hung his spurs on a nail over his bunk. He groped, found the spurs. They were elaborate, silver-mounted things, and they had rowels like buzz saws.

With a spur in each hand, he proceeded to stab and strike. He found a face, concentrated on it. Judging from the sound, he ripped the spur across some teeth. The man made a small sound of agony, like a hurt pup.

"Sh-h-h-h!" his companion hissed.

The hurt man blew up. "He's ruinin' my face!" he squawked. "Help me!"

The second man let go Ben's legs. That was a mistake. A cowboy rides all day and uses his legs to hang onto the horse, so the legs become useful. Ben kicked twice, hit a target both times. One attacker landed with a loud noise on the floor.

The other let go Ben's throat, and tried to find Ben's arms and hold them. He failed. Ben gouged him in the face with the spur and drove him away.

"I hadda leggo 'im!" the man gasped.

"Grab him again," said the man on the floor. "We got to take him out in the hills."

Ben had groped and found his belt with the six-gun. He drew and blasted away. The shells in the gun were blanks, but they didn't sound like it. They were deafening.

The pair of assailants fled. Ben glimpsed their silhouettes briefly against the open door, but they were too convulsed by fleeing action for him to tell much about them.

Ben made a mistake. He did not wait to draw on his boots. He plunged outside, stabbed his feet on sharp rocks, speared them on cactus, finally had to stop. He retraced his way to the bunkhouse door in agony and sat on the stoop, listening to the sounds of two horses going away.

By now, the other cowhands had started appearing. The bunkhouse was a long one, and Ben had been sleeping alone in a section at the far end which had formerly been a harness room. It gave him, in effect, a private room.

"I was just takin' my nightly exercise," Ben told them dryly.

Carl d'Orr appeared. He owned the Broken Circle. Carl d'Orr was a man with the clothes ideas of a movie hero, and the figure of a pot-bellied financier. He was no cowman, not even a Westerner. Ben had overheard him call a heifer a steer, and Ben had thereafter held his own opinions of a boss who couldn't tell the sex of a cow.

Carl d'Orr seemed to be enraged. He was holding a large white handkerchief to his face, and the handkerchief was thoroughly bloodsoaked.

"What's this damned uproar?" D'Orr yelled.

"Visitors," Ben said.

"Who? Where?" D'Orr kept the handkerchief to his nose, and it was large enough to obscure most of his face.

"Last I heard, they was high-tailin' it for the hills," Ben said. "They tried to choke me."

"Choke you?"

"I guess maybe it was a robbery," Ben amended.

D'Orr coughed into the handkerchief. He seemed to be in a great deal of pain.

"What did they get?" he snapped.

"I dunno," Ben said. "I ain't looked."

"Well, look and see," D'Orr ordered irritably.

The puzzle, the little thing of tin and glass and ten steel balls, where you rolled the balls into holes in a green eagle, was gone. Ben had placed it on the shelf over his bunk, so he was immediately sure that it was gone.

He looked in the tangled bunk bedclothes, and under the bunk, to make certain that it had not merely been jarred off the shelf.

In sudden alarm he examined the tobacco tin in which he was in the habit of hiding his money. A relieved breath escaped him. His wealth was intact.

He went back outdoors.

"They didn't get nothin'," he said.

"You sure?" D'Orr asked. D'Orr still had the handkerchief to his face.

Ben looked out over the crowd. Some of the dudes had gotten out of bed to see what was happening. Ben located Albert Panzer. But there was no sign of McCain.

"I guess I chased them hombres away," Ben said, "before they had time to glom onto my bank roll."

D'Orr snapped, "One of you men call the sheriff and tell him about this."

Ben eyed D'Orr curiously. "What's the matter with your schnozzle?" he asked.

"I jumped out of bed and bumped into a blasted door," said D'Orr shortly. He walked away.

Chapter 2

WATER AND FOOD

The next morning, Ben Duck found Albert Panzer seated on the top rail of the branding corral. Ben climbed up beside Panzer and borrowed cigarette makings.

“Feelin’ the altitude any this mornin’?” Ben asked.

“No,” Panzer said. He was silent for a while. “That was kind of queer, wasn’t it? The way we fainted, I mean.”

“Uh-huh,” Ben agreed. “Lot of queer things in this world, though.”

Ben cupped his chin in his palm and smoked thoughtfully. He watched a dude walk into the nearby horse corral and catch and saddle a pony. The dude, a man, treated the horse roughly, and as soon as he was in the saddle, the horse threw him, which gave Ben some satisfaction.

“They’re right intriguing’, though,” he said.

“What?” asked Panzer.

“The queer things in this world,” Ben explained. He blew several smoke rings, only one of which was of satisfactory perfection. “By the way,” he ventured, “did you say anything last night before you went to bed about what happened to us?”

Panzer nodded. “Why, yes, I did.”

“Who to?”

“Well, let’s see.” Panzer considered. “Hard to say. It was in the bar. There was a bunch of them around.”

“Was D’Orr there?”

“Yes, I think he was.”

“How about McCain?”

“I didn’t see him around.”

Ben flipped his cigarette at the corral dust. “I see,” he said. “You just told the story about us fainting to some people in the bar. Any of them remark on the strange coincidence?”

“They thought I was drunk,” Panzer said disgustedly.

“We weren’t, were we?”

“I don’t drink,” Panzer said.

“I never get money enough to afford to,” Ben said. He slipped down off the corral rail. “What do you make of what happened to us last night, Panzer?”

“I don’t know,” Panzer said. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know, either,” Ben told him. He hitched up his chaps and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “I think I’ll go get me a drink of water,” he said.

It was not water he went after. It was McCain. He had seen McCain go limping into the grove of cottonwood trees near the cabins. When Ben found McCain, the man was

sprawled out in a hammock swung between two trees. The man's game leg dangled over the edge of the hammock.

"Howdy, McCain," Ben said.

"Oh, hello, Donald," McCain said idly.

"The name ain't Donald," Ben explained wearily. "Got a cigarette?"

"I don't happen to smoke," McCain told him. "Sorry."

"That's all right," Ben said. "I just wanted to borrow a cigarette to open up the conversation." Ben sat down on a nearby hammock and teetered back and forth. "I figured on asking you something."

"Yes," McCain said. "What have you got on your mind?"

Ben studied McCain. He was more than ever impressed by the man. There was a kind of dynamic force and power about the fellow. It was hard to define.

"Wasn't the eagle in that puzzle box yellow?" Ben asked.

McCain smiled slightly, showing teeth unusually even and white. "You never showed it to me," he said. "What are you trying to do? Trap me into making an incriminating statement?"

This old bird is smart, Ben thought. Aloud, he said, "Yeah. Something like that."

"You suspect me?"

"I guess you'd call it that."

McCain said, "You must have seen me bending over Panzer last night on the path."

Ben nodded. "That's right."

McCain said, "I was taking a walk last night. I happened to be near the path when I saw Albert Panzer lying there senseless. I thought maybe a footpad had waylaid him, so I looked in his pockets to see if he had been robbed. His money and billfold were still in his clothing, so I decided he had just passed out because of the altitude. Being around senseless people upsets me, makes me ill. So I left immediately. I felt a little ill, and sat down for a time on my way back to the ranch. Then I got mixed up in my directions and lost some more time. By the time I got back, you and Panzer were already there. So I didn't say anything."

Ben pushed against the ground with his heels to make himself swing back and forth in the hammock.

"That's a good story," he said. "It takes care of everything."

"But you don't believe it?" McCain said without any change in tone.

"Nope."

"It'll have to do you, I'm afraid."

"Uh-huh." Ben stopped swinging. "How does the boss' face look this morning?"

"D'Orr's face?"

"Yeah. Bumped into a door last night, he said."

"I haven't seen him," McCain said with no sign of interest.

Ben stood up and gave his large batwing chaps a hitch. There was a cool breeze from the north this morning, and in the distance a cow was bawling. Ben said, "I bet

one of them guys that tried to rob me has got a sore face this morning. I sure went over his puss good with one of my spurs.”

McCain showed no interest in that, either.

“Well, so long,” Ben said. “Be careful this altitude don’t give you a faintin’ spell.”

“I’ll watch it,” McCain said.

Ben found D’Orr. There was a strip of adhesive tape down the left side of D’Orr’s face, another down his nose, and two pieces of tape on his chin.

Ben remarked, “That door must’ve been part wild cat.”

D’Orr’s temper was vile. He snapped, “Listen, Donald Duck, four of the guests have been hunting you for an hour. They want you to guide them up to the Forks today.”

“The name is—”

“I know what your name is,” D’Orr said. “And it’ll be m-u-d if you don’t show more action around here.”

With a valiant effort, Ben said, “Yes, boss.”

“It’s those four old maids from Denver who want you.”

“I was afraid of that,” Ben said.

“Please be careful about making slighting remarks about the guests. Especially as high-paying guests as these four. They’ve got the bridal suite.”

Ben said, “That’s the only way they’ll ever see the inside of a bridal suite, too.” But he said it walking away, so that D’Orr did not hear. Yesterday Ben would have made the remark to D’Orr’s face. But the situation was changing. Ben was getting interested in the Broken Circle dude ranch. He didn’t want to get fired.

Ben Duck found the old prospector shortly after noon. It was somewhat of an accident. The four old maids had rawhide constitutions, and more questions than a radio quizz show. So Ben built them a fire to cook their lunch, then left them under the pretext of hunting sagebrush for firewood. He wanted to escape long enough to have a smoke in peace.

The mountains here were arid, bare, rugged and forbidding. There was no vegetation whatever, except now and then a scrawny sagebrush or jack pine in a crevice. There was no moisture to support vegetation.

Four turkey buzzards were circling in the sky. Two more buzzards joined them. Farther away, several crows spun hopefully in the clear, hot air.

“May be a Broken Circle cow over there with a broken leg,” Ben decided.

He swung onto Patches and rode toward the spot.

The old man lay in a gully. Judging from the signs, he had gotten into it and did not have the strength to get out, and had crawled along the sand. He had progressed more by dragging himself than by crawling. He must have spent hours coming the last few yards.

His tongue hung out. The bones seemed to be coming through his skin, although that was only an illusion caused by his starvation gauntness. His skin was cracked; in many places the cracks were the color of old rust from dried blood.

There was a pack tied to the old man's back, and he had a saddlebag fastened to his belt.

"Hey!" Ben got down beside him. "Hey, what happened to you, oldtimer?"

The old man's eyes remained fixed. They were like dead eyes.

Unnerved—he had never been around a dead or dying man before—Ben dashed back to Patches and untied his canteen. He forced water between the cracked lips. The old man's mouth merely filled with water and ran over. The throat was evidently swollen shut, and Ben used his pencil to make a channel down which the water could flow.

There was no sign of life in the old man.

Ben stood up and shouted for the old maids, intending to send them for help. But the wind was against him and they did not hear.

The old man made faint mewling sounds. Ben dropped beside him. "Take it easy," Ben urged.

The faint sounds kept coming from the old man and Ben realized the fellow was saying, "Water," over and over.

Ben gave him a little more water.

"How long you been thirsty, oldtimer?" he asked.

After a while, "Two weeks—before I lost count," the old man managed.

"You been without water two weeks?" Ben demanded.

The other said, "Yes." His eyeballs moved, seemingly with greatest difficulty, until they rested on Ben. He strained for a time with words. "Food gone—three weeks," he managed at last.

"For the love of little prairie dogs!" Ben said. He stood up and bellowed for the old maids, but they still could not hear him. "You'll be all right now," he assured the old man.

The old man tried to get more words out. Ben got down close to hear.

"Do you—know—Doc Savage?" the old man was trying to ask.

"D-o-c S-a-v-a-g-e?" Ben spelled it out.

"Yes."

"Never heard of him," Ben said.

The old man slowly turned his face on its side. He made a gurgling noise and some of the water that Ben had poured into him came out. His knees drew up. He seemed to gather strength. His arms functioned and he started to lift himself.

"Here, here, you'll bust a suspender," Ben admonished.

The old man's voice was suddenly surprisingly clear.

He said, "My saddlebag, get the contents to Mira."

"Sure, sure," Ben said. "I'll get it to Mira."

Then Ben took hold of the bony shoulders to support the old man and the old man struggled and fought him blindly for a few moments, after which he became still and was dead.

After Ben got over feeling the way that having a man die in his arms made him feel, he looked in the saddlebag. He took out a tin-and-glass puzzle box.

It was a puzzle where you shook little imitation metal feathers—not BB-shot—around until you got the feathers all sticking in little holes in a green eagle. There were ten feathers and ten holes for them.

At the top of the puzzle, it said:

FEATHER THE EAGLE

Under the eagle, there was a piece of poetry. It said:

Hand and eye, wandering,
Down and down, pondering,
Up and up, meandering,
 North face,
 Wins race.

Ben wrapped the puzzle in his handkerchief and put it inside his shirt.

There was one other thing.

Ben Duck looked into the old man's back pack to see what made it bulky, and found that it contained a large canteen of water and enough food to last a man at least two weeks.

Ben scratched his head.

The old man had said he was dying of starvation and thirst.

“That’s kind of queer,” Ben said.

Chapter 3

FINDING MIRA

The sheriff and the coroner got there late in the afternoon. Both of them were chewing tobacco. McCain and Albert Panzer followed them, riding roan horses. D'Orr, the Broken Circle owner, was riding a spectacular white Arabian mare.

"Where's Ben Duck?" the sheriff asked.

"He rode off early in the afternoon," explained one of the old maids. "He said he would be back by dark."

The sheriff looked over the scene briefly. He told the coroner, "I guess it's just a job for you, Henry." The coroner nodded. He had two saddlebags full of instruments. "If you people have weak stomachs, you better go off where you can't see," he said.

D'Orr demanded in an astonished voice, "Don't you have to have some kind of legal paper before you perform an autopsy?"

"This ain't no autopsy," the coroner said. "This is just an examination."

The Sun had fallen low in the west, so that jagged hills threw long shadows. The shadows were gloomy and cold. At this altitude, the days were hot and the nights astonishingly cold.

Ben Duck rode up in the twilight. Dust had caked on the flanks of his pinto. Ben looked tired.

"Well?" he asked the sheriff.

"Hello, Ben," the sheriff said. "Henry here"—he nodded toward the coroner—"is just finishing up."

"I'll tell you what he died of in a minute," the coroner said, and went on working.

Ben slid off Patches and loosened the cinches. The pony hung his head and pulled at a tuft of buffalo grass without enthusiasm.

"Ben, did you backtrack him very far?" the sheriff asked.

"'Bout five miles," Ben Duck explained. "Then I lost the trail. He come across those lava beds south of here, where nobody on earth could track him."

"Would a bloodhound do any good?"

"I doubt it," Ben said. "A bloodhound is all right where there is a little moisture to hold the scent. But the sun would bake the trail right off that lava."

D'Orr said abruptly, "It seems foolish to me to waste time trying to find the poor fellow's back trail."

Ben looked at him. "Does it?" he said dryly.

The coroner straightened. He wiped his hands on an old undershirt he was using for a towel. "Starvation and thirst," he said. "That's what killed him."

Ben stared at him. "Starvation and thirst?"

“Uh-huh. He ain’t had either food or water for two weeks, I should judge. He had some grass and cactus meat in his stomach, and something I think was a ground squirrel or a rat. He had eaten some dirt, too.”

“Dirt?”

“They eat dirt in the advance stages of starvation,” the coroner explained.

Ben scratched behind one ear. “Did you look in his pack, Henry?”

“Yeah.”

“What’d you find?”

“Food and water,” the coroner admitted.

D’Orr said abruptly, “It seems obvious that the poor fellow went insane.”

“Crazy or not,” said Ben, “he had food.”

“When people go crazy, they get strange ideas.” D’Orr shrugged. “This poor devil must have got the insane idea he did not have food or water in his pack.”

Ben rolled a cigarette, did not say anything.

“I guess that’s it,” the coroner said.

Ben licked the cigarette, lighted it, frowned at the dying match. He did not recall ever having seen a crazy man. Cowmen were always claiming sheepherders were crazy, but of course they weren’t. Ben did not believe a man could get so crazy he would die of thirst and starvation when he had food and water in the pack on his back.

“Any of you ever hear of a man named Doc Savage?” Ben asked.

McCain stared at Ben steadily. He did not speak.

No one said anything. But after a while, McCain accosted Ben Duck out of earshot of the others. “Why are you interested in Doc Savage?” McCain asked.

“Oh, I was just curious,” Ben said.

“He connected with this thing?”

Ben countered, “Do you know him?”

“I’ve heard of him,” McCain admitted.

“What have you heard about Doc Savage?” Ben asked.

McCain’s strangely pale face was inscrutable under his white hair. He said, “I don’t recall.”

Ben eyed the man. More than ever, he was convinced there was something strange about McCain. “Kinda seems,” Ben said, “that neither one of us has much to tell the other one.”

McCain hesitated. “Does look that way,” he said. Then he walked away.

The sheriff and the coroner had borrowed a new buckboard from the Broken Circle. Ben helped them load the body into the vehicle. Then he mounted his horse and rode alongside the buckboard and its tarp-covered load.

D’Orr trotted his white Arabian up beside Patches. “Got a match?” he asked. D’Orr had not mastered the Western way of riding, body moving easily with the motion of the animal. He insisted on posting.

Ben said, “You ought to get used to not bouncing around in the saddle like that, boss. That’s all right for taking a gallop in them city parks, but out here you do it all day and it’ll shake an entrail loose.”

D’Orr seemed not to hear the advice. He said, “I just happened to remember—I’ve heard of that Doc Savage you mentioned.”

Ben was interested. “You have? Who is he?”

“Why did you ask about him?” D’Orr inquired.

“Curiosity,” Ben said. “I heard his name some place. What do you know about him?”

D’Orr said, “I don’t know much, really. As I recall it, Doc Savage is in the East somewhere. New York, I believe. He is an adventurer of some kind. At least, his name is frequently connected with the wildest kind of excitement. That’s about all I know. By the way, who mentioned his name to you?”

“Feller I met.”

“Was it”—D’Orr nodded at the body in the buckboard—“him?”

Ben glanced sidewise at the adhesive tape on D’Orr’s face. The tape covered a lot of the man’s visage. It could have been D’Orr’s face he had worked on with the spur.

Ben told a flat lie.

“Of course not,” he said.

D’Orr spurred his Arabian suddenly and the great white animal bounded away with a thunder of hoofs on stone. Ben scowled after him, then looked around.

Albert Panzer was riding well behind the others. Ben dropped back and joined him. “You had any more faintin’ spells?” Ben asked Panzer.

The grin that came on Panzer’s lips was wry. “I found a book on altitude sickness today. It don’t affect a man like you and me were affected.”

“I didn’t think it did,” Ben said. He nodded in the direction of D’Orr, then toward McCain. “Both them gents are very curious about how I come to mention somebody named Doc Savage,” he said.

Albert Panzer looked around secretively. “I wanted to talk to you about that,” he said in a low voice.

“You ever hear of this Savage?” Ben asked.

“I’ll say I have!” Panzer drew a deep breath. “He’s an amazing man.”

Ben glanced at Albert Panzer slyly, and they tightened reins on their horses so as to drop even farther behind. Ben scratched his head. “Amazing man, huh?”

“Probably the greatest scientific genius of our day,” Panzer said. “He is a man who is famous in the fields of chemistry, electricity, surgery, engineering, archaeology. And, mind you, I don’t mean famous the way a movie star is famous, or a politician. Not because of a build-up. Not newspaper famous. The public does not know a great deal about Doc Savage’s work. But great chemists, electricians, surgeons, all know of his ability.”

“Ever meet this Doc Savage?” Ben asked.

“Not personally. I have heard of him, is all.”

Ben said, “D’Orr seemed to think of him as an adventurer. He said—I think these were his words—‘Savage is connected with the wildest land of excitement, usually.’”

“Savage might be called that.”

“But you said he was a scientist.”

“I think Savage uses his scientific skill to help people who are in trouble,” Panzer said. “I know I’ve heard him referred to as a man who rights wrongs and punishes evildoers.”

Ben said, “That don’t sound like a payin’ job to me.”

Albert Panzer shrugged. “I’m just telling you what I heard.”

Ben eyed him curiously. “How come you didn’t out with this information when I first asked?”

“I figured,” Panzer explained slyly, “that you might want it confidentially.”

“What gave you that idea?”

“Didn’t the dead man mention Doc Savage to you?” Panzer asked.

Ben was all set for that. He told another lie.

“Of course not,” he said.

Panzer seemed surprised. He hardly registered belief. Then he shrugged, and they rode in silence.

Coyotes were howling on the hills long before they got back to the Broken Circle. The night sky was as clear as ice, and about the same color. They turned up their collars, for they could see their breath.

The coroner was also undertaker, and he had left his hearse at the ranch. They transferred the body. Ben assisted. D’Orr, McCain, Panzer and the others had turned their horses over to cowboys and gone into the house.

“Ben.”

“Yeah, sheriff,” Ben said.

“How’d you come to mention Doc Savage?” the sheriff asked.

“Don’t tell me you know him, too!”

“Yep. By hearsay, that is.”

Ben muttered, “My education has sure been neglected some. I never heard of the gent, but everybody else seems to know him by reputation.”

“He’s sure got a reputation,” the sheriff said dryly. “Why’d you ask if anybody knowed him?”

Ben tilted his head back and contemplated the blue-cold sky thoughtfully. “That old jasper,” he explained, “just before he died, asked me if I knew Doc Savage. I was curious about it.”

“Ummm. I see.” The sheriff drove a small coupe. This pulled a trailer in which he carried a saddle horse. “I think we’re gonna be able to find out who the old man was.”

“There wasn’t anything on him that gave his name,” Ben said.

“You looked, eh?”

“Sure.”

“You didn’t take anything off the body, did you?”

“What gave you that idea?” Ben inquired innocently.

“It just struck me as curious that he was packin’ around an empty saddlebag,” the sheriff explained.

Ben’s grunt was without humor. “He was crazy. He was so locoed that he died of starvation and thirst while he was carryin’ around a pack full of food. Why wouldn’t he be nut enough to carry an empty saddlebag?”

The sheriff said nothing more for a moment. Then he pulled out a rather new gold watch that was obviously expensive. “This watch,” he said, “was on the old man. It’s a watch that cost a lot of shekels. It’s got a number in it. Jewelry stores keep track of the watches they sell. I think we can trace him through the watch number.” The sheriff grinned. “I bet you never thought of that, Ben.”

“This county has sure got a good sheriff,” Ben said cheerfully.

He helped load the sheriff’s pony into the trailer. The officer drove away. The hearse had already gone.

An hour and forty minutes later, the sheriff was back. He arrived in the hearse with the coroner. Each man wore nothing but his underwear shorts, and they were enraged.

“We was road-agented!” the sheriff roared. “Where’s a gun? Loan me a Winchester, somebody. Where’s the telephone? I want a posse!”

Ben asked, “They get the body?”

“Heck, no. They wanted what mazuma me and Henry had, was all!” The sheriff rushed into the ranchhouse.

His neck red with rage, the officer telephoned his deputies in town, telling them to spread an alarm with the State police and the forest rangers. He described the robbers. There had been two of them. One was taller than the other by an inch. One wore denim overalls, the other gray store pants. One was wearing a gray cap. The sheriff couldn’t remember which one wore the cap.

“Sheriff,” Ben said dryly, “did they get that watch?”

“Blast it, yes!” the sheriff growled. “And I don’t remember that number in it.”

Ben said, “I got the number.”

“Huh?”

“I looked in the watch early this afternoon and got the number,” Ben explained.

“Why in billyhell you do that?”

“Sheriff, did it look to you like these highjackers might really have been lookin’ for that watch?” Ben countered.

“Huh?” The officer frowned at him. “How did you know—what gave you that idea?”

“So they were lookin’ for it,” Ben said. “Say, did you tell anybody else you was gonna trace the old man through the watch?”

“I mentioned it to the others, yes.”

“That,” Ben said, “is right interestin’.”

The sheriff stared over Ben's head. "It ain't as interestin'," he said, "as what I'm gonna show you now."

McCain's white head showed in the darkness. He had limped up to listen to the uproar.

The sheriff grabbed Ben's six-shooter, examined the cylinder to make sure it contained cartridges, then walked over to McCain.

Jamming the gun in McCain's ribs, the sheriff said, "You're under arrest! I'm charging you with being one of the road agents that just held me up."

McCain showed no emotion. His face fixed, he said, "This is ridiculous."

"No, it ain't," the sheriff growled. "I didn't tell all I knowed about that holdup. You see, the headlights of my car picked up one of the holdup men as I turned around to come back. I saw him plain. I didn't stop because I didn't have no gun. I didn't let on."

"Utterly preposterous." Ben Duck was fascinated by McCain's control as the man spoke.

"Oh, it was you, all right." The sheriff fished out a pair of handcuffs. "Ducked down in a gully and crouched against some sagebrush, didn't you? Didn't think I saw you, did you?"

McCain said, "I didn't rob you."

"You're the feller I'm arrestin' for it," the sheriff told him.

The sheriff drove away with McCain his prisoner.

The following day, Ben Duck had to work hard at fixing fence, which was the only job he liked less than dude wrangling. He was therefore out of touch with what was going on until that evening, when he telephoned the sheriff and was informed the officer was out of town, hunting McCain.

"I thought the sheriff arrested McCain," Ben said.

"He did," the deputy advised him. "And put him in jail. Trouble is, the jail only held this McCain about thirty minutes."

"McCain escaped?" Ben asked.

"Quicker'n you could bat an eye. Picked the cell lock, somehow." The deputy swore. "McCain didn't answer any questions."

"I'll be durned!" Ben said.

Later that night, he locked himself in his bunkhouse room and examined the puzzle. Made by hand, he decided. It was a strange item for an old man to be carrying around in his saddlebag. One sure thing, it was handmade, not a factory product. It had obviously been made painstakingly by hand, the work showing vast patience, rather than skill. The little feathers had been carved painstakingly out of lead. Ben noted some machine markings on one of the feathers that led him to decide they had been whittled out of bullets.

It was a tough puzzle. He spent an hour getting all the leaden feathers into the eagle. But still he did not have anything sensible.

He used his jackknife and took it apart. He did not learn anything. He put it back together carefully.

The puzzle would exactly fit inside a large flat tin which had contained cigarettes. Ben closed it inside the tin, then pressed adhesive tape carefully around the edges. He applied more tape until he was sure the thing was waterproof.

Next Ben got two of his dirty shirts and a pair of Levis and hid the taped cigarette tin containing the puzzle in these. He walked out to the horse-watering tank.

D'Orr was a tightfisted ranch owner. His cowboys had to do their own laundry, and it was customary to do the hurry-up jobs at the horse-watering tank.

There was nearly a foot of mud in the bottom of the horse tank. After he had been washing his shirts for a while, Ben jammed the sealed cigarette tin down into the mud.

It was as good a hiding place for the puzzle as any Ben could think of, since there was no chance of the mud being cleaned out of the tank. They had cleaned the mud out that spring, only to discover that the tank leaked like the dickens with the mud out. They had been forced to shove the mud back in.

Washing finished, Ben hung the garments on a corral fence. He went back to his room. He noticed that his pillow was not lying where it had been. Also he found tiny holes in his Sunday boot soles which looked as if someone had been exploring with a darning needle.

He loaded his six-shooter with real bullets and slept with it under his pillow.

The Broken Circle was thirty-six miles from town. Ben was supposed to spend the next day fixing fence again, but he merely rode over the hill, picketed Patches within reach of grass and water, and headed off the ranch station wagon as it went in after the mail. He climbed in. The driver of the station wagon grinned, said, "Fancy britches didn't say anything about a passenger into town."

"D'Orr?" Ben returned the grin. "He told me to fix fence."

The town had one street, no railroad. Visitors arrived by stage—it was actually a common bus, but this was dude-ranch country so everybody called the bus a stage—and freight was trucked in.

The sheriff was brushing the dust off a five-gallon white beaver hat he used for rodeos and special occasions.

"I'm headin' for the stage station," he told Ben. "Come on, if you wanta." He scowled. "I can't find that McCain gent."

They walked down the street. Ben asked, "You do anything with the numbers of that watch I give you? You learn anything?"

"The old man's name," said the sheriff, "was Pilatus Casey."

"Pilatus Casey, eh. Funny name."

"He lived in New York."

"Oh. He wasn't a prospector, then?"

"Niece said he came out here about a month ago for his health."

"Niece?"

“Only livin’ relation, far as I found. She was his sister’s daughter. That makes her a niece, don’t it? I always forget just what relation a niece is.”

“I think that would make her his niece,” Ben said. “What’s her name?”

“Mira. Mira Lanson. I’ll introduce her to you.”

“You’ll *what*?”

“She’s due on the stage in a few minutes.”

Ben scratched his jaw. “She sure hightailed it out here.”

“I telegraphed her, and she called me back by telephone. Then she caught an airplane.”

Ben bought the sheriff a cigar in the stage station, the place also being a soft drink, tobacco and general merchandise store. They stood there contemplating a stuffed elk head over the back bar. The stage was about due.

Mira. So the dead man’s niece was named Mira. He had promised to give Mira the puzzle where you feathered an eagle. He’d promised the old man while he was dying. But he wished he knew what the darned thing was.

A long yellow bus pulled up in front of the door.

“Here’s the stage,” the sheriff said.

As soon as he saw Mira, Ben wished he’d thought to comb his hair. He wished he’d put on his Sunday clothes, too.

The sheriff had come to life. He reminded Ben of an old red bull. He held her hand and said, “Mira Lanson, this is Donald Duck, a cowboy out at the Broken Circle.”

“The name is Ben,” Ben said, angrier at the sheriff than he had ever imagined he could get.

“You look like a real cowboy,” Mira Lanson said. She took Ben’s hand and almost electrocuted him. She was not so tall but that he could look over her coppery head, little brown hat and pert feather and all, into the sheriff’s eyes. She added, “I believe you were the one who——”

“That’s right,” Ben said uncomfortably. The male loafers were straightening their hats and neckerchiefs. “I’ll take your bag,” Ben said.

It was a very small and very new bag. It did not look expensive.

The sheriff bustled around in his office, dusting off chairs unnecessarily, shoving the spittoon under his desk, and turning on the fan. Ben was irritated. The sheriff, the old goat, was old enough to be her grandfather, even if he was a bachelor.

“I was hopin’,” said the sheriff, “that you could tell us what we don’t know.”

In a surprised voice, she asked, “What is that?”

She had seated herself. She was wonderfully shaped; her traveling suit gave you a good idea.

“What was your uncle, Pilatus Casey, doing out in these mountains?” the sheriff asked.

“Why, he came to Wyoming because he thought the altitude would do his sinus trouble some good. He had hay fever very badly, and he was also convinced he had a touch of tuberculosis, although I don’t think he had. That is the only reason I know of for his coming.”

“I see.” The sheriff hesitated delicately. “Then you do not know of any reason why anyone should try to keep us from identifying his body.”

Her eyes flew wide. They were the color of new pennies. “Oh, no!”

The sheriff squirmed. “Reason I ask, some road-agent hombres held me up t’other night and robbed me of your uncle’s watch. Course, these bandits took my pocketbook, too, so I guess it was just a holdup. Robber I’m after is named McCain.”

“I don’t know him,” the girl said. “Can I—might I see my uncle’s body?”

The sheriff sprang up. “I’ll go find Henry, the undertaker, and have him unlock his place for us. You stay here. I’ll come back.”

After the sheriff had gone, Ben studied Mira Lanson shyly. The presence of pretty women always embarrassed him.

Suddenly he blurted, “Was your uncle crazy?” Then, seeing how completely shocked was her expression, he added hastily, “That was what the sheriff really wanted to ask you. Only he didn’t get around to it.”

She turned her copper eyes on him and his toes seemed to come loose.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Coroner’s verdict is that your uncle died of starvation and thirst,” Ben explained. “But he had plenty of food and water in his pack.”

She turned a little pale. Not at once did she answer. Her hands twisted a tiny brown handkerchief.

“I don’t know anything about that,” she said.

There was coldness in her tone that set him back.

Ben sat there a moment. The silence was heavy. Then Ben said, “Excuse me a minute,” and got up and went into the back room.

He had sat in poker games in the back room, and he remembered what pictures were on the wall. He took down one of the pictures. It was a small photograph of the sheriff’s father. He pulled out the tacks and removed it from its frame.

He carried the photograph of the sheriff’s father back and handed it to the girl.

“I thought you might want this picture of Pilatus Casey,” he said, his manner completely innocent.

The girl took the photograph. She looked at it, then quickly took out her handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes.

“He—he was a wonderful man,” she said brokenly. “I think this picture was taken within the last year.”

Ben swallowed with difficulty.

She was more than a pretty girl. She was one of the world’s biggest liars.

Chapter 4

A BAD DAY FOR DUCKS

The sheriff returned, saying that he had found Henry, and that the undertaker would open his establishment. "I don't believe I'll go with you," Ben said.

As soon as the girl and the sheriff had left for the undertaker's, Ben hurried over to the stage station. He knew that the stage laid over half an hour, and he was lucky enough to find the driver.

"Remember the little girl, the one with the copper hair, that you hauled in?" Ben asked him.

"Yip, yip!" the driver said, grinning.

"I wonder where she came from," Ben said.

"What I was wondering," the driver said, "is where she's been all my life."

"I ain't kiddin'."

The driver looked at Ben's face. "Oh," he said. He licked his lips. "She—well—she came in on an airplane from the East. From New York. I picked her up at the airport, after she made arrangements by telephone."

"So she really came from New York—thanks," Ben said.

He stood on the sidewalk and pondered. The girl was a liar; there was no doubt of that. She wasn't Mira Lanson, and old Pilatus Casey was not her uncle. Or if she was Mira Lanson, then the old prospector wasn't Pilatus Casey. One sure thing, she had identified a picture of the sheriff's old dad as her uncle, falling neatly into Ben's trap. Ben hooked his thumbs in his belt and flapped his hands against his flat muscular stomach absently until the sheriff and the girl came out of the undertaking establishment. Then he joined them.

The girl was dabbing at an eye with the stamp-sized handkerchief. "Uncle Pilatus—he liked the Western country," she was telling the sheriff jerkily. "I—I think he would like best to be buried here in Wyoming. There are no other relatives."

"Sure, sure, sure," said the sheriff. "Glad to make all arrangements for you, Miss Lanson. Your uncle would approve of your wishes. We got a nice graveyard up on Rattlesnake Hill. Mighty nice graveyard."

Ben said, "It ain't called Rattlesnake Hill no more. The chamber of commerce renamed it Ross Mound Cemetery. Have you forgot that, sheriff?"

The girl said, "I will need some place to stay." She looked helpless for a moment, then turned to Ben. "I—I wonder if the Broken Circle Ranch would put me up?"

"I dunno," Ben said dubiously.

He wondered: Now what the heck does she want to stay *there* for?

"Course the Broken Circle can accommodate you," the sheriff declared. "They're in that business. A big dude ranch is like a hotel."

"I'll telephone and find out," Ben suggested.

He forgot, until he had D'Orr on the telephone, that he was supposed to be out fixing fence. D'Orr inquired what in the black-so-and-so Ben was doing in town. He used words that must have reddened the telephone operator's ears, if she was listening. However, he was mollified when he heard Ben had a guest.

"Who'd you say she is?" D'Orr demanded.

"Says she is a Miss Mira Lanson, and that old prospector that died was her uncle," Ben told him.

D'Orr then became so enthusiastic that Ben was somewhat suspicious.

"Bring her right out, Donald," D'Orr ordered. "Take the station wagon. If Slim isn't ready to come back with the mail and supplies, you drive the girl out in the station wagon. You can go back later for Slim."

"O.K.," Ben said.

It developed that Slim was not ready to return to the ranch. He was having his boots half-soled, and the work was not yet done. He'd wait, he said. Ben should go ahead in the station wagon and take the new guest out.

Ben loaded the girl and her bag into the station wagon. He headed out of town, following the rough range road that led across the greasewood flats, then up into the hills.

The girl's silence finally irked Ben.

"Did your uncle look natural?" he asked her innocently.

"I hope *this* looks more natural," the girl said.

He realized she had a gun muzzle in his ribs.

He took his foot off the accelerator.

She said, "Keep going. Pull off to the right. Stop on top of that hill, yonder."

The hill she indicated was one of the most prominent spots in that section. The station wagon bumped over sagebrush and the gears made grinding noises until they came to the top of the hill. Ben pulled on the hand brake.

"You can cut the engine," the girl said.

Ben turned the switch, then looked around. Off in the west, the mountains stood up in a stony naked-looking fence. Visible habitations included a number of dry-farmer shacks, a ranch or two and, off behind the station wagon, a part of the town.

"Kind of a conspicuous place you picked," he suggested. "Kind of lonesome, too."

"Keep your shirt on," the girl said. "It won't be lonesome for long."

She was right.

There were two of them, and they came in a black pick-up truck which was pulling a two-wheeled trailer with a stock rack. In the trailer two cow ponies rode. It was the conventional rig used by cow ranchers, but the pair in the pick-up were not cowmen.

The two men looked more like bankers—or dudes, at least. Their faces were pale, their hands soft; their eyes did not have the sun-squint of Western men.

"Thanks, Mira," one of them said.

“He knows I’m not Mira,” the girl said. “Who are you—you’re not the man who—you’re not Mr. Smith.”

The two men looked at each other. One of them said, “Mr. Smith!” The other one laughed.

The girl looked suddenly worried, Ben thought.

The two came over and searched Ben. They found the six-shooter, which he was carrying under his shirt, and which he’d not had a chance to use.

Ben eyed the girl, asked, “Who is Mr. Smith?”

She was wordless. She bit her lips.

Ben asked, “Where’d you tip off these gun mavericks that I was wise to you?”

“While you were telephoning the ranch,” the girl said. “As soon as I saw the body, I knew you had trapped me by showing me a picture that was not Pilatus Casey.”

“Shut up!” one of the men growled.

The man had a harsh voice that was distinctive, and Ben frowned at him. “There’s somethin’ familiar about you, feller,” he said.

“You’re crazy,” the man muttered.

“How’s them spur tracks on your partner’s face?” Ben asked.

He knew by the change of expression on the man’s features that he had guessed right. This was one of the men who had attacked him in his bunk that night.

The girl seemed puzzled. Ben told her, “This gent and another one tried to rob me one night recent. There was some shootin’ before they got away, and I worked over one’s face with a spur.”

The girl began to get a look of horror.

The man who had taken part in the robbery came over to Ben. He said, “You talk too much.”

“It would be funny,” Ben told him, “if the sheriff was to recognize you as one of the fellers who road-agented him.”

“You talk too much,” the man said, “about the wrong things.”

“Yeah?”

“Suppose you talk,” the man said, “about Doc Savage?”

Ben was surprised. “What about him?”

“You was talkin’ to different people at the Broken Circle about Doc Savage,” the man said. “We want to know why.” There was rock-hard earnestness in his voice.

“I’ll be durned,” Ben said.

“Another thing.” The man leaned down to scowl. “Where’s the puzzle?”

“What puzzle?”

“The one where you feather an eagle,” the man said. “Where’s it?”

“You talk like a crazy man,” Ben said.

“Yeah,” the man said. “I was afraid of that.”

Ben was never quite sure what he was hit with. The other man did the hitting. It was very hard, whatever it was. And there was an empty black space.

The canyon walls were the color of a fawn two or three days old; the color of a fawn so young that its coat had not yet lost the protective coloring of spots given by nature. The canyon walls were very high. They seemed to come together overhead.

Ben's head felt as big as the canyon. When he moved it, the head hurt and roared. He lay still, except for his hands and feet, which he moved. Both hands and feet were tied.

A man came over. He was a big man, dressed in dark clothes, with a dark handkerchief over his face.

"Where's the eagle puzzle?" he asked.

Ben looked at the man closely.

"You're Albert Panzer," he said.

The man kicked him lightly in the ribs. The kick hurt Ben's head worse than it did his ribs.

"Where's the green eagle?" the man growled.

Ben said, "I'll be a ring-tailed Piute! I never suspected you, Panzer."

The man with the mask swore. He took off the mask. It was Albert Panzer. "Where's it?" he yelled.

"I suspected McCain," Ben said, "and I was 'most sure D'Orr might be guilty. But I didn't suspect you, Panzer."

"Where's the eagle puzzle?"

"Them two hombres got it when they jumped me in my bunk that night," Ben explained.

"I don't mean that one," Panzer snarled.

Ben shrugged. "You're talkin' over my head, then," he said. He hoped his face was straight, hoped it sounded like the truth.

Panzer got down beside Ben. His face was dark. Ben thought he heard the man's teeth grind together in rage.

"Why were you askin' questions about Doc Savage?" Panzer demanded.

Ben narrowed an eye.

"Suppose I ask you a question," he said. "Suppose I ask you what this is all about?"

Panzer made a sound of rage and dashed a handful of sand into Ben's eyes. It was painful—the sand made such agony that it was all of twenty minutes before he could see. By that time, it was getting dark, and suddenly quite cold.

They had a camp. There were no tents, but bedrolls were spread out on the sand. Huge boulders were all about on the canyon floor, and on top of one of these lay a man with a telescope almost as long as a rifle. A lookout. They were hiding out among the boulders. No one paid attention to Ben. They cooked a meal—using tins of canned heat which gave no smoke. They ate, but no one offered Ben food.

Panzer gave an order and picked up a lasso rope. He came over to Ben, and two of the men—there were four in the camp, in addition to Panzer and the sixth fellow up on the high boulder with the telescope—stripped Ben down to his underwear. The cold

night air whipped at his exposed skin. They drove four stakes in a square about twelve feet on each side. They staked Ben out between the stakes.

“While you get good and cold, you can think about talkin’,” Albert Panzer said.

“About what?”

“Why you was talkin’ about Doc Savage, and what became of that puzzle.”

“I told you who got the puzzle.”

“There was another one.”

“Oh, go to the devil!” Ben snarled.

“If a nice freezin’ treatment don’t bring you around,” Albert Panzer said, “we’ll hunt up some red ants tomorrow. When red ants crawl in your ears, they’re really somethin’.”

They went back to their bedrolls. Panzer had sounded utterly fierce, and Ben wondered how he could have been so fooled by the fellow.

Now and then, as the hours dragged, one of them got up and came over to turn the shaded beam of a flashlight on Ben to make sure he was there, and the first few times Ben glared back in stoical silence, although he was blue with cold and in the most complete agony he had ever suffered. Later on, he cursed the man with the flashlight roundly, and tried to expectorate on him, but there was not much satisfaction in that, because the man poured sand in his open mouth unexpectedly.

Later, much later—it must have been past midnight—there was a soft sound nearby. Ben wondered if he could bump the other with his head and knock the man unconscious. And a low whisper said, “Ben—quiet—shhh!”

It was the girl. She breathed, “Listen. I’m going to help you.”

“Yeah,” Ben said. “I bet.”

“Shhh!” She was silent for a while, listening. But no one came. She said, “They’re going to kill you as soon as they find out what they want to know. I didn’t bargain on anything like that.”

“What *did* you bargain on?” Ben’s whisper was sarcastic.

She spoke earnestly. “I know I was a fool. But I was broke and out of work, and I was an actress. When they came to me and offered me fairly good money to impersonate a girl named Mira Lanson, I couldn’t resist.”

“Is that your story? Don’t tell me you were dumb enough not to see there was somethin’ crooked in it.”

“When you’re hungry, you’re inclined to take chances.”

“Where did this happen?”

“New York. The man who hired me was named Mr. Smith—or so he said.”

“Is he here now?”

“Did you see that man lying up on the rock with a telescope?”

“The lookout? Yeah.”

“That’s Mr. Smith.”

She evidently had a knife, for his arms and legs were suddenly free. He tried to sit up. It was all he could do to keep from yelping in agony. He was stiff. Bending his arms and legs was like trying to break sticks.

“Listen,” Ben muttered. “What’s behind this?”

“Don’t *you* know?”

“No.”

“Well, I’m sure I don’t,” the girl said.

Ben stood up. It was very dark, but he was acutely aware of his nearly naked condition. The night wind stuck needles of ice into his skin.

The girl took hold of his arm. “Ben?”

“Yes?”

“I think we had better get away from here and call on Doc Savage,” she said.

“I sure approve of the gettin’ away part, because I can see the need of that,” Ben whispered. “But why ring in this Savage gent?”

“They’re afraid of him.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Unless it is because he has a reputation that frightens criminals.”

Ben grasped her arm. “Come on,” he whispered. They moved away in the darkness, and there was sand underfoot for a while. Ben had heard a horse nicker near the mouth of the canyon, and he presumed the mounts were picketed there. They went that way.

Sharp rocks began hurting his feet. It was a little less dark, indicating they were nearing the canyon mouth. And somewhere close, a horse breathed in deeply and blew out breath.

The string was stretched across the ground about knee height. It was a binder twine. Ben hit it first, then went over and felt of it with his fingers. He knew what it meant instantly.

“Quick!” he gasped. “A string across the canyon mouth. Other end must be tied to some guy’s leg.” He shoved the girl toward the horses.

A man came up on them immediately. It was dark. Evidently he was afraid to show a flashlight. “Hey!” he barked. “Who’s that?”

Ben said, “Keep your shut on. It’s just me,” in a calm voice that he hoped would fool the other. He kept going toward the horses.

The girl was trembling. Suddenly Ben knew that she was genuine, that this was no trick to get his confidence and pump information out of him.

The knowledge that the girl was really scared led him to make his next move. That, and an innate chivalry that all cowhands have.

There were three men waiting at the horses. Ben had not known about them. They must have been sleeping there, close to the animals. They charged suddenly, all three of them, and fell upon Ben and the girl.

The girl cried out as an arm clamped her neck. Ben lunged toward her. Another man dived for his legs, but he kept his feet. He struck with his fist, dropped the man who had the girl.

“Get on a horse!” Ben yelled. “Get to Doc Savage!”

The girl hesitated, began wildly, “But you——”

“I’ll be all right,” Ben roared. “I’ll ride out of here by a different route. I’ll be all right.”

He wasn’t all right. He was in a jam, and knew it. Three men against him, and his muscles still as stiff as boards from cold and inactivity. Someone got hold of his hair and put a thumb in his eye and began to gouge. Ben dragged the thumb down into his mouth and did his best to bite it off. The yelling of the owner of the thumb was gratifying.

By now, the girl had untied one of the horses, and mounted it. Fortunately, it seemed she could ride.

“Ben!” she cried. “Are you——”

“I’m all right,” Ben howled. “I’m ready to leave here. Get goin’!”

The girl’s horse hammered away into the darkness.

Ben fought his three assailants, and eventually they got him down and two of them held his arms while the third pounded at his head with a rock. The rock was about the size of a baseball. The man wielding it hit Ben’s head only about half the time. In time, he became senseless.

Chapter 5

THE BIG MAN

The girl had ridden before, but that had been with a saddle. She was bareback now, however, and was having trouble. There was only a rope around the neck of the wild cow pony she rode; she held on to that and clenched both hands in the animal's mane.

The beast thundered ahead, traveling through abysmal darkness with speed that horrified her. She could not control it, would not have known where to direct the animal if she could have. Rocks made loud noises under the hoofs. Several times, overhanging branches struck her agonizing blows. She hung on, protecting her face by burying it against the animal.

The horse went on and on. If there were sounds of pursuit behind her, she did not hear them. And finally the animal was out on level range, galloping. She called "Whoa!" But the bronc kept on. It did not buck. Once it shied, and she heard a roar of pounding hoofs around about, and had horrible moments when she thought that pursuers had surrounded her. But the rumbling things in the night began to bellow, and she knew it was cattle. She tried to pull the horse to a stop by hauling on the rope, but that did not do any good.

The horse seemed to know where it was going. She let it go.

Later—it was so much later that it must have been near dawn—she brought up suddenly, realizing that a horseman had ridden up beside her.

"Oh!" She gripped the rope, which she had rigged into a hackamore on her pony's nose.

It was a man. He was big in the darkness. He said, "You're not lost, by any chance?"

There was something in his voice, quiet strength possibly, that the girl found suddenly comforting.

Eagerly, she said, "Yes! Oh, yes, I am. Do you live around here?"

"I'm staying not far away," the man said.

"Listen," the girl said. "I've got to get word to the sheriff. A young man, a cowboy named Ben Duck, has fallen into the hands of some men who are torturing him."

The man's voice took on vibrant interest. "Where is this Ben Duck being held?"

"In a canyon west of here," the girl said. "I have an approximate idea of the place. And, listen, I've got to get to a telephone, too."

"A telephone," the man said. "Why?"

The girl did not know why she answered him freely with the truth. She did not know then, but later, after she knew more about the man, she understood it without surprise.

"There is a man named Doc Savage," she said. "I must get word to him."

"About what?"

“About this.”

“I see,” the man said, with calm power in his voice. “I understand. Listen, there is a trail down at the foot of this hill. The trail, if you turn right, leads to a ranch where there is a telephone. You ride on.”

“Thank you,” she said, and kicked at the horse’s ribs with her heels.

“Wait,” the man said. “You say this canyon, this canyon where Ben Duck is being held, is west of here?”

“Yes.”

“What direction are you facing now?”

“Why, east.”

He said quietly. “You are facing northwest. You have your directions mixed up.” He got down and lifted one of her horses’ feet. “Your animal is not shod. It will be almost impossible to follow your back trail.”

“Oh! What will I do?” she gasped.

The man seemed bothered. He turned a flashlight on, and examined the ground. “There is almost no trail,” he said gently.

The girl hardly heard him. She was staring at his horse, at the animal’s hip. Her eyes got wide with terror. There was a brand on the man’s mount. She knew enough about brands to read this one. It was the Broken Circle brand.

The man said, “I am going to ask you a question.”

“Yes?”

“This trouble that Ben Duck is in—has it got anything to do with a puzzle about a green eagle?”

The girl took her fright between her clenched teeth. She leaned forward suddenly and clutched the bridle of the man’s horse. She clutched the bridle near the headstall, yanked, and the bridle came off. The horse ran away, as she had known it would. Western ponies would not stand unless their reins were dragging.

She pounded her own tired pony with her heels, and it ran. It ran even faster than she had hoped.

She heard the man shout at her to stop, but she paid no heed. This man was from the Broken Circle Ranch. He knew that Ben Duck was in trouble because of something about a green eagle. She was frightened; afraid he was one of her enemies.

She rode hard for half an hour. The pony breathed with such sobbing gulps that she slowed the animal to a walk. She was aching with fatigue. She knew that her appearance must be a mess.

Her fright instead of ebbing, had grown stronger. Tiredness seemed to sharpen her ability to think. Behind this thing, she knew now, must be something big. They had spent money and hired her to come out from New York, just to trick a piece of information out of a cowboy. They had wanted her to find an innocent-looking childish puzzle where you shook lead feathers into holes in a green eagle. She wondered why she had not realized there must be something terrible behind it. Her need for money, she supposed, had made her stupid.

The sun came up.

With a kind of dumfounded horror, she realized there was a man behind her. He was not more than half a mile back, and running. It was the same man who had stopped her in the night. The man whose horse she had driven off. He was following her on foot.

She was amazed he could have kept so close to her. Her horse had run fast. She would have wagered everything that no man could have kept pace. But there he was.

The pony breathed easier. She set him into a run, and increased her lead. They got out on wide alkali flats, dotted with sagebrush and prickly pear cactus. Dust knocked up underfoot, hung like little puffs of finely carded cotton behind.

When the breathing of her pony labored, she slowed him to a lope. She looked back often. She was really frightened now. For the man was gaining again. He ran, she could see from that distance, easily.

The horse came to a prairie dog town, where the myriads of holes were a menace. She guided the animal as carefully as she could with the hackamore. Heat poured down from the sun, and the sharp barking of the little tobacco-colored prairie dogs, their tails jerking when they barked, seemed to ridicule her.

Her body ached intolerably. She was thirsty. Her hands seemed to contain only pain when she tried to clench her fingers in the pony's mane to keep from falling off.

It must have been near ten o'clock when she came to a highway. Finding the highway was luck.

She slid off her horse and staggered in front of the first car that came moaning down the black-top pavement. The machine stopped for her.

"Take me to the nearest town!" she gasped. Then she told an untruth. "I've got to find a doctor."

A man and his wife rode in the car. It was an Iowa machine. The man drove furiously, and his wife was sympathetic. She asked questions. The girl muttered, in reply, something about an accident. The rest of the time, she stared at the pavement, and ached.

It was forty-two miles to the town. She watched the speedometer, so she knew. The town jumped at them suddenly from behind a hill, and it was familiar.

"Wait!" the girl gasped. "The airport! Here, that lane just ahead—turn in there." She saw their startled expressions, and fibbed, "I have a friend there who will help me."

They deposited her at the airport.

They told her that an eastbound plane was due in twenty minutes. She bought a ticket. She still had her money; the money they had advanced when they hired her. It was enough, and some over.

She waited until a few minutes before the plane was due, then she telephoned the sheriff.

"Oh, Mira Lanson," the sheriff said. "Where the dickens are you? They say out at the Broken Circle that you didn't show up yesterday."

The girl said, “Some men seized Ben Duck. They are holding him in a canyon. I think they plan to kill him.” She described the location of the canyon to the best of her ability. She described such of the men as she had seen, talking rapidly so that the sheriff could not get in a word.

She could hear the plane coming in now, and she knew the sheriff would not be able to call back in time to stop her.

“I’m going after Doc Savage,” she finished finally, and hung up.

She had to run for the plane. She sat in the deeply comfortable seat, trembling with uneasiness, until the plane motors boomed out and the craft ran across the field and took to the air. She watched the ground drop away.

The next thing, the stewardess was shaking her. She woke up struggling in fright, but it was only lunch. She ate ravenously, then slept again.

Later, when she was awake—and intolerably stiff—she analyzed her behavior. It was hysterical, perhaps. Hasty. And she had been scared. But, withal, she was satisfied with the course she had taken. She was going to put the story in the hands of Doc Savage.

Doc Savage was a mysterious person to her. She had heard of him, of course, but what she had heard was probably about what other people had heard. The public, that is. Doc Savage was a figure of mystery, a man about whose private life even the newspaper columnists could learn little. It was known that he was an impressive man of great ability, scientific and physical, whose trade was the strange and Galahadian one of righting wrongs and punishing evildoers who were outside the law. It was understood that his headquarters were on the top floor of one of the city’s major skyscrapers. But no one knew much about those headquarters.

She would, she decided, pass this story along to Doc Savage. He could do what he wanted about it.

She felt sorry over the fate of Ben Duck. She had frankly liked the young cowboy. His honest qualities had appealed to her. They must have appealed to her a lot, she thought now. She had risked her life in an effort to save him. She wondered what had happened to Ben Duck. Growing in her, now that she could think back more clearly, was a sickening conviction that Ben had not escaped from that canyon.

She was a little surprised that the sheriff made no effort to telegraph ahead and have her taken off the plane.

But that did not surprise her as much as did the dark-faced man who came up to her in the lobby of the tall building which housed Doc Savage’s headquarters. The man wore a uniform. She presumed it was a building attendant’s uniform, and too late it dawned on her that the uniform was otherwise. The man was merely wearing the garb to make her think he was a building attendant.

She was looking at the building directory in the lobby when he stepped up behind her and asked, “Looking for Doc Savage?”

“Oh!” she gasped, and whirled.

She did not like the man, but he did not give her time for her dislike to crystallize into something definite enough in the way of suspicion to save her.

He said, “Mr. Savage keeps a man in the lobby to inspect people who come to see him. That is because he has many enemies. I will have to question you.”

She hesitated.

“Over this way,” the man said.

He took her arm, led her to the right. She did not realize, because she was unfamiliar with the building, where they were going—until the man walked her out through a side door.

Two other men stepped up. One of these showed a gun which he was covering with a topcoat. He said, “Don’t do any singing, sister.”

The street was empty, the hour being early, the street a side one. Overhead somewhere, an airplane buzzed. On Fifth Avenue, big buses lumbered, and there were a few taxicabs.

The man with the gun asked, “Anybody see you? Anyone get suspicious?”

“Naw.” The man in the uniform of a building attendant chuckled. “She was lookin’ up Doc Savage’s floor number when I spotted her. I give her a line. She never suspected anything.” He looked at one of the men. “Where’s the car?”

“Did you pick up the——”

“The sack and the weight? Yeah, I got ’em.”

The way the man sounded, and what he said, suddenly made the girl weak with terror. Her knees seemed to unhinge, and she could hardly get her breath. They had to support her.

Then, mysteriously, they were not supporting her. They were—all three of them, which was what made it weird—down on the sidewalk. They sank slowly. They made no outcry. They did not seem in agony. They were no hand or leg movements, no mouth shapes, that could mean they were in pain. They seemed to go to sleep on the sidewalk.

The girl stared at them and became very tired and very comfortable, so comfortable that she did not mind lying down on the sidewalk; in fact, she had an overwhelming desire to do so; and she did, and seemed to go to sleep.

One thing she did notice before she slept. The figure of a man. A big man. He had appeared suddenly; she got the idea he had dropped from a nearby window. But the fantastic thing was that he was the man she had met on the range near the Broken Circle ranch, the man who had pursued her horse with such unbelievable stamina.

Chapter 6

THE CASEY ANCESTOR

When she recovered, it was much as if she had awakened from sleep. There were no bad effects. She looked around. The room was not particularly large. There were big windows on one side. In front of these an elaborately inlaid table; a large chair stood against a wall, and there was comfortable leather furniture.

In front of her stood the man she had seen down in the street—the man she had met near the Broken Circle Ranch. His expression was inscrutable.

The girl's first impulse was to leap up. She did so, discovering she could stand. She retreated until she brought up against the inlaid table.

The man's expression remained enigmatic. He went to a door, and as he moved, she saw that he was even more of a giant than she had thought. His white hair, the rather rheumy quality of his blue eyes, the dry paleness of his face—all signs of age—were not in keeping with the vibrant alertness of his movements.

He opened a door. "Monk," he said.

The man who came in—Monk—fitted the name, but pleasantly. He was a grinning simian individual with enormous arms and a round, homely face that had a big mouth and small twinkling eyes. His clothes were expensive, but none of the colors were right, the fit was off everywhere, and the garments looked as if they had been slept in.

He was trailed by a remarkable-looking pig. The pig had enormous ears and a snout built for inquiring into things.

"Monk Mayfair," the big man introduced.

The girl's eyes got round; her lips parted. "Monk—Monk Mayfair. That is the name of one of Doc Savage's aides."

"That is right."

The girl stared at the man she had met on the Broken Circle range. "But who are you?"

The man called Monk answered that. "Why, that is Doc. Didn't you know that?"

She shook her head instantly. "Listen, I saw Mr. Savage once, at fairly close range. I happen to know this man is not—well—Doc Savage has strange flake-gold eyes. And his skin is a deep bronze."

Monk said, "Disguise."

The girl sniffed. "You can't disguise eyes."

The big man removed a small rubber suction cup of a device from a screw-cap metal tube. He applied this to tiny glass caps—nothing more than the common "invisible" type of eyeglass, but colored blue—and removed them.

"Altering the color of the eyes," he explained quietly, "is not particularly difficult."

The girl studied his face. It had changed. There was power in the features that she had not noticed before, enhanced by the weird quality of the eyes, the pupils of which

were like pools of flake-gold being stirred by tiny winds. Those eyes were the things she had remembered most strongly about this man.

“You *are* Doc Savage,” she said.

“We want your story.” Doc Savage’s voice was charged with power, although not lifted. “All of it.”

The girl sank in a chair. “My name,” she said, “is Johanna Hickman. People call me Hicky.”

“Yes?”

“I’m an actress. I was broke. A man came to me. He said his name was Ned Smith. He said he was a detective. He said he wanted to hire me to go to Wyoming, pretend to be a girl named Mira Lanson, whose uncle had died. I was to meet a cowboy named Ben Duck, and inveigle him into turning over to me a little green puzzle of an eagle with some holes in it into which you shook leaden feathers. He was supposed to have gotten the puzzle from the uncle who had died. The uncle was named Pilatus Casey. When I got this puzzle, I was to turn it over to Mr. Smith. I was offered good pay—twenty-five dollars a day—to do the job, plus expenses. I took the job.”

“Then what?”

“This Ben Duck was too smart for me. He handed me a picture of somebody else and tricked me into identifying it as my uncle. Mr. Smith was there in town. He had arrived ahead of me. I told him Ben Duck had tricked me. Mr. Smith told me to decoy Ben Duck out into the country, and hold him there until detectives could arrive. Only it wasn’t detectives who came. It was Mr. Smith’s hired thugs. They seized Ben Duck, took him to a canyon, were torturing him. In the night, I cut Ben Duck loose, and we fled—but I don’t think Ben Duck got away.”

Doc Savage asked slowly, “Is that all you know about this thing?”

“That,” said Johanna Hickman, “is everything.”

“Your previous address here in New York City,” Doc Savage requested.

She gave it to him willingly. “You’ll find I have told you the truth. My landlady will even remember Mr. Smith calling on me, probably.”

After Doc Savage had left the room—he was obviously going to use a telephone to check the girl’s story—the young woman stared at Monk. Monk was such a homely fellow that it was easy to be friendly with him.

She said, “I don’t understand this,” in a bewildered voice. “I met Mr. Savage on the range near the Broken Circle Ranch. He was riding a Broken Circle horse.”

“That’s right,” Monk agreed. “And he followed you to New York. Or rather, he beat you here.”

“But I don’t understand how he came to be there on the Wyoming range night before last, riding a Broken Circle horse.”

Monk hesitated. Then he got up, went to the door. “Doc,” he called. “It all right to tell her what you were doing in Wyoming? She’s curious about that.”

The answer was evidently in the affirmative, because Monk came back and said, "It's simple. A little more than a week ago, Doc got a call for help from Pilatus Casey."

"The old prospector who was found dead?"

Monk nodded. "Yes. Pilatus Casey wanted Doc to come to Wyoming at once, and meet him at the Broken Circle Ranch. Old Casey said there was something big and dangerous brewing. He said that if anything happened to him, Doc should start looking for this green eagle puzzle. He described the puzzle fairly well."

Monk sighed.

"To make a long story short," he continued, "old Pilatus Casey didn't tell Doc a lot. He called over the telephone. But Doc became interested. The thing was goofy—the part about a green eagle puzzle, particularly—but there was undeniable terror in old Pilatus Casey's voice. The old fellow was scared. And Doc had nothing very pressing on hand at the moment, so he went to Wyoming."

"What has he found out?" Johanna Hickman asked curiously.

Monk shrugged. "Pilatus Casey didn't show up at the ranch. Doc got tired of waiting. So he tried to start something. He made a puzzle that was a little like the one that had been described to him, and planted it on this cowboy, Ben Duck."

"Why do something like that?"

"Doc figured," Monk explained, "that someone might try to do something about the puzzle. They did. Two guys took it away from Ben Duck. Doc followed the thieves, and watched them hide out in a haystack on the Broken Circle Ranch. He watched one of the guests, Albert Panzer, bring food to the two thieves. After the body of Pilatus Casey was found, Doc watched these two thieves holdup the sheriff and seize Pilatus Casey's watch, in an effort to prevent the body being identified. Doc had heard enough to know that somebody was hiring these guys and Albert Panzer. Somebody higher up. He was trying to learn who the higher up was, but the sheriff grabbed Doc."

The girl was looking through the window at a forest of skyscrapers. She was, she knew by now, in Doc Savage's headquarters on the top floor of the great midtown building.

She said, "Mr. Savage broke out of jail."

"Yes, and went back to the Broken Circle, to watch and keep under cover," Monk said. "Albert Panzer and the two thieves had disappeared. What he didn't know until he found you was that they had grabbed Ben Duck and gone to the canyon."

One thing was puzzling the girl. She asked, "Why did Mr. Savage follow me back here?"

"To see what we can find out about the mystery from the New York end," Monk said.

She nodded.

"Pilatus Casey called on Doc Savage for help in a mystery about a green eagle puzzle," the girl said, "and now you're trying to find out what the mystery is, because Pilatus Casey is dead."

"That sketches it," Monk admitted, "on a thumbnail."

Doc Savage came back into the room. He was accompanied by a man who was of medium height, with good shoulders, a thin waist—and a remarkable outfit of apparel. The man was not garishly dressed; he was just perfectly attired. So perfectly attired that there was no doubt about the perfection. He carried an innocent-looking black cane.

“Ham Brooks,” Doc Savage introduced. “The lawyer of our group.”

Ham Brooks looked at the girl. He looked at Monk. The idea that Monk had been alone with such a ravishing bit of femininity seemed to irritate him.

“Chemistry,” Ham called.

There came waddling into the room an animal that might have been a chimpanzee, midget baboon, dwarf ape, or some mysterious species of simian as yet uncatalogued. The animal was remarkable for the likeness it bore to the homely Monk.

“My pet,” Ham explained blandly, indicating the chimp. “Name is Chemistry. Any resemblance to Monk, here, is purely accidental and regretted by both myself and Chemistry. No relation, I assure you.”

Monk glared.

“This shyster lawyer,” Monk said, “has a——”

“—wife and seventeen half-witted children,” Ham finished the statement. “Which is a lie. And a lie quite typical of Monk. He hasn’t much imagination.”

Monk became red-necked and silent.

The girl gathered that the two did not get along any too quietly.

She thought of something.

“What about those three men who were—who had just captured me when you interfered?” she asked.

Doc said, “We are about to get around to them.” He turned back toward the door. “Wait a moment, please.”

He was not gone long, and Johanna Hickman—she had asked Monk and Ham to call her Hicky, and they had agreed with alacrity—was astounded at the change in Doc Savage. He had removed his disguise. There had been some kind of dye on his hair, some coloring material on his skin, and he had evidently taken these off with chemical removers.

Doc Savage was a giant of bronze, the metallic color of his skin probably having come from long exposure to tropical sun. His hair was a bronze a little darker. His features—there had been wax in his cheeks, and some metallic device that changed the shape of his nostrils—were regular and handsome without being too perfect.

He said, “Come on.” He was carrying a small radio.

They walked out into the corridor and down a flight of stairs and through a door.

The office which they entered was unfurnished. Doc Savage locked the door.

The three men who had tried to seize Hicky lay on the floor. They were not tied in any way, yet they were unable to move. Hicky stared at them, then realized their arms and legs were useless. The cause of the uselessness became evident when Doc Savage

produced a small hypodermic needle and a vial of some chemical, and gave each of the prisoners a fresh dose.

Monk whispered, “Local anaesthetic,” in Hicky’s ear. “Like the stuff you get at the dentist’s. Can’t move their muscles.”

“Can’t they yell, either?” Hicky asked.

“Notice he’s not giving them a fresh shot in the throat,” Monk pointed out. “He gave their vocal chords one slug of the local to keep them quiet. They’ll be able to talk in a few minutes.”

Monk’s prediction proved correct. Doc Savage kneaded the throats of the prisoners with his hands, and when they were able to make noises, tied cloth gags between their jaws.

“Watch him work,” Monk whispered admiringly to Hicky. “What he’s going to do is make these guys talk. Watch how he does it.”

Hicky nodded. She asked, “Down there in the street—what overcame them? Whatever it was made me unconscious, too. What was it?”

“An anaesthetic gas,” Monk explained. “Doc puts it up in little thin-walled glass pellets. It’s invisible and odorless, and becomes harmless after it mixes with the air for a while. When it hits you, you don’t know anything about it until all of a sudden—*ping!* You’re asleep. Leaves no after effects.”

The girl watched Doc Savage. She had heard that he was an amazing man. Apparently the reports were not exaggerated.

Doc plugged the small radio into a wall outlet. He tuned in a broadcast program, then advanced the volume control as far as it would go. The program was hillbilly music, raucous, thunderous, full of shouting. Very good stuff, Hicky realized, to cover any sounds these prisoners should make if they tried to yell for help.

The bronze man went over and opened the window. It was a large window. He looked out and down, remaining there a few minutes.

Hicky went over to the window. The street was so far below that it was a little nauseating. There was no ledge, no setback in the sheer side of the building for at least sixty stories. The girl shivered, drew back.

Doc Savage went over to one of the prisoners, removed the gag.

“All we want,” the bronze man said, “is a complete story of what you know about this thing.”

The man—he was the one who had shown the gun to Hicky—peeled his lips off his teeth. “You know where you can go,” he said, and added some obscenity.

Doc Savage’s voice took on a grim, rumbling quality.

He said, “Unfortunately, we do not have much time to waste on you.”

The prisoner skinned his teeth again, got rid of more profanity. The little radio was making a terrific racket in the room. They had to shout at each other.

Doc Savage removed the gags from the jaws of the other men. He tried to get them to answer questions. They refused, one of them bluntly, the uniformed one after a moment’s hesitation.

“Keep your traps shut!” the first captive shrieked at them.

Ham Brooks strode over to the prisoners. Ham twisted at the handle of his dark cane, jerked, and it became evident that the implement was a sword cane. The blade was long and brightly dancing, the tip coated with a sticky substance that was evidently some kind of chemical to enhance the effect of the blade.

“Talking,” Ham said violently, “is the only chance you birds have.”

The spokesman sneered at him. “You ain’t puttin’ anything over, bud. We can take anything you put out, up to a killing. And it happens we know you got the reputation of never killing anybody.”

Doc Savage asked grimly. “What gave you the idea we never kill anybody?”

The man sneered at him. “I been around.”

The words seemed to infuriate Doc Savage. The bronze man seized the prisoner, hauled him over to the window, and jammed him down on the sill, half outside. The man looked down. He became somewhat sick of expression. But his courage held, and he snarled, “This kind of bluff won’t get you anywhere.”

“You think it’s bluff?” Doc Savage asked ominously.

“Hell, yes.”

The prisoner screamed then. His scream lifted even above the blating of the radio. He made frantic efforts, pawing with his numbed useless arms at the window sill, breaking his fingernails and skinning his wrists in his effort to hang on, spray flying off his lips from the force of his crying out in horror, trying to hook his chin over the sill to save himself, but falling and slipping off into space.

The girl screamed then.

Monk leaped and caught the girl—depend on Monk to do that—and she was pale and tense in his arms. The look she gave Doc Savage was ghastly.

The bronze man did not seem concerned. He looked out of the window, downward after the falling body, then drew back. “With hundreds of windows on this side of the building,” he remarked, “it is not likely the police will spot the one from which the body fell.”

He walked over to another of the captives, eyed them, then glanced at Ham. “In fact, if we dumped all of them out of the window, it would be a quick easy disposal,” he said.

The prisoner who was wearing the uniform looked as if he was going to faint. The other was clenching his teeth and a little saliva was leaking from the left corner of his mouth.

“You want to tell us what you know?” Doc asked.

They were silent.

The bronze man said, “Well, we cannot waste time,” and clutched the uniformed captive by the shoulders, started to drag him toward the window.

“Wait!” the man screamed suddenly. “I wasn’t gonna hurt that girl! We was just hired to keep her outa sight for a while!”

“Who hired you?” Doc asked.

“He said his name was Smith.” The man became paler. “Bless me, chief, I’m telling you the truth. He said his name was Smith.”

“Describe him.”

The man described a person who was about five feet eight, dark, cast in the left eye, liked loud ties and socks, had a set of scarred left knuckles.

Doc turned to the girl. “That your Mr. Smith?”

Hicky was looking at the window, her eyes magnetized by horror. Doc had to repeat his question. She nodded. “Yes, that answers the description of the man who hired me,” she said.

The prisoner looked infinitely relieved. He wiped his forehead with a numbed arm, having trouble doing the job. “I’m not lyin’ to you,” he reiterated.

Doc was grim. “You will have to tell us more than that, if you expect to get out of this,” he said ominously.

The man said, “Brother, I can tell you more. Here was the original set-up. There was an old man named Sebastian Casey——”

Monk said, “You mean Pilatus Casey, don’t you?”

“I mean Sebastian Casey,” the prisoner corrected. “Pilatus Casey was his son, although he was past sixty years old. There was this old Sebastian Casey and his son Pilatus, and Pilatus had a niece named Mira Lanson, who was his sister’s daughter. The sister had died a long time ago. The two old men and this girl were the only members of the Casey family who were living. Then there was a young fellow named Hubert Brackenridge, a young dentist, who was the family friend.”

“What’s the family history got to do with it?” Monk asked.

“I’ll show you in a minute. About a month ago, old grandfather Sebastian Casey gets the mumps and dies. He was past eighty, but he got the mumps anyway, and he dies. But before he dies, he calls in Pilatus Casey and this family friend, Hubert Brackenridge, and he tells them something.”

“What’d he tell ’em?” Monk demanded.

“I don’t know,” the prisoner said. “But whatever it was, hell broke loose. Somebody took a shot at old Pilatus Casey, and missed. Then somebody tried to kidnap him, but that failed, too. Then Pilatus Casey lit out for Wyoming. And Hubert Brackenridge was killed.”

“This family friend, Hubert Brackenridge, was murdered?”

“I didn’t say murdered. I said killed.”

Doc Savage contemplated the captive narrowly. The man was scared badly enough to be telling the truth. “How did the so-called killing happen?”

“Automobile accident. Car went over the edge of a road into a deep ditch and caught fire. Hubert Brackenridge’s neck was broke and he was smashed up.” The captive eyed them, then shrugged. “I don’t know whether Hubert Brackenridge was murdered, or whether it was an accident.”

Doc Savage said, “It seems that as soon as old Sebastian Casey died, someone made attempts on the lives of Pilatus Casey and the family friend, Hubert Brackenridge. Is that right?”

“Yes,” said the captive, “that’s right.”

“Why?”

“Eh?”

“Why?” Doc’s flake-gold eyes were intense. “What is behind it?”

“I don’t know.”

The bronze man’s eyes bore on the captive in a way that made the fellow squirm and dabble at his forehead with a numb hand.

“Honest, I don’t know,” the man said wildly.

“Who are you working for?”

“That guy Smith hired us,” the man said, “but I understand he’s gone to Wyoming. I don’t think Smith was the head guy, though. The orders come from somebody else. I don’t know who. I think Smith might know, but I ain’t sure.”

“Whoever is behind the trouble,” Doc suggested, “is trying to keep under cover?”

“That’s the idea,” the man said. “Say, what are you gonna do with me?”

“Ask you some more questions. What about the real niece of Pilatus Casey—the genuine Mira Lanson. What about her?”

“I don’t know anything about her.”

“Was there any attempt made to kill or kidnap her?”

“Not that I know of.”

“What else do you know?”

“Nothing,” the man said. “I really don’t. My name is Leo Marticer, and my pal here is Chuck North, and the guy you”—the man shuddered—“chucked out of the window was Tony Parst. We have worked together for a long time.”

Doc said, “Pulled a lot of jobs together, eh?”

“Well—yes,” the man admitted uncomfortably.

Doc Savage produced another hypodermic needle, a different one than he had used for the local anaesthetic—this one was larger—and administered a coffee-colored drug.

Monk, for the benefit of Hicky, explained, “That’s just a stronger anaesthetic, a general one. It will keep these guys drugged and helpless for a couple of days.”

“What will you do with the prisoners?” the girl asked.

Monk opened his mouth, then shut it. He couldn’t very well explain. Monk knew that Doc would consign the captives to the place they called the “college,” but Monk also knew that the existence of the “college” was a secret. It was an unusual institution where the students underwent delicate brain operations which wiped out all memory of the past, after which they were trained as good citizens and taught a trade.

“Oh, the prisoners will be all right,” Monk said evasively.

Doc Savage, having finished administering the general anaesthetic, straightened, said, “We will bring up the other one.”

The bronze man went down to the floor below, to an office immediately under the one where the questioning had taken place. The office was a large one, occupied by two men.

Doc Savage introduced the two men.

“Renny Renwick,” he said, “and Johnny Littlejohn. Two of our associates.”

Renny Renwick, who was an eminent engineer, had a long puritanical face and fists which would hardly have gone inside gallon pails. He was very big, almost as large as Doc Savage.

Johnny Littlejohn was longer and thinner than it seemed any man could be and survive. His clothes fitted him like a tent on a pole. A monocle was attached to his lapel by a ribbon, and the monocle was obviously a magnifier.

“I’ll be superamalgamated,” he remarked, seeing Hicky for the first time.

There were two spliced timbers in the room, and an arrangement whereby they had been thrust from the window and braced against the ceiling. There was also an ample net of the type used by building contractors as a safety measure when men are working in high places.

The man Doc Savage had thrown from the window above was sitting on the floor. He was unharmed, except that he was bound hand and foot.

“Oh!” Hicky was astounded.

Monk grinned. “Renny and Johnny, here, just stuck that net out of the window and caught the fellow.”

“But I didn’t see any net when I looked down,” the girl said.

“Neither did this guy,” Monk said, indicating the bound prisoner. “They put the net out when Doc signaled.”

The bronze man hauled the captive upstairs and placed him with the other two, then administered a general anaesthetic. He made a telephone call. That afternoon, an ambulance would call for the three prisoners, and take them on the long run north to the “college.”

“In the meantime,” Doc said quietly, “We will investigate the real Mira Lanson. And the death of this Hubert Brackenridge.”

Chapter 7

IGNORANCE AND DEATH

They found Mira Lanson through the undertaker who had buried Sebastian Casey. She was not in the telephone book. Nor was she in the city directory.

“Really,” she said, lifting her eyebrows and the end of her nose, “I find an unregistered telephone avoids annoyance.”

The lifted eyebrows and the lifted nose gave a line on her character. That, and the way she rolled her broad A’s. She called it, “rawly.”

Her form ran a little too much to bones. The art work on her face was overdone. She was smoking a cigarette, and it was in a foot-long holder.

“It would have made it more convenient for us to find you if you had a listed telephone,” Doc Savage said. “May we come in?”

“I don’t see why you should come in,” she said.

“It’s about your uncle, Pilatus Casey.”

“Really”—she called it “rawly” again—“I can think of no reason why I should be interested in Uncle Pilatus.”

“He’s dead,” Doc said.

She drew smoke through the long holder. The smoke leaving her lips was still blue.

“Is he?” she said. “How interesting.”

She stepped back then, and let them in, but it might have been because she had taken a second look at Doc Savage. The sight of the bronze man’s size and handsomeness, Renny reflected, made her act like a cat that had seen cream. Renny was a skeptic where women were concerned. This one reminded him of a skinny blond panther.

Doc said, “We were wondering if you would have any objections to talking about Sebastian Casey and Pilatus Casey.”

She curved her red lips at him. “Why should I object?”

“Sebastian Casey was grandfather?”

“Yes.” She shrugged. “Really, one can’t help one’s grandfather, can they?”

“I take it,” Doc said quietly, “that you didn’t like him?”

She patted a spot on the davenport for him to sit down. “It wasn’t that way, exactly. The contrary, I should say. He didn’t like me.”

“Can you tell us anything about him?”

“He was a quarrelsome old man. I haven’t seen him half a dozen times in the last ten years.” She looked up coyly and added, “Not since I was a child.”

“Did you know that Sebastian Casey made a statement of some kind to Pilatus Casey and Hubert Brackenridge?”

“I heard of some such statement.”

“Do you know the text of the statement?”

“No.”

“Were you present when it was made?”

“I was in the house. I was not present in the room.”

“Then you knew Hubert Brackenridge?”

“Naturally.”

“Did you know him very well?”

She used the fingertips of her right hand to fluff her hair.

“Ah—quite well,” she said, and dropped her eyes.

“Has it ever occurred to you,” Doc Savage asked, “that there was anything strange about Hubert Brackenridge’s death?”

“What?” She stared at him. “That’s ridiculous. He—he had an accident. His car missed the road and went into a ditch.”

“That is what we were told,” Doc agreed enigmatically. He changed the subject. “It is very kind of you to give us your time. I do not think we will bother you much more, except for one question.”

“Yes?” she seemed uneasy.

“Have you,” Doc asked, “ever seen or heard of a little toy puzzle consisting of a green eagle perforated with some holes into which you shake leaden feathers?”

“No.”

“Never heard Sebastian Casey or Pilatus Casey mention it?”

“No.”

“What about Hubert Brackenridge?”

“No.”

Doc Savage arose and said politely that he was grateful for what information she had been able to give him, and that he and the others would be going. They left by the door, the bronze man being the last one to depart.

Mira Lanson reached out suddenly and clutched his sleeve with red-nailed fingers. “What makes you think Hubert Brackenridge’s death wasn’t an accident?” she demanded tensely.

“Thank you again,” Doc Savage said, “for telling us all you knew.”

Hicky eyed the bronze man when they were in the street. “That woman,” said Hicky, “didn’t tell you all she knew. Not by a long shot.”

“What makes you think so?”

“I know women. That’s why. That woman is a deceitful hussy.”

“She made me think of a hungry blond panther,” Renny said.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Monk told him. “You fatten her up a little, and she wouldn’t be bad.”

“Not bad to look at, maybe,” Hicky said. “But bad inside.”

“That,” Ham said, “would make her Monk’s kind of gal.”

Monk scowled at him.

They walked to the end of the block, where they had been forced to park their car. The street was crowded. When they reached the machine, Doc got behind the wheel. He drove around the corner, and stopped.

“Monk, you and Ham go back and watch Mira Lanson,” Doc directed. “One of you take the front of the place, and the other the back. Get Long Tom Roberts on the telephone and have him hurry over and tap the woman’s telephone line.”

“Right,” Monk said.

He and Ham got out of the machine.

Doc Savage handed each of them a small device not much larger than a box of full-sized kitchen matches. These were tiny portable radio transmitter-receiver combinations. Operating on very short waves, they were efficient only for horizon distances.

“Keep in continuous touch with us, and with each other,” Doc advised.

“Right.”

The bronze man drove a few blocks, and stopped at a drugstore to use a telephone. The bureau of vital statistics of the city furnished him with the name of the undertaker who had handled the funeral of Hubert Brackenridge, and the department of the State police devoted to traffic accidents was able to give him the exact spot—in this case, they furnished him with the name of a trooper who had covered the Brackenridge death—where the accident had occurred.

“I take it,” said Hicky, “that you are going to investigate this car death of Hubert Brackenridge?”

Doc Savage nodded.

“Holy cow!” said big-fisted Renny. “Do you suppose Hubert Brackenridge’s death was really a murder?”

The bronze man made no comment.

Forty-five minutes later, they had picked up the State police trooper who had been first to reach the scene of Hubert Brackenridge’s accident.

He took them to the spot. It was a country lane, so deserted that during the time they were there, which was about thirty minutes, only one car passed the spot, and that was a station wagon with a bright-varnished body and yellow wheels.

Faint traces of the accident remained—a slight rut angling off the road, a newly repaired guard fence, and a burned area in the bottom of a deep ditch.

“The car burned after it hit?” Doc asked.

“Yes. A terrific fire.”

Renny, suddenly suspicious, rumbled, “Was the body burned until it was hard to identify, by any chance?”

“Oh, no. It was easily identified,” the officer assured him.

Doc asked, “Who made the identification?”

“Two of his business associates.”

“Hubert Brackenridge was a dentist, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. The men who identified him were in the dental business in the same building. Their names were Dimers and Stein. They identified the body while it was lying right here.”

After he had gone over the vicinity, Doc Savage dropped the State trooper at the station. The bronze man and the others drove back to the city.

“It looked like an ordinary accident,” Renny said. “Of course, someone could have knocked Hubert Brackenridge on the head and run his car off that curve. But, again, it was a bad curve and could have been an accident.”

Doc Savage made no comment. He pulled up suddenly before an office building in the suburban district.

“What’s this?” Renny asked.

“The building where Hubert Brackenridge practiced dentistry,” Doc explained. “Renny, would you mind going in and seeing if Dimers and Stein, the two dentists who identified Brackenridge’s body, are here. Ask them if they identified it.”

Renny entered the building. He was not gone long. He came back and reported, “Both of them here. Both of them said it was Hubert Brackenridge, all right. They went to the undertaker’s place and looked at it, and they were sure.”

“The undertaker’s place?” Doc asked.

“Sure.” Then Renny’s jaw fell. “Say! Wait a minute! Didn’t that State trooper say they identified the body at the scene of the accident?”

Doc said, “You better go back and ask and be sure about that.”

Renny returned to consult the two dentists about where they had identified the body.

He reported, “It was the morgue. They were never at the accident scene.”

“That is unusual,” Doc said.

“Possibly the State trooper made a slip of the tongue,” the girl suggested.

There were trees in the cemetery that needed trimming, and the grass was dead in patches. The caretakers had not taken away flowers from the graves when they had faded. The effect of the whole place was elderly, and its slovenly appearance, instead of being depressing, was rather pleasantly lazy.

Doc Savage said, “This is the cemetery where Hubert Brackenridge’s body was interred. It seems there is a Brackenridge family tomb. The body was placed in that.”

The keeper of the cemetery—the head keeper—had a map showing the location of the Brackenridge mausoleum. Doc noted the position, then set out.

The bronze man had not gone far when he stopped suddenly.

“Take a look.” He pointed.

A station wagon was swinging out of the cemetery, following a winding road and moving at good speed. It was an average-looking station wagon, except that it had yellow wheels in addition to a brightly-varnished body.

“Holy cow!” Renny exploded. “That’s the same station wagon that passed us on that road where Hubert Brackenridge’s car went into the ditch.”

Hicky exclaimed, "There's something strange about that!"

Doc Savage, saying nothing, began to run. He went with long strides toward the Brackenridge tomb—there was no chance of overhauling the station wagon—which was a block-shaped mass of dark stone interlaced with white marble.

A man lay sprawled out beside the door. He was dark, swarthy, grimy, wore overalls. A wheelbarrow and a garden rake nearby were obviously part of his equipment.

"One of the ground attendants," Hicky said needlessly. "He has been slugged."

Doc Savage bent over the unconscious man.

Renny rumbled, "I'll get a description of that station wagon to the police!" and dashed away, big fists swinging. Johnny made a circle of the tomb vicinity, then went over and tried the gatelike outer doors of the tomb itself. They were open. He looked down and pushed pieces of metal around with a toe. Fragments of the lock.

He went into the tomb. He was gone for some time.

Renny came back, rumbling, "I got the cops on the tail of that station wagon."

The attendant's mouth twisted and he made mumblings and finally his eyes opened and rolled. "They got the body," he mumbled.

Johnny came out of the tomb. Johnny ordinarily did not make any statement that required him to use small words. But now he was startled into using small ones.

"They stole Hubert Brackenridge's body," he said.

After the attendant had revived sufficiently to get to his feet and stumble off toward the caretaker's building to report the ghoulish raid, Doc Savage and the others went back to their car. There did not seem to be anything more they could do.

Hicky wrinkled her forehead. "This is strange. Hubert Brackenridge's body is important in some way. Those men—whoever they are in the station wagon—were obviously following us."

Johnny started, looked at Doc Savage, asked, "Were they trailing us, Doc?"

"Not trailing us," the bronze man said positively. "They were smoother than that. They were probably checking the scene of the accident to see if we were investigating—they no doubt drove by periodically to examine the spot. As soon as they saw we were investigating, they beat us to the cemetery and got the body."

"But why?" Hicky demanded.

Doc Savage seemed not to hear the question.

The young woman looked so irritated at Doc's silence that Renny smiled slightly. He knew that Doc had a small habit of appearing not to hear questions which he did not wish to answer.

"Probably," Renny said dryly, "they murdered Hubert Brackenridge. And wanted to prevent us finding out that he was murdered."

"That *would* account for it," Hicky admitted.

The car rolled on to the main boulevard, and suddenly the radio burst into life. Monk's voice came out of the transmitter, and it was strained.

"Doc!" Monk croaked. "Get over to Mira Lanson's apartment house as quick as you can."

Renny grabbed the microphone, demanded, "Monk, what's happened?"

"You get over here quick," Monk said.

"Is Ham all right?" Renny demanded.

"No, he isn't," Monk said.

Doc Savage tramped down heavily on the accelerator, and their car began to make a noise like a deep-throated foghorn blowing softly. Doc touched a button, and a siren under the hood began to howl. Red warning lights glowed on the bumpers. It seemed a remarkably short time—possibly because the passengers had involuntarily held their breaths part of the trip—before Doc rolled the machine into a side street.

Monk dashed out to meet them.

With Monk was a thin man of hardly average height who had a remarkably mushroom-like complexion. He was Major Thomas J. Long Tom Roberts, and despite the fact that he looked like a hopeful prospect for an undertaker, his health was amazingly good, almost as good as his fighting ability. He was conceded to be one of the world's great electrical wizards.

Monk did the talking.

"Trouble hit us without warning," the homely chemist explained. "We were watching this Mira Lanson, and nothing suspicious had happened, so there was no warning."

"I was out back putting a tap on the telephone," Long Tom put in.

"And I was on the roof of the building next door," Monk said, "rigging a spot where we could watch the front of the house without being seen."

"Holy cow!" Renny exclaimed. "Cut out the preliminary talk and tell us what happened."

"A station wagon drove up, and four men got out," Monk said. "The four rushed in and seized Mira Lanson. They dragged her out, threw her in the station wagon and drove off. That's the last we saw of them."

"What about Ham?" Renny asked.

"Ham disappeared," Monk said. "I think them raiders grabbed him, rapped him on the head, and threw him in the station wagon. I think they carried him off."

Hicky asked thoughtfully, "Did this station wagon have yellow wheels?"

"How'd you know that?" Monk stared at her.

Doc Savage asked, "Wasn't it possible to follow the station wagon?"

Monk shrugged. "It got away too fast."

The bronze man's metallic face was thoughtful for a time. "Was there," he asked finally, "any chance that Mira Lanson went with them willingly?"

"It looked like they captured her," Monk insisted. "She sure didn't seem willing."

"Could she have been pretending to be unwilling?"

"I don't know," Monk said.

"I'll bet she was pretending," said Hicky.

Two other things happened immediately. First, the police called—they simply cut their radio transmitter in on the frequency Doc Savage was using, in order to communicate with him—and informed him that the station wagon with the yellow wheels had been found.

When located, the station wagon had been drenched with gasoline and in flames. It was burning furiously. There was a body inside.

Doc said, "Monk, Renny, Johnny, you take the car and dash over there and look at the body."

Monk's face was stark. "Maybe—maybe it's Ham," he said, horror cramping the words in his throat.

Monk, Renny and Johnny departed in the car. Doc Savage, with Long Tom and Hicky, entered the apartment of Mira Lanson.

Long Tom Roberts smiled emaciated approval of Hicky, which was surprising. Long Tom ordinarily did not approve of women. Women were trouble, he usually insisted, whether they were pretty or homely, long or short, thin or wide, brunette, red-headed or blonde. He rarely had a date, possibly because he was sensitive about looking as if he had one foot in the grave.

"I imagine," Long Tom told Hicky, "that Doc would let you drop out of this any time you wish. After all, there is liable to be some danger."

Hicky said, "I'm going to stick until we get the cowboy, Ben Duck, out of trouble."

"Oh," said Long Tom. "It's Ben Duck." He looked a little sour.

Doc Savage went over Mira Lanson's apartment. He found the kind of stuff that a woman living alone would have around her place. The stuff was expensive.

In the bathroom, there were three burned matches in a wastebasket. The washbowl was a little dark. And there was some soot-staining on one of the neat little green towels.

"Looks as if she might have burned something recently," the bronze man remarked.

Doc continued his search without making more comment, until he came to the telephone. He started to pick the instrument from its hook, then withdrew his hand.

"Where do those wires go?" he asked grimly.

Long Tom examined the wires. There were two of them; they were as thin as hairs; only the unusual sharpness of the bronze man's vision had enabled him to see them. They were draped over the receiver hook in such a way that, had he lifted the receiver, they would have been separated.

The wires led down and into a drawer of the desk. Long Tom carefully tied a string to the drawer handle, and they got in the adjoining room and pulled the drawer open from the safety of that distance. Then they went back and looked in the drawer.

The bomb was flat, not much over three inches thick, but it was a foot wide and more than that in length.

Long Tom said, “Nice little trap. Those wires are together so that they make a circuit and hold a relay closed. If you had lifted the receiver, the wires would have fallen apart, broken the circuit, and the relay would have opened, causing this thing to go off.”

Doc carefully took the bomb apart. It held enough nitroglycerin to have killed everyone in the room.

Long Tom looked at Hicky. “I told you there might be danger.”

Hicky managed to smile. “I’m sticking with you,” she said. She looked at the bronze man. “Mr. Savage, do you think Mira Lanson set that bomb trap for you?”

Doc shook his head. “The trap has been set several hours. Since before we began investigating Miss Lanson.”

“How do you know?”

The bronze man indicated a small globule of chewing gum which had been used to affix the fine wires to the wood of the desk drawer and the under side of the desk where they led to the telephone receiver.

“The chewing gum is dry,” he pointed out. “It would take some time for it to dry.”

The telephone rang suddenly. Doc picked up the instrument.

“This is Ham,” the voice of Ham Brooks said quietly.

“Where are you?”

“At the Pine Valley Airport in New Jersey. Can you get out here?”

Doc Savage said, “Yes, we can. What do you want me to do with Elmer?”

“You can tie ribbons on Elmer,” Ham said.

Chapter 8

CARGO WEST

When they were in a car—they were using Long Tom's private limousine, which was so ancient that it had probably been called a horseless carriage when constructed—Hicky looked at Doc Savage thoughtfully.

"Who is Elmer?" she asked.

Long Tom answered that "Elmer," he said, "is a handy fellow to have around."

"I don't understand."

"When Doc asked what he should do with Elmer," the electrical wizard explained, "he was using a code. He was actually asking Ham if the telephone call was on the up-and-up."

"And what if the call had not been on the up-and-up?" Hicky asked.

"Ham would have said to leave Elmer behind, probably. If Ham had said anything except to tie a ribbon on Elmer, it would have meant there was trouble."

"Oh!" Hicky's mouth was open. "You think of everything, don't you?"

"Unfortunately," Doc Savage put in dryly, "there is a great deal that we do not think of. That is why we have so much trouble."

Hicky smiled. "From what I've heard, other people have all the trouble when they start fooling with you."

Doc Savage wheeled the car carefully through a traffic jam. Despite the decrepit nature of the vehicle, the bronze man seemed to be able to get more out of it than its owner, which was why he happened to be driving.

Doc said, "See if you can contact Monk, Renny and Johnny."

The system of radio communication by which the bronze man kept in touch with his associates while they were working was a thorough one. The apparatus, while small, was efficient. And each man was fully equipped with a two-way radio.

Long Tom got Monk on the radio and said, "Listen, Monk, Ham is alive."

Monk was silent for a long time. Evidently he was afraid Ham might be listening, and was trying to control his delight. Monk would have practically chopped off an arm before he would let Ham think that he, Monk, was in the least concerned over what might have happened to him.

"The overdressed shyster!" Monk said finally. "Probably ran off deliberately! I'll kick his teeth in for being such a bother."

Long Tom asked, "What about the body they found burning in that station wagon?"

"We got here," Monk said, "and the police still hadn't managed to put out the fire."

"Whose body was it?"

"Whoever set fire to that station wagon," Monk said, "had loaded a bunch of five-gallon gasoline cans in the back, and they kept blowing up and burning, so that the

body was almost completely consumed.”

“Then you weren’t able to identify it?”

“I didn’t say that,” Monk said.

“Well,” Long Tom yelled, “who was it?”

“It was the embalmed body of Hubert Brackenridge that they burned,” Monk snapped. “I’m sure of that, too. It had been embalmed, and it had been dead for some time, and the undertaker who buried Hubert Brackenridge identified what was left of it as the body he buried.”

Doc Savage took the microphone. “The undertaker is sure it was the same body he buried?”

“Yes.”

Doc said, “How soon can you get out to Pine Valley Airport in New Jersey?”

“By plane?” Monk asked.

“Yes,” Doc said. “Stop by headquarters and pick up one of our planes. Better take a fast one that is still maneuverable enough to land and take off from small fields.”

“In other words, don’t take one of those superspeed ships?”

“That is right.”

“It will take us half an hour or more to drive back to headquarters,” Monk said. “After that, we can fly the plane to the airport in a matter of minutes.”

“Do that.”

“You want us to come down boldly on the airport and land?”

“Unless we decide differently.”

Pine Valley Airport was a private field used by light-plane owners for the most part. There were two hangars of sheet metal, both new, built since the sudden interest in aviation that had followed governmental interest in training pilots. There was low woodland on three sides of the field, a concrete highway running along the fourth edge.

Nearing the field, Doc slowed speed.

Hicky asked, “Why did those men seize Hubert Brackenridge’s body and burn it?”

Doc Savage seemed not to hear her.

“What,” asked Hicky, “could Hubert Brackenridge have known about the mystery that might have led them to murder him in the first place?”

Long Tom said, “He was present when old Sebastian Casey made some kind of a dying statement. Pilatus Casey and Hubert Brackenridge both heard Sebastian Casey’s statement.”

“And now they’re both dead.”

“Yes,” said Long Tom. “I don’t think Hubert Brackenridge died an accidental death, either.”

“Maybe they seized the body and burned it,” Hicky said, “to cover up evidence that Hubert Brackenridge was murdered.”

“Maybe.”

“What,” asked Hicky, “does the green eagle puzzle mean?”

“Don’t give me a headache,” Long Tom muttered.

They were nearly thrown off the seats when Doc Savage stopped the old car suddenly.

Ham Brooks had come out of the brush alongside the road, and was waving at them. He ran to the machine, said, “You better pull off into the brush over here. There’s a lane. I figured you would come this way, so I came down here to head you off.”

Ham was still dapper, except for a rip in one leg of his trousers. He was carrying his innocent-looking black cane, and there was nothing outwardly about the implement to show that it was a sword cane.

“What happened to you?” Long Tom asked him, as soon as Doc Savage had driven the old car into the brush and parked it where it was out of sight of the road.

Ham said, “When those guys came to Mira Lanson’s apartment and grabbed her, they were in two cars. There was that station wagon with the yellow wheels, and there was a coupe they were using.”

“We didn’t see any coupe,” Long Tom exclaimed.

“I know you didn’t. I was the only one who saw it. I saw the driver and another guy with him get out and take up a position as lookouts. They left their coupe parked where they couldn’t see it. So I got in the baggage compartment.”

“Didn’t they find you?”

“No.”

“What if they had?”

Ham grinned without humor, and pulled out a small weapon which resembled an overgrown automatic pistol. It was a machine pistol, perfected by Doc Savage, and could fire hundreds of cartridges a minute. It discharged mercy bullets producing unconsciousness, explosive slugs, smoke pellets, at will.

“I almost wish they had found me,” Ham said.

“Where did they go?”

“They drove up north,” Ham said. “I think, judging from what I could overhear, that they put a lot of gasoline in the station wagon, and set it afire. I don’t know why they did that.”

“They were destroying a body,” Long Tom said.

“Whose body?”

“Hubert Brackenridge’s. And don’t ask me why. We haven’t figured it out. Unless they were trying to hide evidence that Hubert Brackenridge was murdered.”

“I don’t think that is why they did it,” Ham said.

“Why not?”

“They would know that stealing the body and burning it would be sure to make the police suspect that something like murder had happened to Hubert Brackenridge.”

Doc Savage looked at Ham thoughtfully. “That is a good piece of reasoning,” he said.

Ham Brooks waved one expensively gloved hand. “Those guys,” he said, “are over at the airport.”

“What are they doing?” Doc asked.

“They’ve hired a plane,” Ham explained. “They’re waiting for it to show up.”

“Where did you find that out?”

“I got hold of one of the guys at the airport,” Ham said. “They are young fellows running the place. They didn’t have any large ships capable of long-distance flights, which is what these fellows want. So they telephoned to a Long Island airport for them, and the ship is going to be here”—Ham consulted his watch—“in about twenty minutes. There was a delay while the pilot got to this Long Island airport, so he could fly the ship over.”

The dapper lawyer looked at Doc Savage intently. He seemed to have a good idea of what the bronze man would do next.

Doc asked, “These men are hiring ship *and* pilot?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” Doc Savage said. He switched on the radio-telephone transmitter in the car and began calling. “Monk, Renny, Johnny—one of you come in please.”

It was finally Johnny who answered. The big-worded archaeologist and geologist did not use any jaw-breaking words. He did not use those on Doc. He said, “Yes?”

“Are you in the air?”

“We just took off from the Hudson River,” Johnny explained.

Doc turned to Ham. “Where did they rent this plane? What airport?”

Ham told him.

Doc gave the name and location of the airport to Johnny. He said, “These men we are after have chartered a plane there. It is a large ship, and the pilot should be leaving very soon. I want you to intercept the plane. Intercept it before it takes off, if you can. Tell the pilot the flight is canceled. Pay him a little something for his trouble, and give him the idea you are the man who hired the plane.”

“Right,” Johnny said. “Anything else?”

“Report to me when you have stopped the plane.”

“Right.”

Doc Savage switched off the radio. “Where are the telephone lines?” he asked Ham.

“Over here. They run along the road.” Ham pointed.

“Those are the lines that go to the airport where those men are waiting?”

“Yes.”

Doc said, “Where are the pliers?” He got the pliers, stout ones, and climbed a telephone pole and cut every wire.

“Why did you cut the wires?” Hicky asked.

“To keep the pilot of the rented plane from calling this airport and learning we are pulling a trick.”

The bronze man did not volunteer further explanation, and Hicky was puzzled. She obeyed the bronze man's instructions to get in the old car. Doc drove. They rattled back the way they had come.

Hicky, in the back seat, said, "But we're going off and leaving those men there," to Long Tom, who was riding with her.

"Doc knows what he's doing," Long Tom said.

"What *is* he doing?"

"Well, you see what we want most to know is what is behind this," Long Tom explained. "And instead of closing in on those guys and going to a lot of trouble——"

Ham said, "Doc's plan is this. He will——"

"I'll tell her!" Long Tom snapped. "You shut up!" He glared.

Ham subsided, looking startled. It was not like Long Tom to flare up. Ham nudged Doc. "Long Tom seems to like her," he whispered.

Long Tom was saying, "Doc's plan is probably this: He will take one of our planes, pretend to be the pilot, and fly to the place that these fellows want him to take them. That is an easy method of trailing them."

"But it's dangerous!" Hicky exclaimed.

Long Tom grinned.

When big-worded Johnny Littlejohn reported that they had managed to head off the hired ship, Doc Savage made a statement of approval, and instructed them to fly at once to a pasture which was near where the bronze man was then driving, and far enough from the field where the men they were trailing were waiting.

Doc parked at the pasture edge, and put on a disguise. He clipped his bronze hair differently, changed its color to a muddy brown with chemicals, altered the color of his eyes to a nondescript gray with eyeball cups, and gave his face a different contour with paraffin and metal gadgets which went inside the nostrils. He added a gold cap over one tooth, some stuff which made the remaining teeth yellowish and unhealthy looking. He stuffed a handkerchief in each hip pocket to broaden his hips.

Monk was flying the plane when it landed. The ship was a big streamlined job that glistened in the sunlight like new silver. Doc had formerly painted his planes a distinctive bronze color, but had discovered that it made him too conspicuous, and had discontinued the practice.

Big-fisted Renny was uneasy. "Holy cow! This isn't gonna be easy, Doc."

The bronze man said, "You fellows rush back to the city and get another plane. Be ready to follow."

"How'll we know where you go?"

"I will get into the radio transmitter on this ship," Doc explained, "and change the wiring so that the set does not turn off when the switch is turned. The set will be on the air continuous. Use a direction finder on the carrier wave."

"All right," Renny said. "But holy cow! I think this is taking a big chance."

The bronze man climbed in the ship, gunned the motors to clear the cylinders of sluggish vapor, then opened the throttles, and the plane crawled across the pasture. It took the air easily, and began to pitch as it hit air currents over the low hills.

A few minutes later, Doc slanted the ship down at the airport, landed, and taxied over to the hangars.

A squat man came out to meet him. The man wore dark corduroy trousers, and had his hand in one pocket of a leather coat he was wearing.

Doc said, "Was there somebody here who hired me and this plane?"

"This ship from South Shore Airport?" the man asked. He had a harsh voice.

"Yes, it is," Doc said. Which was no lie; the plane had landed there, although Monk and Renny and Johnny had been in it.

"I'm the man who hired you," the man said. "Can you take off right away?"

"Sure. The tanks are practically full."

"Good. There are eight men with me."

"Eight?" Doc shrugged. "This ship will carry twice that many. But what about money? Who pays me?"

"How much do you want?"

"You show me the exact spot on the map where you want to go," Doc told him, "and I can tell more about that."

The man climbed in the plane. "Got a map of Wyoming?"

There was a scale map of the hemisphere, and smaller charts printed on thin paper, covering in detail almost every spot in North and South America. Doc located the Wyoming chart and unrolled it.

The man looked at the map for a while.

"We go here," he said, pointing.

"Apparently there is no established airport around there," Doc said, after consulting the map.

"It's range country."

"A flight like that for eight men and yourself," Doc said, "will cost four hundred dollars. Cash in advance."

The man scowled. "Where do you keep your horse, Jesse James?" he asked.

Doc shrugged. "It's no skin off my nose if you don't want to pay it, or haven't got the dough."

The man complained peevishly about the price. Doc remained adamant. He was quarreling about the price for a reason. He hoped it would allay their suspicions, if they were inclined to have any.

"Oh, all right, damn you!" the man snarled finally.

He paid off in good money.

He went away and came back with his eight men.

Actually, there were not eight men. Only seven. One of them was a girl—Mira Lanson. She was dressed in boy's clothing, and she had dirtied her upper lip to give the

impression of a boy's mustache. They had clipped off her hair crudely with scissors. Doc could not tell whether she was coming along willingly, or not.

Chapter 9

COULEE WAR

They refueled in Columbus, Ohio. It was night by then, and Doc came down on the beam, then taxied over near the waiting room used by the regular air lines.

“There oughta be a restaurant in there,” the leather-coated leader said. He eyed Doc. “Will we get to this place in Wyoming tonight?”

Doc said, “We will have to land at some regular airport and wait until daylight, so that we can spot a landing field.”

“We might as well kill some time here, then,” the man growled. “Take your time refueling. We’re going to eat.”

“All right,” Doc said easily. “And if I’m not here when you get back, it’ll be because I’m getting something to eat, too.”

“Umph.”

The bronze man watched them walk away. Then, sliding out of the plane quickly, he gave the attendant instructions about the gasoline, and paid him for the amount he was to receive. “Just stick the ticket in the cabin,” Doc instructed.

Doc headed for the west end of the waiting room, and from there worked to a point where he could look on through a window. It was dark at that end of the restaurant, and they would not be likely to notice him. He unlimbered a small telescope that had considerable magnifying power.

He was a skilled lip reader, and all of the group were facing in his direction.

“That pilot,” the leader was saying, “claims we can get there as soon as he can find daylight enough to land.”

“He suspect anything?” a man asked.

“Of course not.”

“I can fly that plane,” a man leaned over to say. “Why don’t we knock him off right away and get it over with?” He was a thin blood man with a skull-thin face and rather plump hips.

“That looks like a lot of airplane to me,” the leader said.

“I can fly it.”

“Just the same,” said the leader, “I think we’ll land before we do anything about the pilot. That plane might have tricks you don’t know anything about.”

The thin-faced man, who had said he was a pilot, fell silent and sulked.

When it became evident that he was not going to learn anything, Doc Savage withdrew from the window. He managed to pick up two sandwiches at the soda fountain—separate from the lunchroom—and went back to the plane. He was careful to let them see him consuming the sandwiches when they returned.

“All set?” he asked.

“All ready,” they told him. “Let’s go.”

Doc Savage lifted the big plane into the air. In order not to reach Wyoming before daylight, he flew well below the top speed of the ship.

He kept a close, but surreptitious, watch on his passengers. He was convinced now that they did not plan to let him go unmolested, that they intended to kill him.

They met strong headwinds, so they were a little later than expected in reaching Wyoming. The Big Horn Mountains stood up to the northward, sunlight bright against the rocky flanks, here and there a snow cap like a crown of tinsel. After that, there was the Big Horn River, not much larger than some Eastern creeks down here, then a long stretch of monotonous prairie that verged on desert, veined with irrigation canals at long intervals, here and there verdant green where the canals emptied.

Suddenly they were in a hag’s dream of stone pinnacles, of bare, arid peaks as unpatterned as if made by a child’s playful chopping. These shoved up. The peaks grew higher. The canyon grew deeper, narrower. Now and then there was a scrawny scrub pine. Then, abruptly, there was a valley, and to the South, the Broken Circle Ranch.

The leader of the seven men came forward and asked Doc where they were, had the bronze man point out their position carefully. The chart showed the names of the big ranches in the vicinity. The Broken Circle was one of these.

“Head up this way more,” the man said.

Doc decided the fellow wanted to stay well clear of the Broken Circle outfit.

Mira Lanson had remained entirely quiet, seated well back in the cabin. There had been nothing to show whether she was a prisoner or a member of the gang. But she did not look happy.

A few minutes later, the leader clutched Doc’s shoulder and pointed. “Down there,” he said. “You see that marker?”

The marker consisted of several saddle blankets arranged in the form of an arrow. The blankets lay against light gray alkali, and were gaudily noticeable.

Doc slanted the plane down and adjusted the wing flaps so that the speed could be slow. He circled and saw that the ground was smooth enough for a landing.

He landed, and cocked the plane into the wind before he cut the motors.

Three men came out of the sagebrush nearby. One of them was Albert Panzer. He wore his gaudy chaps made from the hide of a black-and-white pinto pony.

Panzer waved. He met the leader of the group who had arrived by plane, and they shook hands. The others got out of the plane. All of them seemed to know the three men who had met the ship. The possible exception was Mira Lanson. She was strangely stiff in manner, and spoke to no one.

They held a conference some distance from the plane. They stood so that Doc Savage could see their faces, and not so far away that, although he could not understand their words, he could read their lips.

Panzer asked, “What happened to Doc Savage?”

“We gave him the slip in New York,” the other explained. “I think we’re rid of him.”

“Did you cover up everything, so there’s no chance of his following us out here?”

“Sure.”

“How about that body?”

“Hubert Brackenridge’s body? We got it, and burned it. Don’t worry about anything turning up on that angle.” The other grinned.

“How about this pilot?” Albert Panzer was clever; he did not glance in the direction of the plane as he spoke.

“We thought about knocking him off at first,” the other said suavely. “But we changed our mind. The pilot seems a right guy. We may need this plane again. So we decided on a different course.”

Albert Panzer frowned. “Yeah? What kind of a course?”

“Let’s have him stick around with his plane. Tonight we will come back and sound him out. He might be persuaded to join up with us.”

He evidently said something more, but the other man stepped around so that he was between Doc and Panzer’s face, so that the bronze man could not tell what was said.

Neither did Doc catch the next half-dozen or so exchanges of speech, because he could not see either man’s lips. He did watch their faces. He saw Panzer register astonishment, then doubt, and finally the man shrugged. Panzer then lighted a cigarette, and in doing so, stepped around into such a position that his lips and those of the other man were visible.

“In case we have to do that,” Panzer said, “this pilot might be handy. Your idea is all right. We’ll ask him to wait here, and later try to sound him out about joining us.”

The leader of the new arrivals from New York nodded. He turned and came back to the plane.

“Listen,” he said to Doc Savage. “We’ve been talking it over, and it looks like we might need this plane some more.”

“What you want me to do?” Doc asked. “Wait around?”

“Yes. You wait here. The rest of us are going to take a little trip into the hills. Some of us will be back later. That all right with you?”

“You want to hire me some more?” Doc asked.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll wait here,” the bronze man said.

All of them—those who had been in the plane, and the trio who had met them—trudged off across the alkali flat. The naked hills were nearby, thrusting up with surprising abruptness. They disappeared into a canyon.

Albert Panzer kept walking until he made sure they were out of sight of the plane.

“One of you,” he said suddenly and harshly, “go back and keep a watch and make sure that guy is still in the plane.”

One man detached himself hastily, went back. He bellied down in the sagebrush on a small ridge, peered at the plane and made sure Doc Savage was at the ship. Doc was examining one of the motors. The man signaled that fact to Panzer.

Albert Panzer whirled on the leader of those who had come on the plane.

“Now,” Panzer said, “what tipped you off that the pilot is Doc Savage?”

“Two things.”

“Let’s hear them.”

“First, that pilot was watching us in Columbus, Ohio, where we were eating in a restaurant. I saw his reflection in a polished metal towel-holder for paper towels. He was watching through kind of a telescope. Later I figured that out. Lip reading. Second, a pilot just happened to come up to us at the Columbus Airport and ask me if that wasn’t Doc Savage’s plane we had come in, because it looked like one that Savage designed.”

“That,” said Panzer, “doesn’t look so good.”

“You’re telling me.”

“Doc Savage is a big man. Physically, I mean. A very big man.”

“So is this pilot.”

“He must be Savage. The only other one of Savage’s men who is near his size and height has fists so big that they almost look deformed. How’s this guy’s fists?”

“They are normal size.”

“It’s Savage, then.” Albert Panzer took a couple of angry, pacing turns through the sand. He scowled up at the sharp rock walls of the canyon.

The other seemed nervous about Panzer’s disapproval. “Of course, we could go ahead and croak him now,” he said, “but I thought——”

“I wouldn’t bet on that,” Panzer said fiercely. “If we had Savage here now, with six-guns pointing at him, I wouldn’t bet a cent on the outcome.”

“I thought,” the other stated hastily, “that it would be better if we wiped out this Savage crowd all at once.”

“How you figure we do that?”

“Keep an eye on him today. Chances are he’s having his friends follow him in another plane. When they get here, they’ll start out looking for us. We leave a plain trail. We set a trap. They follow the trail into the trap.”

Albert Panzer rubbed his jaw. He grinned thinly. “It sounds like a good idea. But I’ll have to take it up with the boss.”

“Is the boss where you can make a contact?”

“You be sure Doc Savage stays with that plane,” Panzer said, “and I can get away long enough to use our radio transmitter. I think I can make contact all right.”

Doc Savage remained with the plane most of the morning. He spent some time in the cabin, and during that interval, he communicated with Monk and the others flying in from the East and instructed them where to land and how to do it.

There was a high ridge immediately to the east, and on the other side of this Doc had noted, before landing, plenty of flat coulee bed suitable for a plane. Doc instructed Monk to put the silencers on the motor of the plane and come in very low, out of sight behind the ridge, and land and wait.

About the time he judged the plane flown by Monk was due to come within hearing, Doc started one of the motors of his own plane. He ran the motor and tinkered with it. The exhaust made a great deal of racket, enough to cover any sound that Monk's ship might have made.

Doc waited until Monk must surely have landed.

He wrote a note. The note said:

I saw a creek over the hill. Going over there to take a bath. Back by dark.

Pilot.

He fastened the note to the cabin-door handle with a string. Carrying a towel ostensibly flung over his shoulder, he walked away, heading south toward a spot where there actually was a small stream. Once out of sight, he quickened his pace and veered east.

Monk and Ham, their two pets, met him just beyond the ridge.

Monk said, "Long Tom, Renny and Johnny are down at the plane. We landed without any trouble."

"Think anyone could have seen you from the other side of the ridge?" Doc asked.

"Not a chance."

"How about the girl?"

"Hicky? She's with us. Making a bigger hit than ever with Long Tom. Seems she is interested in electricity and radio and stuff. Right up Long Tom's alley. He's been letting her use the plane radio."

"Hicky has been using our plane radio?" Doc asked.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Oh, at various times during the day. We had radio bearings and weather reports to get. And Long Tom changed the wave length of the set over to the amateur band and let her talk to some hams."

Doc Savage made no comment, although there was some very slight, quizzical expression on his features.

They walked back toward the plane.

Renny, Long Tom and Johnny were staring up at the ridge.

"I thought I saw somethin' move up there," Renny rumbled. "Somethin' black."

"Probably a buzzard," Doc Savage said.

Chapter 10

THE NEWSBOY

It was Albert Panzer's head—topped by a black hat—which Renny had seen projecting over the top of the hill. Panzer had become somewhat unwary, and he had jerked back in mad haste, growing suddenly pale.

He was roundly cursed by the man with him. "You damned fool," said the man. "If they would see us now, the goose would be cooked."

Panzer took the cursing meekly. It was a long time before he took another chance and peered over at the plane. He exhaled in relief. "They didn't see me," he said. "Whew! Well, it's working out the way we figured."

"You want me to keep track of them?" the other man asked.

Panzer retreated hurriedly until he had joined his men. They were heavily armed. Three of them carried cases of dynamite, and two others had electric detonating equipment and wire.

"Come on," Panzer said.

He led them up the canyon to a spot where it branched, and where there was a cliff, not quite sheer, but almost so. Up the side of this cliff, a steeply jagged scratch, there was a trail.

Panzer said, "Plant the dynamite along the ridge, in that crack we found up there."

They spent an hour at this task, and Panzer surveyed the job when it was done.

"Nice," he said. "The shots are spread so they'll bring the whole face of the cliff down on that path. Now plant two more charges, one above and one below, to close the canyon if we have to."

This was done.

Panzer glanced at the sky. "It's late enough in the afternoon now that we can pull this off. Some of us will go to the plane and serve as bait to draw them on." He looked over his men. "You'll go, Tuck. And you——"

Tuck said, "I don't want any part of this Savage, if you don't mind."

Panzer scowled at him. He looked at all of them, then made his voice as insulting as he could and asked, "Are any more of you yellow?"

Tuck said, "Call it yellow if you want to. I still call it good sense."

No one else said anything. Panzer hitched at his black-and-white chaps. "I'm going," he said. "And I want two more of you. We won't take the whole gang, in order that Savage will not be tempted to grab us on the spot. We want him to trail us in hopes of getting the whole gang."

Two men volunteered. They looked more desperate than brave, following Panzer down the canyon to the plane.

Doc Savage was stretched out under one wing of the ship, as if dozing. He stood up when Panzer and his two men came close.

“Get tired of waitin’?” Panzer asked.

“I left a note that I was going swimming,” Doc explained. “But I got back before you fellows did.” He studied them. “What about hiring my plane some more? You decided about that yet?”

Panzer was an actor. He nodded blandly. “Yes. You camp here with the plane, so it will be available. We will pay you for waiting time.”

“That is fair enough,” Doc admitted.

Panzer looked at the western sky. It was near sundown, but not yet dark. He had a hunch that Doc Savage and his men would follow the trail more readily if it was dark, and there was less chance of them being seen.

“I think we’ll cook and eat something before we start back,” Panzer said.

It was very dark when Panzer finished eating, picked his teeth with a match and threw the match away. He had a new respect for Doc Savage by now. Doc had not shown the slightest trace of tension, no indication that he was acting. And the bronze man’s disguise amazed Panzer. By very close inspection, knowing there was a disguise, he had found traces of it.

“We’ll leave you now,” Panzer said. Then, with bland solicitude, “You have blankets and food? You will be comfortable?”

“If I’m getting paid for it, I won’t mind,” Doc said.

Panzer tucked his rifle under his arm and moved away. His two men followed him, and they gained the mouth of the canyon.

“That big bronze guy,” one of the men whispered, “gives me the creeps. You notice how he acted? As casual as could be. But he never turned his back to one of us, not once.”

“To trap a fox,” Panzer said, “you got to be a fox.” He said it rather proudly.

“We might have shot him down right there while we were having supper.”

“And his five men would have cleaned us up in no time. They’re loitering around there in the sagebrush somewhere. Anyway, I think Savage was wearing a bulletproof vest.”

They went carefully, moving with infinite caution. Panzer found a niche and stationed one of his men near the trail.

“After they get past, and start up the cliff face,” Panzer said, “you blow this whistle.” He gave the man a whistle which had a thin, piping tone.

Panzer and his one companion climbed on up the trail. They went rapidly, for they were nervous. Too, they wanted plenty of noise, in order to guarantee pursuit.

On top Panzer scampered well back from the edge. His men were crouched there. One of them was doubled over the generator which would detonate the electric caps they had rigged in the dynamite charges.

“Listen for a thin, piping whistle,” Panzer said.

They waited. The moon was low, but bright enough to make noticeable shadows. Peaks shoved up around them like fangs, and on all sides, and not as far away as usual,

the coyotes were making a yipping, forlorn uproar. The world was a darkly grotesque and haunted place.

Suddenly, the whistle came.

“They’re on the trail!” Panzer gritted. “Let it go!”

The man with the generator let it go. It was an old-fashioned blasting generator; you shoved down on a handle like a tire pump. It made a noise like a grandfather clock getting ready to strike, then, in the middle of that low whirring, the earth jumped down and then up, down and then up with great sudden violence, and the earth, the universe, became a roar. Those who had not been shocked off their feet were nearly upset by the blast.

There was a grinding like a fabulous dog eating a monstrous bone.

Panzer balanced on hands and knees and said, “Well, they’re buried under a hundred feet of stone.”

A man walked to the canyon rim—the new canyon rim—for a titanic fragment of it had been blasted down into the crack below. He poked a flashlight beam downward. The light was like a stiff white rod in the dust.

“I would say buried nearer two hundred feet,” he said.

Panzer stiffened. “Listen!”

There was some rumbling of rock.

“Listen!” Panzer screamed more loudly.

A voice was coming up out of the canyon. It was a frantic voice, and one they recognized. It was the lookout. The man they had left down there. The man who was to blow the piping little whistle as the signal for death.

“Watch out!” he was shrieking. “It was a trick! Savage knew about it! He’s got me! You didn’t kill me!”

Down in the canyon, and near the mouth of the place, long and bony William Harper Littlejohn moved as if his life depended on it. He leaped wildly over boulders, sprawled across greasewood bushes. Finally he reached the man who was screaming.

The fellow had gotten his gag out. Johnny jammed it back in place.

“I’ll be superamalgamated!” Johnny groaned.

He was infinitely disgusted.

A moment later, Long Tom Roberts arrived. Long Tom said, “I thought you were to watch that lookout after we grabbed him, and keep him quiet!”

Johnny said nothing. He was too disappointed to speak.

Long Tom demanded, “Did Doc and the others have time to reach the top of the canyon wall and tie into Panzer and his gang?”

That was answered twenty minutes later, when Doc Savage and the others returned.

Monk said, “They got away. They had horses hidden over the hill. They got to the broncs before we could reach ’em, and rode like blazes.”

“Can we trail them when it gets daylight?” Long Tom inquired.

Doc Savage said, "If you will listen, you will know the answer."

They paid attention to the night. There was a faint sound far away. It was like a big river running fast, except for a small noise now and then that might have been distant automobile horns beeping.

"Cattle," Long Tom guessed.

"There was a big herd over the ridge," Doc agreed. "They have stampeded them, and will ride among them until they get a chance to ride clear, one at a time, and meet somewhere."

Ham said, "Which is another way of saying there isn't one chance in a million of trailing them."

Doc Savage went over to the prisoner.

"Where is that poison?" the bronze man asked loudly. "We might as well dispose of this fellow without delay."

The man on the ground, the one who had been left to whistle the death signal—his whistle had been taken from him by Monk, who had blown it, and who was fiddling with it now—groaned in terror.

Monk Mayfair turned a flashlight on his own face, apparently by accident, and made a horrendous face. A horrendous face was not a difficult job for Monk.

"We ain't got nothin' but slow poison," he said. "But that'll do the job."

Ham said angrily, "You stupid missing link! What do you mean, not packing anything but slow poison! We haven't got much time to waste."

"Either fast or slow, he's dead, ain't he?" Monk growled.

Monk went away.

Hicky had come up in the darkness. They had placed her in a spot of safety. The talk about poison had caused her to look completely horrified. "You're not—you're not ——" She choked up.

Monk came back with a vial and hypo needles. With infinite glee, he stripped one of the needles open, filled it and fell upon the prisoner.

The prisoner had courage. "If you lugs think you're gonna scare me into talkin'," he said, "you're lookin' for a wind from the wrong direction."

"Have we asked you a question?" Monk demanded. "A single question?"

He jabbed the hypo into the man.

Hicky got pale and swayed. She looked so sickened by what was so obviously a cold-blooded murder that Long Tom felt moved to draw her aside.

"That's only truth serum they're giving him," Long Tom whispered. "But you're being a big help by looking so sickened."

"To make it look better," Hicky said, infinitely relieved, "I'll go back and pretend to faint."

"Good."

The captive was deeply impressed by the realistic faint which Hicky pulled. He became blue, with traces of green. He twisted and tried to cry out, but the gag and the ropes which held him restrained his efforts.

Hicky could see, as time passed, that the drug was having a drastic effect on the man.

“Truth serum,” Long Tom told Hicky, “is dangerous stuff to use. That’s why Doc does not employ it when there’s any other way out.”

“But why all the deceit about its being poison?”

“Truth serum is funny stuff. If a guy knows he’s given the stuff, he can mighty often determine not to answer any questions truthfully, and get the job done.”

Doc Savage went to work on their prisoner. The man’s talk was rambling, disconnected, hard to understand. Like nothing so much as the babbling of a drunk.

What the man knew summed up as: Albert Panzer was in charge of operations, but he was not the big boss. The man did not know who the real boss was. He had heard Panzer call the person Becky.

Sometimes he thought Panzer took his orders from a woman, the man said.

Panzer had been secretive. He did not reveal the identity of the person they were working for, and he had kept secret the general purpose of their activities. This had puzzled everyone.

One thing was sure: A cowboy named Ben Duck was in possession of information concerning a puzzle where you shook leaden feathers into holes on a painted green eagle. Ben Duck had taken this puzzle off Pilatus Casey, an old prospector who had been murdered.

“Who murdered Pilatus Casey?” Doc asked.

“Panzer done the job,” the man mumbled.

“How?”

The prisoner didn’t know how.

“What is the exact significance of this green eagle puzzle?” Doc inquired.

The captive didn’t know that, either.

“Where,” Doc asked, “is Ben Duck being held?”

The prisoner knew that, at least. It took them almost an hour of sweating patience to get a description of the exact location of the place out of him.

It was around dawn when Doc Savage found the spot where Ben Duck had been held. They knew it was the spot by the evidences of camping—tin cans and discarded food containers and the general filth of a careless camp—in the vicinity.

“Why!” Hicky exclaimed. “This isn’t the spot where they took Ben Duck at first.”

“Remember,” Doc reminded her, “that you notified the sheriff that Ben Duck had been seized. They probably had to move their captive to evade the sheriff.”

The bronze man, once he was certain Ben Duck was not at the camp—and no one else, for that matter—went searching. There were indications that the camp had been broken hastily. He hunted for a trail.

When he found a trail, it was the trail of at least seventy cattle, the sharp hoofs of which had wiped out all horse trail.

“Bet it was the same bunch of cattle they picked up right after they got away from us,” Monk muttered. “They were smart enough to drive them up here, so as to keep on covering their trail.”

Doc spent some time following the cattle trail. He gave up when convinced it was hopeless—the cattle were in a small valley, where he came upon them suddenly. But the riders were nowhere in sight. They must have quitted the herd separately, wherever there was hard stone that would hide hoofmarks.

Doc said, “We will go back to the Broken Circle Ranch.”

“You think we might pick up something there?” Ham asked.

“There are loose ends,” Doc said.

Chapter 11

HORSE TROUGH

D'Orr smirked and rubbed his hands when they landed their plane in the alfalfa meadow below the Broken Circle Ranch buildings. He thought they were dudes, customers. They did not disillusion him.

Monk and the others were puzzled that Doc Savage seemed in no hurry. He took rooms for all of them at the ranch, and engaged horses. It was very rough country in back of the ranch, of course, and they would need horses if they went anywhere. But they thought the bronze man was wasting time.

The sheriff came out that afternoon.

"Hello, Sheriff Gates," Doc Savage called to him.

"I never saw you before," the sheriff said, staring at Doc.

"I am McCain."

"Huh?" The sheriff took a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket. "You don't look like McCain, except that you're big. But I think I'll arrest you."

Doc Savage explained who he was, and showed documents proving his identity. Then he told the story, from the time old Pilatus Casey had sent him a wild appeal for help from Wyoming. Doc told what he knew about the green eagle puzzle. It did not sound like much.

The sheriff rolled a cigarette carefully. "Why didn't you tell me you was Savage before?"

"Did not think it would be best if the gang knew I was interested."

"What gang?"

"Panzer and his men. The fellows who grabbed poor Ben Duck."

"Who," asked the sheriff, "is the brains behind this?"

The bronze man shrugged. The sheriff drew on his cigarette. This thing was an intricate enigma, so puzzling that the sheriff felt strange. It was not like cow rustling and shooting scrapes and disputes over line fences and waterholes.

"I got no idea where they're holdin' Ben," the sheriff said. "I looked for him everywhere."

"They are torturing him in an effort to find a green eagle puzzle."

Fierceness jumped over the sheriff's face. "It's gonna be tough on them hombres when I tie into 'em," he said. "Ben is a fine young man."

D'Orr was standing by, listening. He asked, "Any reward for finding Donald Duck?"

Monk gave his belt a hitch and frowned at the man. D'Orr had tried to foist the highest-priced accommodations on them, and had overcharged on top of that. Monk did not like the fellow.

“Why should there be a reward?” Monk asked harshly.

D’Orr shrugged. “I thought you fellows might want to find him real bad.”

Monk stepped forward. The homely chemist’s shoulders were hard, the way they were when he felt like fighting. “You got us pegged wrong,” he said. “We’re not in this for money. We’re in it to help a guy.”

Doc Savage spoke quietly.

He said, “We will give five thousand dollars for information leading to the rescuing of Ben Duck alive.”

Monk swallowed. He was astounded.

The sheriff grabbed Doc Savage’s hand and pumped it. “That’s fine,” he exclaimed. “Ben Duck is a nice young man.”

Monk did not understand why Doc had come to the Broken Circle Ranch, and Monk was not alone in being puzzled. The others could not see an object in it. The bronze man’s behavior seemed dilatory. It appeared that his time could have been better spent in the hills hunting Ben Duck and the men who were holding him and torturing him.

Doc Savage was not perturbed. Still, it was hard to tell when he was excited or calm. His control over his emotions was remarkable.

Doc visited Ben Duck’s bunkroom. He went through Ben’s meager belongings. Eventually he came up with one object that interested him—a suit of underwear. A suit that had been worn, but which was not as soiled as another one.

“Looks like Ben Duck wore long-handled underwear the year around,” Monk remarked. “But what’s so interesting about that particular suit?”

“It seems a little strange,” Doc pointed out, “that he stopped wearing it when it was scarcely soiled. The other two suits, you’ll notice, are rather dirty.”

Doc examined the underwear. On one sleeve, the right, he found a greenish stain. He decided it was moss.

He said, “The underwear must have been taken off because one sleeve got wet. It got wet where there was moss on or in the water.”

He went out to the horse-watering tank, took off his shirt, and began exploring in the mud in the bottom of the tank.

When he found the taped tin which contained the puzzle, he carried it into the house and opened it. Only his five men were present when he brought out the puzzle.

They studied the thing, and they were completely at a loss. At least the five associates of Doc Savage were. Doc himself made no comment.

But after about five minutes, Doc Savage did something that held a great deal of meaning for the others, and also puzzled them. Doc made a small trilling sound. It was a strange, low, exotic sound, partaking of the weirdness of a wind through a naked forest. It had a ventriloquial quality, seeming to come from everywhere.

The sound was a small unconscious mannerism of the bronze man’s in moments of mental excitement.

Every one of his five associates was convinced that he had suddenly understood the significance of the puzzle. They were more sure when he seemed not to hear Monk's queries about what he'd decided.

Monk scratched his head. "It's kind of silly, all this furor over that thing."

Doc said. "It's clever—very clever."

Then he did another thing that surprised him. He took the tin box and the puzzle out and showed it to his men, and to Sheriff Gates. The sheriff stared at it and said, "Say, that's like the one Ben Duck found on his chest the night after he had a strange fainting spell on the range."

That made Monk grin. He knew that Ben Duck's "faint" that night had been the result of Doc's anaesthetic gas; he knew also that Doc had planted a puzzle similar to this one on Ben Duck in order to stir up some excitement.

But this was the genuine puzzle. And no one seemed to know what it meant. Doc put it back in the tin box, put it in his pocket.

The afternoon dragged. The only diversion occurred when Habeas Corpus and Chemistry, the two pets, became involved in a ludicrous melee.

The two pets had come along in the plane. Neither animal had much use for the other, and their association at best was a guarded truce.

Like most of Wyoming, the region around the Broken Circle ranchhouse was scabbed over thickly with cactus beds. The cactus was the prickly pear type, small round wafers of yellow-green studded with long amber needles that could strike at skin in abrupt agony.

Habeas Corpus was investigating a cactus clump innocently when Chemistry, the chimp, happened to back into one of the spines. Somehow Chemistry got the idea Habeas was responsible. An instant later, there was a yowling uproar as the two animals fought. The bedlam was augmented by Monk and Ham, who separated the animals, then had a quarrel that was louder than the one staged by the pets.

Eventually all participants retired in separate directions to pick the cactus out of themselves.

It was near dark when D'Orr came riding in from the hills.

They had not known that D'Orr had been missing from the ranch a good part of the afternoon.

D'Orr went to Doc Savage. He rubbed his hands together greedily. "You can get that five thousand ready," he said.

"What five thousand?"

"The reward for Ben Duck," D'Orr said. "I've found him."

D'Orr's explanation was simple and logical. Yesterday he had noticed signs that men were using a cave high up in the mountains, and he had thought nothing of it; but now he was suspicious, and he had ridden up there—with the result that he had seen, so he said, several men arrive with Ben Duck a prisoner. D'Orr had ridden back pell-mell to the ranch for aid.

“We’ll ride at once,” Doc said.

Monk muttered, “Doc, I’m gonna have to leave Habeas Corpus here. The poor little cuss can’t seem to get along with this cactus.”

Ham’s pet chimp, it developed, would have to be left at the ranch for the same reason.

Half an hour later, they rode west. The way led up a slope which looked deceptively slight, but which was so steep that their horses walked and panted. There was a green fur of pines. It was virgin timber, with windfalls piled everywhere like fence rails.

They made a large party—D’Orr, the sheriff, a deputy, Hicky, Monk, Ham, Renny, Long Tom and Doc Savage. It was slow, difficult going. Johnny was unobtrusively missing.

Monk rode up alongside the sheriff. “You say some guys jumped Ben Duck in his bunk one night, and Ben jabbed one in the face with a spur?”

Sheriff Gates nodded. “Spur musta marked his face, too,” Ben said.

Monk looked back at D’Orr. “When’d D’Orr start wearin’ that adhesive tape on his schnozzle?”

“The next mornin’ after Ben—” Sheriff Gates pulled at his jaw with thumb and forefinger. “Say, hell! What you drivin’ at?”

“I was just thinkin’,” Monk said.

Monk dropped back and spoke to Doc Savage in a low voice. “Ain’t we kind of taking things for granted, Doc?” he asked.

“In what way?”

“This finding of Ben Duck seems a little johnny-on-the-spot to me,” Monk said suspiciously.

“You do not think we should trust D’Orr, then?”

“Well, the thought kinda entered my head.”

Doc Savage made no comment. They rode on. It was late afternoon and hill shadows piled across the valleys. They were higher up in the mountains. It was hot in the sunlight, startlingly cool in the shadows.

“Wonder how D’Orr got his face hurt,” Monk remarked pointedly.

Doc still said nothing.

Monk muttered, “This is a heck of a fine chance for somebody to knock off the whole gang of us. And they ain’t above tryin’, either.”

Doc Savage ducked to avoid a low-hanging pine limb.

“Furthermore,” Monk continued, “I don’t like that D’Orr’s looks.”

With a trace of careful patience, Doc Savage said, “Where do you think Johnny is, Monk?”

“Johnny?” Monk peered back at their party. “Say, come to think of it, I haven’t seen him around all afternoon.”

“Johnny,” Doc Savage explained, “followed D’Orr when he left the ranch this afternoon.”

“What?”

“According to Johnny,” Doc said, “D’Orr is perfectly honest.”

As if given a telepathic awareness that he was under suspicion, D’Orr dropped back and joined them. He said uneasily, “The nearer we get to that place, the more I’m worried. I’m afraid we will run into a trap.”

“They do not expect us,” Doc reminded him.

“I know, but if we should run into a trap, it would sure look like I led you into it,” D’Orr stated.

“It sure would,” Monk agreed pointedly.

D’Orr paled slightly. “I learned about this cave by accident, believe it or not. I had earlier noticed that some men seemed to be using the cave. I thought they were campers or hunters or prospectors. But, then, when I heard about this trouble, it occurred to me that they might be some of the men mixed up in the affair. So I rode up there this afternoon. And I saw them bring Ben Duck to the cave.”

“You explained that to us when we started out,” Monk said.

“Well, it’s the truth.”

Monk looked at Doc. “Is that the way Johnny reported it, Doc?”

“Yes,” the bronze man said.

D’Orr looked dumfounded. “You had a man follow me?” Then he grinned. “I’m glad. This takes it out of my hand. I’m damned glad you *know* I’m honest.”

Monk gave his trousers a hitch. Personally, he could never quite believe D’Orr was honest. But then he was occasionally mistaken. The homely chemist dropped back and rode alongside pretty Hicky, thereby irritating Long Tom. Hicky seemed not to notice that both men were interested in her. Hicky was preoccupied. “I hope we find poor Ben in time,” she said.

There was something in the way she mentioned Ben Duck that made Monk and Long Tom stare at each other. It sounded as if *he* might be the man about whom she was most concerned.

“The cave,” announced D’Orr, “is on the far side of that ridge yonder.”

Doc Savage consulted his watch and saw that it was time for another contact with Johnny. They had been communicating every half-hour. He got off, removed the portable short-wave radio from a saddlebag and put it in operation.

“Johnny,” he said.

Instantly, there was a whisper coming out of the receiver. The speaker was excited, did not once lift his tone above a whisper. “I’ll be superamalgamated,” he said. “Doc, this is Johnny. Something has gone wrong. I’ve been watching that cave where they’re holding Ben Duck, and somebody has tipped them off. They’ve set an ambush. I’m on the ridge above you.”

“Where is the ambush?”

“Ahead about a mile,” the whisper said. “Doc, you come up here with Monk, Ham and Renny. Leave the others with the sheriff and Long Tom. That way, I think we can trap them.”

Doc asked, "Why are you whispering?"

"They've got a scout close. I'm hiding in a hollow tree."

Doc said, "We are coming up." He switched off the radio. "We will split forces as Johnny suggests." Doc indicated those who were to stay. "The rest of you come with me," he added.

Long Tom, who was to be left with the others, complained, "I don't see why we're splitting up."

"Johnny must be sure we can attack from different directions," Doc said.

Monk, Ham and Renny started climbing up the canyon side with Doc Savage. They left their horses behind. They were very careful.

Sheriff Gates remained behind with his deputy, Long Tom and Hicky, and D'Orr.

D'Orr was pale. He said, "It's lucky we were warned. Oh, it's lucky."

Sheriff Gates frowned at D'Orr. "We better tie the broncs outa sight. Over behind this dornick here will do."

The stone he called a dornick was house-sized, had a base of tall brush. They staked the animals out therein, and walked back out into the evening sunlight.

There was a man waiting there. He was a bland man with cold, dark eyes. He was a stranger. He said, "I've got Ben Duck here."

He pointed at his feet. He was standing in tall weeds. There was a figure, a man's figure, lying in the weeds.

Sheriff Gates, Long Tom—everyone—dashed forward.

The man lying in the weeds got up. He had a long blue revolver. He waved the gun at them. He was not Ben Duck.

"Sorry," he said. "We had to use some kind of a gag to get you all out where we could see you."

Long Tom started to frown, and Hicky began filling her lungs with air, her intention to scream.

"You let out a beller, kid," the man told her, "and I'll shoot everything out from between those pretty ears of yours. And don't think I won't."

"Get their horses," his companion ordered.

The man began searching the prisoners first. It was then that D'Orr made his break. He swung a foot suddenly, kicked a man in the stomach. The man doubled up. D'Orr grabbed his gun.

Long Tom started to join the fracas—and halted. The other man was menacing him with a revolver. The fellow was so close that he couldn't miss. Reluctantly, Long Tom subsided.

D'Orr and his foe were down on the ground. They went over and over. In soft sand, they did not make much noise. D'Orr seemed to be trying to fire the pistol, although he did not quite have possession of it.

Then more men came out of the bushes. Four of them in a compact group.

Albert Panzer was one of the four newcomers. He said in a low voice, “All right—brain that damned rancher!”

Men fell on D’Orr with pistol butts. The weapons rose and fell, made hollow ugly noises. D’Orr sank down in the weeds. They kept on beating him. Their breathing was ugly puffing, like small steam engines.

Panzer went over and looked at the thing in the weeds.

“You didn’t need to kill him,” he said. “Or is he dead?” He got down on all fours and made an examination. “Dead as a mackerel.”

The men who had done the beating began to look scared. “What’ll we do with the body?”

“Take it over there in the brush,” Panzer said.

They did that. They looked more scared when they came back. One of them pointed at Long Tom and the others. “They saw it. They can testify against us.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Panzer growled. “They won’t testify against anybody.”

They got hold of the horses. The captives were forced to mount.

“Why don’t we just knock ’em off here?” asked one of the men who had attacked D’Orr with a pistol butt. He was blue-pale.

Panzer said, “No, no, we got a plan. Keep ’em moving, and moving fast. Let’s go.”

“What about Ben Duck?”

Panzer scowled. “We got more than Ben Duck to worry about. I’ll take fifty Ben Ducks—if somebody’ll take Doc Savage.”

Chapter 12

WHEN BEN CAME BACK

Doc Savage and his three men used caution. They worked directly up the side of the canyon. As nearly as they could judge, they had more than half a mile to climb.

This was high altitude, and their breathing was deep and labored. They did a great deal of flying at high altitudes, and that had acclimated them to a certain extent to rarefied atmosphere.

Doc Savage was carrying the radio. When they were about halfway up the ridge, he halted and put the instrument in operation.

“Johnny,” he said into the microphone.

The whisper came back at him.

“Are you climbing up the ridge?” it demanded.

Instead of answering, Doc Savage was silent a moment. His mouth straightened out tightly.

Doc asked, “What shall we do with Elmer?”

“Elmer?” The whisper was vaguely puzzled. “Whatever you think it best.”

Monk, Ham and Renny stared at Doc Savage. Their expressions got stark. The whispering voice on the radio had fallen into the trap. The correct answer to the code question about Elmer should have been to tie ribbons on Elmer. Renny muttered, “Holy cow! We’ve been led into something!”

Into the microphone, Doc said, “Hold it a minute while I ask what he wants to do.”

“All right,” the whisper said. “But hurry!”

Doc Savage rotated the little radio outfit. The receiver loop was built into the case, but it was almost as directional as a regulation direction finder. The carrier wave of the other set was sufficient to get a bearing. Obviously, the other transmitter was not on the ridge.

Doc was deeply shocked. They knew that, because he made the small, unearthly trilling sound that was his unconscious habit in moments of intense mental stress. He made it very briefly. It had a strained quality.

Then the bronze man was going back down the canyon side. He went with such flying speed that Monk and the other two were left behind. When they overhauled Doc, he was standing on the canyon bed, near a huge boulder, reading sign. The crushed weeds, the footprints in the sand, told a story that seemed confusing to Monk and the others.

But to Doc it was evidently clear.

He said, “Long Tom’s party was tying their horses when they were held up. There were two men at first. Later, more men joined them. They rode off down the canyon.”

He searched for a while, followed one of the trails back into the bushes, and dropped to a knee. He indicated a mark, square in shape, in the sand.

“This is where they used Johnny’s radio,” the bronze man said grimly. “That is the mark where they placed it on the sand.”

The bronze man’s face was showing more emotion than Monk had ever seen in display before. There was anxiety. Utter self-disgust. Monk knew the reason. Doc had made a mistake. He had failed to use the code check about Elmer when the whisper that had said it belonged to Johnny had first come over the radio. It was a small error. It was likely to cost several lives.

Monk came over and touched Doc’s arm. “A man can’t bat a hundred per cent all the time.”

The bronze man shrugged miserably. “There is no excuse for a mistake being made at the wrong time.”

They found the form of D’Orr a bit later.

D’Orr had been partly covered with brush, but he must have moved a little, because one leg was exposed. They removed the brush quickly, but did not change the position of his body. Doc made an examination.

“He is not dead,” the bronze man said. “Monk, you and Ham get cold water. There is a small stream over to the left.”

While the others revived D’Orr, Doc searched for the trail left by the departing captors and their prisoners. It led down the canyon a short distance, then turned right, up the steeply rising bed of a smaller canyon.

He had not gone far when he stopped suddenly, retreated, and eyed the same on the trail. There was very little sign that it had been disturbed; only the vaguest traces. He took a long stick and probed cautiously.

They had taken some thin-walled glass bottles, filled them with an ochreous liquid of utterly vile appearance, and buried the bottles. Following the trail carelessly, Doc would have stepped on them, broken them in the sand.

He raked a bottle to him, studied it. It was mustard gas, he decided. Utterly deadly.

After that, he did not follow the trail directly. He kept wide of it. But they had prepared for that, too.

There was a thorn bush. With fine thread, they had tied a limb back, so that anyone walking past would break the thread and the thorn bush would fly around and thrust its thorns into unwary legs. The thorns were tipped with sticky stuff. Poison.

Doc went back.

D’Orr was sitting up when Doc reached him.

“How are you?”

“My head,” D’Orr groaned, “is noisier than a Chinese wedding. It’ll never be the same again.”

Doc made another examination. “There are no fractures.”

“It’s a dang wonder,” D’Orr said. “They caught us by surprise. Two of them at first. Then more came out of the brush.”

“What are they going to do with Long Tom, Hicky and the sheriff and his deputy?” Monk asked. Monk’s tone was anxious.

“I don’t know,” D’Orr said. “But I wouldn’t want to be in their shoes.”

Ham still had his sword cane. He flourished it angrily. “What are we waiting on? We can trail them.”

Doc shook his head. “No.”

“But why not?”

“They expect us to do that—they will lay all their plans on that expectation. In fact, they have planted a number of traps—I found two of them—and following them would be extremely dangerous.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Ham’s face was strained. “We’ve got to make some progress on this thing before long. I wonder if you realize that we’ve had setback after setback. When you narrow right down to what we’ve accomplished—what have you? Practically nothing.”

That Ham should complain was unusual. His plaint bore no direct criticism of Doc Savage; it was rather a bemoaning of their luck, most of it bad so far.

D’Orr stood up.

“For the love of Mike!” he exclaimed.

“What’s the matter with you?” Monk asked.

“I just remembered something.” D’Orr stared at them. “When I was half-conscious, I heard Panzer say something. Or rather, one of the other men asked Panzer a question.” D’Orr’s excitement increased. “The man asked what they should do about Ben Duck. And Panzer’s answer was that they had something more than Ben Duck to worry about.” He indicated Doc. “Meaning you.”

Doc’s expression became suddenly alert. “What did you think that meant?”

“I wasn’t in any condition to think at the time.” D’Orr felt tenderly of his head. “However, now I would say that it sounded as if Ben Duck had escaped.”

“Did they say Ben Duck had escaped?”

“No. But it sounded like that. I bet he has escaped.”

It was no more than four or five minutes later when a bedraggled, disheveled, trembling figure stumbled out of the brush.

“Are—are you Doc Savage?” asked the apparition.

Doc nodded.

“I’m Ben Duck,” said the scarecrow. Then his knees buckled and he lay down in the weeds and grass and ancient leaves.

He had not collapsed from faint, or from lack of strength. Weakness of relief described it. As Monk said later, it looked as if the fellow just decided it was time to lie down and have himself a good shake. The trembling subsided finally. “I knocked a man in the head with a rock,” he said.

Looking pleased, Monk inquired, “Kill him?”

“Gosh, sure hope not,” said the other.

“You’re Ben Duck, eh?”

“Yes. They been holdin’ me. They was gonna starve me into tellin’ ’em where that green eagle puzzle was. That was after the ornery snipes tried beatin’ me.”

The man stretched out in the weeds as if at long last he could relax. The knuckles of one fist were skinned. His leg, the left one, was minus part of a trouser leg, and an evil blue color in spots, although not much swollen. His nose was gashed deeply, and crimson had caked over his lips and chin.

D’Orr dropped beside him. “What’d they do to your face, Ben?” he gasped.

“Remember the night some hombres got in my bunkroom?”

“Yes. You jabbed one of them in the face with a spur, you said.”

“The gent I spurred didn’t like it. He took off one of his spurs and returned the favor—while I was tied up.” The grin the man gave D’Orr was lopsided. “Yuh know somethin’? You hurt your face the same night. I figured for a while you was the gent I spurred, maybe.”

“Why, Ben Duck!” D’Orr exclaimed, and looked completely horrified. “I only bruised my face on a door.” Abruptly he reached up and, grimacing, pulled off the bandage so that they saw his face. “See,” he said.

D’Orr’s face was only bruised and skinned. No spur had done that damage.

“Yeah, I know it wasn’t you,” the other said.

Doc Savage came over. “Ben, do you know what is behind this?”

“You’re Mr. Savage, ain’t you? I’m sure glad to meet you. Johanna Hickman sure spoke high of your reputation.”

“Can you give us any information, Ben?”

“There’s a puzzle. It’s a thing made out of tin and cardboard and wood and some lead feathers. It’s an eagle. You put the feathers in the eagle.”

“Yes, we know.”

“That’s the key, that puzzle. You show me that, and I’ll solve the whole thing.”

“All this trouble,” Doc asked, “has been over that?”

“There’s more to it than the puzzle, Mr. Savage. But you get me the puzzle, and we can clear up the rest.”

“Did you have it?”

“I did. I got it off old Pilatus Casey when he was dyin’. He gave it to me to give to his niece, Mira.”

“Did you give it to Mira?”

“Heck, no. They ran a fake Mira in on me. That was Johanna Hickman. She’s a nice girl. They just roped her in on the mess.”

“Where is the puzzle?”

“In the mud in the bottom of the Broken Circle horse-watering tank. On the west side. About two yards from the pipe where the water runs in from the windmill.”

That was about where Doc had located the puzzle.

He reached inside his clothing and pulled it out. D'Orr's eyes popped.

"We found it," Doc explained. He handed it over. "Now, Ben, we want to know what this thing means."

"Two of you gents help me walk."

"I'll help you, Ben," big-fisted Renny said. "Holy cow, what you want to do?"

"We gotta go up to the top of this ridge, so I can see down the other side. We gotta do it before dark, or I'll have to wait till mornin'."

"Why?"

"I'll show you."

"This sounds complicated, Ben," muttered D'Orr.

"It's so simple it'll knock your hat off."

They climbed the ridge in silence. It was fully ten minutes before D'Orr asked, "You know where the gang is holed up, Ben?"

"I think I can show you. Say, Albert Panzer is the ringleader."

"We know that, Ben," D'Orr said. "Panzer fooled all of us there at the ranch."

"They got some prisoners. They got a girl. She's old Pilatus Casey's niece. She's the real Mira Lanson."

"We know that, too."

"Do you know what became of a guy named McCain who was there at the ranch?" the other asked.

"McCain?" D'Orr said. "No, Ben. He disappeared after he got out of Sheriff Gates' jail."

Monk opened his mouth—then closed it. D'Orr didn't know that McCain and Doc Savage were the same. That was high tribute to the bronze man's disguise ability. So D'Orr didn't know who McCain had been. Monk had thought he knew, although he'd given no particular thought to the point.

Monk decided not to tell D'Orr or Ben Duck that McCain had been Doc Savage in disguise. His reason was a little twist of humor. He still didn't like D'Orr. He wanted to startle the man, to amaze and dumfound him. When D'Orr was having a placid moment, and there was no excitement, Monk would tell him who McCain had been. Then D'Orr would really feel the effect of surprise.

Monk grinned as he climbed.

He was still grinning when Doc Savage began to sing. Then Monk lost his grin, for the bronze man's song was not exactly a song. It was pitched low, the humming lingo was, and it was meaningless to the casual listener.

Doc Savage was speaking Mayan, the little-known language which he and his aids used for secret communication. "I am going to give you an order in English," the bronze man was saying. "Ignore it. Pretend to follow the order, but actually ignore it."

The bronze man's strange singsong was silent for a while, then it resumed, still in Mayan.

Monk listened to the Mayan words in growing amazement. He glanced at Ham. The dapper lawyer was astounded, trying to hide it. So was Renny. None of them spoke. But

as they climbed, they came close to Doc Savage and moved by his side, in order not to miss what he was saying, the instructions he was giving.

Doc finished, was silent.

He said in English, "Wait a minute." He stopped. "We need horses. Monk, you and Ham go back to the Broken Circle Ranch and get horses for all of us, plus enough animals to bring out our friends if we manage to rescue them. And get a posse to help hunt for the sheriff."

"I'm only Ben Duck and just a cow waddy," their companion said unexpectedly. "But I'd like to make a suggestion."

"Go ahead," Doc said.

"The less whoop an' flutter we make, the more chance we got to take these cussed hombres. It ain't guns we need. It's foxiness. I think we got that without ringin' in no posse to stir up the country."

Doc Savage was thoughtful a moment. "Good idea," he agreed. "Just get the horses. Never mind the posse. Do not tell anyone what has happened. Bring horses."

"Right," Monk said. "How about fetchin' along our pets, Habeas Corpus and Chemistry?"

"Have you decided they can stand the cactus?" Doc asked dryly.

"Sure," Monk said. "They gotta learn to stay out of the stuff sometime."

Monk and Ham walked away, down the canyon, heading in the direction of the Broken Circle Ranch. Their faces were strangely grim.

Doc Savage and Renny climbed silently. D'Orr said, "I'm feeling better. I can help Ben, here, to give you fellows a rest." And Renny, smiling slightly, said, "We're not tired." His smile, however, was strained.

There was sheer naked rock the last five hundred yards of going. The late afternoon sun—it was already dark in the canyon bed—hit them with a chilly brightness. They found a gulch in the stone which sheltered them from prying eyes, and climbed through that.

D'Orr asked, "Where's this place you're headin' for, Ben?"

"Up there," he pointed. "You see that hogback and them rocks? From there I can tell."

"Why from there?"

"Because if you see what I think you'll see, you'll understand."

D'Orr shrugged. He moved over beside Doc and Renny, muttered, "It's funny he's not putting out any information. What do you think he's leading up to?"

Doc Savage shrugged. The bronze man's features seemed more devoid of expression than usual.

Later they rested and panted. D'Orr said suddenly, "Ben's got somethin' to tell you. It's important."

They moved over to the man's side. He was holding his scarred face.

He said, "I just remembered this. You know that old geezer Pilatus Casey? I overheard how they killed him."

“How?” Doc asked.

“He really died of thirst an’ starvation. There wasn’t nothin’ fake about that.”

“But, Ben, he had food and water in his pack, the sheriff said,” Doc reminded.

“Sheriff didn’t analyze that food an’ water, did he?”

“No.”

“Poisoned.”

“Eh?”

“They caught old Pilatus Casey, Panzer and his gun-swaps did. They tried to make the old man tell ’em where that eagle puzzle was hid. He wouldn’t. They tortured him. He still wouldn’t tell. So they put some poisoned food and poisoned water in his pack an’ turned ’im loose to die on the desert. Fancy way of murderin’ him. Only he slicked ’em. He picked up his puzzle, and didn’t eat none of the poisoned grub nor drink no poisoned water. He give ’em the slip. Only he died before he could get back afoot.”

D’Orr demanded. “Ben, can you testify to that in court?”

“I can testify I heard one of the gang tellin’ one of his pals, who had come in from New York, how they done it.”

“That ought to be enough to hang all of them,” D’Orr said grimly.

Then he took a large revolver out of his clothing.

“Only they won’t nobody hang,” he said.

D’Orr pointed his gun at Doc Savage and said, “I know you got a bulletproof vest. One move, and I’ll plant some lead between your eyes.”

Doc Savage did not make the move.

Chapter 13

THE FEATHERED EAGLE

Three men came out of concealment and joined D'Orr. One of them was the rascal Tuck, who had been afraid of Doc Savage in the first place. There were four other men who made their presence known; they were sheltered by rock, and they held rifles. Seven, that made. Seven in all. They seemed awed by the thing they were doing.

D'Orr said, "Get Ben Duck here. Knock him down and tie him up."

Tuck it was who came around behind the others and reached out and struck with a fist, saying, "So we got you back again Benny." Then, when his victim had fallen to the ground Tuck ground a knee down on him and used a rope for tying. Tuck's knots were tied with a sailor perfection. "Nice Benny," he said. He slapped his victim's face, very hard. "I'm gonna pull your teeth, Benny," he said, "and drive in nails where they came out."

"Tie Renwick next," D'Orr ordered.

Tuck got up and came toward Renny and Renny said, "You lay a hand on me, my friend, and I'll put a foot through your insides."

Tuck stopped. He stared at Renny. He must have fully understood the expression on Renny's face, for he turned and threw down the rope he was carrying.

"He don't like me," he said. "Somebody else better tie him."

It was a smart decision on Tuck's part. Renny had made up his mind that he hated the fellow utterly, and Renny would have attacked him, gun or no gun. A small man with the wrinkled skin of a collapsed football and a small brown yarn of tobacco juice staining one mouth corner tied Renny.

Renny looked at Doc Savage. "Did you know this pink-livered blankety-blank of a D'Orr was one of the crooks?" he asked.

Doc Savage seemed not to hear the question. The bronze man's metallic features were motionless with a kind of expressionlessness that was a little frightening to Renny.

D'Orr misunderstood. He thought Doc was scared. He came to the bronze man boldly. "I bet you feel funny as hell," he said.

There were tiny hot fires in Doc's flake-gold eyes, but they were masked, and D'Orr did not see them.

D'Orr's pride expanded. "I guess I'm the first guy who ever got you in a crack where you couldn't get out."

Doc did not answer.

D'Orr chuckled. It was a genuine chuckle, full of raw boasting arrogance and glee over what he had accomplished. "And I kept hearing how tough you were," he said. He turned to Tuck. He jeered, "And you were scared stiff of Savage."

Tuck said, "Right now, I would rather be in Mexico."

They tied Doc. Then D’Orr himself searched the bronze man very carefully. He removed Doc’s coat and shirt and stripped off the alloy chain mesh undergarment which was a bulletproof armor resembling ancient mail, except that it was small in weight and bulk.

D’Orr appropriated the eagle puzzle. He unwrapped it—Doc still had the thing in the tin box—and examined it. He let Tuck inspect it.

“Where,” asked D’Orr, “was Panzer going to meet us?”

Tuck shrugged. “We’ll show you.”

They climbed deeper into the mountains.

They came into a region which was not above timber line, yet there was no timber. It was an arid, naked stretch of rugged stone.

D’Orr strode boldly, twirling a pistol. “You never suspected me, did you?”

Doc Savage glanced at him, a faint twist of derisive amusement in his flake-gold eyes.

D’Orr continued. “I was the inside man at the Broken Circle. Kept an eye on things that went on around the ranch.” He leered. “I spotted old Pilatus Casey for them.”

Doc seemed not to hear.

“You get me?” D’Orr said. “I spotted Pilatus Casey. If it hadn’t been for me, he might have got away entirely. They expected him to come in from the north.”

Getting no answer, D’Orr walked in smug silence for a while. Then he chuckled, said, “For years I ran that dude ranch and didn’t hardly make ends meet. Then along comes a thing that is big. And in a month, I make more than all the dude-ranch owners in Wyoming will make in all their lives.”

Doc said, “You do not need to explain that you are greedy.”

That made D’Orr mad. He snapped, “Yeah? Well—you’re in a fat mess, ain’t you? We’ve got all of you. We’ve got Long Tom and Johnny. We’ve got you and Renny. We’ve got Sheriff Gates, and that Johanna Hickman girl. We’ve got Ben Duck.” D’Orr leered at him. “We’ve got everybody that knows anything about this. So where can we go wrong?”

Doc said, “You have not got Monk and Ham.”

D’Orr snorted. “They have a gang of men planted on the Broken Circle Ranch trail. They’ll take Monk and Ham.”

Doc looked concerned over that, and D’Orr chuckled. They climbed in silence. At places, the going was almost sheer, a matter of crevices for fingers and toes. It would be dark soon. And it was becoming bitterly cold.

They came upon Albert Panzer suddenly. He had a number of men with him, also Long Tom, Johnny, Sheriff Gates and the deputy. Hicky was there.

Doc was not permitted to communicate with the other prisoners. They were led away, Long Tom and Johnny leading, then the Sheriff and his deputy. Hicky followed. She waved just before she was forced out of sight.

Panzer came over. He stared at Doc Savage.

“Nice, nice,” he said. “Nobody knows how this pleases me.”

He scowled past Doc. “Ben Duck, too, eh! Well, well, one big family again.”

D’Orr said, “I got the puzzle.”

“Hand it over.”

D’Orr gave Panzer the puzzle. Panzer handled it carefully, as if it was something of immense value, and very fragile. He opened it, examined it “This looks like it,” he said.

“I think it is,” D’Orr agreed.

Panzer stared at Doc Savage with complete hate. “If you are sure of it, we can get rid of these prisoners right here. There’s an old bear cave down the slope. We can shove the bodies in there and wall up the entrance.”

D’Orr bit his lips. “We better be sure about that puzzle,” he said.

Panzer scowled and said, “Ben Duck, here, will know if it’s genuine.”

He gave an order and two men seized the quailing figure of the cowboy and dragged him off into the brush. Panzer and D’Orr followed them, Panzer carrying the puzzle. For a while, ugly sounds of a beating came out of the brush. Then the pair returned. They looked satisfied.

“Take all the prisoners,” Panzer ordered, “and dump ’em into the cave.”

“Have we got time to check the puzzle before night?”

Panzer peered at the sky. “Afraid not. First thing in the mornin’, we’ll do it.”

“Will that be all right with his nibs?”

“The big boss? He’s perfectly satisfied with the way things are going.”

They could tell time—in the cave—by the bats. The bats were there in millions. They had been going out in the dusk, when Doc Savage and the others had been brought in.

Lying in the darkness, Doc Savage had answered one question from Renny. “Are they going to knock us off, right away?” Renny asked.

Doc told him, “They will probably wait until they are sure the puzzle is the genuine one.”

“That means,” Renny said, “that they’ll have to take a long chance in keeping us alive. I think they’re afraid of us. They may not want to take that chance.”

“They murdered Pilatus Casey before they got the puzzle,” Doc said. “They will go to great lengths before they repeat that mistake.”

They lay there, not in darkness, for there was a big light overhead, a gasoline lantern that shed white luminance. The floor was uneven, and they could not see each other, although all of them could be seen by a guard who stood on a high pinnacle nursing a sawed-off shotgun that, he assured them, was loaded with buckshot, of a size to kill a man.

The cavern was not large. It was a product of subterranean flow in past centuries, high, narrow, jagged, unbeautiful, and the bats had made the floor unpleasant.

A girl’s voice said, “Mr. Savage?”

It was Hicky.

“Yes,” Doc said. “How are you? Have they hurt you?”

“No, I’m all right—I told them I knew where the puzzle was, and they haven’t been sure, so they haven’t touched me.” Hicky sounded cheerful. She continued. “Say, I know what happened. I overheard some talk.”

“Happened when?”

“The night old Sebastian Casey died in New York. On his deathbed, he told Pilatus Casey and Hubert Brackenridge where there was something immensely valuable in Wyoming, here in these mountains. The green eagle puzzle is the key to the location of this treasure-trove. But that night, the night Sebastian Casey told the story, someone else heard it. That other person killed Pilatus Casey and Hubert Brackenridge.”

“Who,” Doc asked, “is the other person?”

“The one they refer to as the boss.”

“Who is it?”

A man came to the cavern entrance and yelled, “Are those people talking in there? If they are—shoot the next one that opens a mouth.”

The guard on the pinnacle cocked his shotgun with an elaborate gesture. “You hear that,” he told the prisoners.

Hicky said, “Mr. Savage, I don’t know who is the boss of this.”

The guard yelled, “You hear what I said?”

“Go ahead and shoot,” Hicky said. “What’s a few hours delay?”

But they were silent after that, and nothing happened, except that, hours afterward, the bats became thick once more overhead. They came a few at a time, at first. Then thickening, they were a black squeaking ribbon that flowed above, squeaking and whispering. Sinister somehow, and nauseating. The return of the bats meant that morning was getting close.

Albert Panzer seemed worried when he came into the cave. He snapped at D’Orr, “You better ride back to the Broken Circle. Something has gone wrong. Those men we had on the trail haven’t reported sighting Monk and Ham.”

D’Orr said, “Maybe their radio is out of whack.”

“I just talked to them.”

D’Orr obviously did not want to ride back to the Broken Circle just now. He scratched his head, fussed around, finally said, “Listen, whether you like it or not, I’m sticking around until we track down that puzzle and see what we’ve got for all of our trouble.”

Panzer scowled. Finally he consented, “Oh, all right.”

They picked Doc Savage up off the floor. Two men carried him out of the cave, having difficulty doing it. They hoisted him across a horse, and left him there, still tied hand and foot.

“You fall off and it’s your own hard luck,” one of the men said. “These rocks are sharp.”

They did not ride far. Only a few minutes. They came to a small flat.

The flat had, through some freak of nature, been caused halfway down a steeply sloping mountainside. It was like a shelf. At one end, there was green brush and a few small trees. Plainly, a spring was there.

They stopped near the spring and Doc Savage was hauled off the horse.

Panzer said, “Here is where old Pilatus Casey had his camp.”

There were plenty of signs of a prospector’s camp having been at the spot.

Doc said, “So you figure the puzzle starts from here.”

Panzer scowled at him. “How’d you guess that?”

“This is Green Eagle Springs, isn’t it?” Doc asked dryly.

Panzer nodded suspiciously. “Just how much do you know about this puzzle?”

“It is a rather unusual kind of a map, at least,” Doc said.

“I’ll be damned!” Panzer said. He was amazed. He said, “We brought you down here while we followed the map. If it don’t come out right, it’s gonna be tough on you. We’ll know it’s a fake you substituted. We’ll work you over plenty.”

Panzer then produced the puzzle. He pried off the glass cover so that he could manipulate the leaden feathers with a finger. He put the feathers in holes in the eagle.

There were four holes into which leaden feathers would not fit. He left the feathers out of those. Then, with feathers in the other positions, he took a pencil.

He consulted the rhyme that read:

Hand and eye, wandering,
Down and down, pondering,
Up and up, meandering,
North face,
Wins race.

“I guess,” Panzer remarked, “that means you start with the eye, wander down and down”—he scratched his head—“for two feathers, then go up from there two feathers, meandering. That would mean rambling. Let’s see. Mmmmmmm.” His words became meaningless as he drew lines with the pencil.

“Get it?” D’Orr demanded anxiously.

“Got it,” Panzer said excitedly. “Come on! Wait a minute! Bring Savage along.”

By connecting the feathers as designed by the rhymed instructions, he had produced a crude map. There was only one thing missing—the distances to be traversed in each direction. But it developed that this took care of itself. For, after they had scratched their heads—there were no compass directions for the start—they decided down and down meant downhill, so they set off in that direction, and came eventually upon a marker, a cairn of stone.

Excited, they plunged ahead. Four men hauled Doc along, and had great difficulty doing it.

Finally D'Orr let out a howl, pointed.

Panzer was completely speechless as he looked.

It was Tuck who said, "Well, well, the whole damned side of the mountain is made of gold!"

This was a slight exaggeration. The vein was no more than six inches thick, but the sun happened to be catching it exactly right, and it looked immensely rich. Not pure virgin gold, but a vein of immensely rich ore. Here and there it was obviously virgin pure.

Some of the gold had been mined. Not a great deal. The mining had been simple work with a pick.

And it was equally obvious that, when the gold was not being mined, the vein had been perfectly hidden by covering it with rubble and loose stone. The pile of stone lay where it had been cleared aside.

"Hot puppies!" Panzer said ecstatically. "Here's where old Sebastian Casey got that gold he lived off of for most of his life. He used to come out here every three or four years and pick out enough to do him. He never told anybody where he got it."

Doc Savage said, "He told on his deathbed, didn't he?"

Panzer whirled.

Doc added, "And old Sebastian Casey made the map, of course, of the green eagle puzzle. He had it for years, evidently, for it looks old. Who did he give the map to? Pilatus Casey? And was Hubert Brackenridge in the room at the time? *Brackenridge must have been there.*"

Panzer's expression was black.

"Give me a rifle," Panzer said. "We might as well get rid of Savage now."

Doc had been dropped by his captors, the men who had carried him. He was sitting down.

He had also managed something that they had not noticed—he had torn the lining, or a fragment of it, out of his necktie and wrapped it around the ropes which held his ankles. Then he had moistened his fingers with saliva and dampened the necktie lining.

The lining burst into flame now. Suddenly, the result of the chemical action of the moisture upon the treated tie lining. As water ignites the flares used on life preservers, the thing functioned. And the flame was abruptly violent, blue-white and fizzing, as it burned through his leg bindings.

He managed also to jam his wrist bonds down into the flame.

Simultaneously, Monk and Ham came out of the crevice nearby, where they had been concealed. They had machine pistols, and no kind feelings, whatever.

Chapter 14

LOST TRICK

Two or three things were like lightning striking fast. Doc Savage came to his feet, his ankles burned free and his wrists partially so. He reached out and struck the stupefied Tuck, and the man dropped the pistol he was holding.

Monk lunged suddenly at Panzer. That was a mistake. He should have menaced the man with a machine pistol, and disarmed and tied him. But Monk wanted to use his fists.

The first blow was not entirely effective. Panzer dodged. His foot slipped off to the left; he lost his balance. A moment later, he was going end over end down the almost cliff-sheer side of the mountain.

D'Orr shot Ham. Ham always insisted it was an accident; D'Orr did not want to shoot him. It was just something that he did unconsciously. Which might have been the truth, or might not. But D'Orr shot Ham twice.

The first bullet cut Ham's leg open below the knee. Not seriously. The second slug took him in the stomach. The stomach bullet was not as bad as the other. Ham was wearing a bulletproof undergarment. But he was knocked down.

Doc Savage, lunging wildly, reached D'Orr. His fist, coming in, actually whistled a little—Monk testified to this—before it struck. D'Orr dropped, his jaw in such a condition that it later took a skilled surgeon six hours to wire the pieces of bone back into shape.

The other foes got their hands up.

"Disarm them!" Doc said. "And tie them."

Monk made that simpler. He walked up to each man and knocked him senseless with a hairy fist.

"I need the exercise," Monk said cheerfully. "We danged near froze to death here last night. We laid in that danged crack in the rock all night."

Doc Savage had jumped to the edge of the mountain and looked down. He made, very briefly, his trilling sound. It was distressed, startled.

For Panzer had not been hurt by his long tumble down the steep slope; or at least not seriously damaged. He could run. He had reached the flat, and was pounding across it.

"A machine pistol!" Doc rapped.

Ham tossed him the weapon. But by that time Panzer had dived into a gully. A moment later, there was a low thunder of noise.

"Horses!" Ham exploded. "They had their horses there."

They saw a few horses an instant later. Panzer had taken a mount, stampeded the others.

Doc said, "He's heading toward the cave," and began moving.

He had, a few days before when pursuing Johanna Hickman, all but outrun the horse the young woman was riding. But that had been over a long pull, a great distance, and it is a commonly accepted fact that a man can outrun a horse at great distances. This race was a different proposition. The distance was short. The cave was not far away.

There was, however, one advantage, and Doc made use of it—the steepness of the route. The horse had to labor, at places go entirely around. The animal, too, was inclined to be cautious, to hesitate in spite of Panzer's mad spurring.

Ham helped, too. From across the canyon, he fired a burst from the machine pistol. He used explosive slugs, and they burst with hell—loud concussions on the hillside and loosened boulders that galloped end over end down the slope. The horse shied, and Panzer was thrown across its neck. He hung on madly for a while, then controlled the animal. But he had lost time.

Doc reached the cave mouth possibly a hundred and fifty yards ahead of Panzer. He did not go directly to the cave entrance. He circled, got to the side of it.

As he expected, the guards rushed outside to learn the meaning of the racket Panzer was making.

Doc cut in behind them, dashed into the cave mouth.

He had no real expectation of their not seeing him—only a slim hope—and the hope failed. A man heard him, whirled. He howled something. It was astounded, inarticulate. But Doc got inside the cavern before the man got sufficiently organized to use his gun.

They killed time outside. They thought Doc was armed—if they knew at all what to think. Panzer was screaming at them, so wild that foam flew off his lips. That confused them all the more.

In the cave, Doc flung down alongside Renny. He worked on the knots of the rope that held Renny's wrists, got it loose. Renny, with his big fists, was always a good man in a fight.

Outside, a man roared, "Come outa there or I'll throw a stick of dynamite in on you!"

That was patently a bluff. There had been no sign of dynamite, and no time to get any, or cap it and fuse it.

Doc picked up a rock, started to throw it at the gasoline lantern to get rid of the light. He changed his mind.

"Turn the others loose," he told Renny.

He climbed up to the lantern, losing precious time, and got to it. He dropped his coat over the lantern, made a tight bundle. The coat was leather, inclosed most of the light. The leather smoked and smelled. But it was dark inside the cavern.

Panzer suddenly got the guards to understand the gravity of the situation. They came charging inside, their feet loud on the rocks. They fired as they came, in order to clear their path.

Doc said, “Down, everyone. Watch those bullets.” His voice was a crashing uproar.

Then he flung the gasoline lantern. He threw it, coat and all, using a lobbing pitch as if he were putting a shot. The lantern struck the stone above the cave entrance. It hit hard. The fuel chamber split, and gasoline came out, spouting and rich with fumes because it was under pressure, and ignited.

Flaming gasoline was like red tissue paper pouring down upon the first two men to come into the cave. They roared in pain, wheeled, tried to get back outdoors. The result was a kicking jam as they fought Panzer and another man.

Doc piled into the melee. He ignored the flames. The blazing gasoline was more spectacle than danger. He had somewhere banged the machine pistol against a stone, and it would not function. He used the thing for a club, because he had hurt his fist on D’Orr. He beat down one man.

Renny joined him. Renny was full of roaring rage, but stiff from being tied. He could not move rapidly. A man kicked at him, and Renny took the foot above his belt buckle. He folded to his knees. Panzer lifted a revolver deliberately, and was aiming when Doc threw the machine pistol. Panzer’s face lost some of its shape.

A moment later, the surviving guard was running down the steep mountainside, yelling that he surrendered, but making no effort to stop and do so. He stopped suddenly, got down on his knees and howled for mercy when Monk Mayfair unexpectedly confronted him.

He howled so loudly that Ham burst out laughing.

“Looking at you sure scares ’em to death,” Ham said.

Chapter 15

THE SNAPPER

Johnny Littlejohn came out of the cave, rubbing his wrists where the ropes had hurt him. He was trailed by Sheriff Gates, then by the others, one at a time, as they were freed, or untied themselves.

Hicky said, "What happened?" and Monk told her in remarkably few words, whereupon Hicky said, "But I don't understand how you knew where to set your ambush."

"Doc had it all figured out."

"How?"

"That puzzle—that green eagle puzzle. He found a Green Eagle Springs on the Wyoming State map, and deduced the rest. The puzzle made a map when you went from one lead feather to another on the eagle, beginning where the rhyme said to begin. It was a slick map. Doc figured it out."

"But when?" Hickey demanded. "I mean—when did he tell you to set the trap at the mine? When did he do it without D'Orr knowing?"

"He talked to us in Mayan," Monk said, "as we were climbing up the mountainside, just before that ambush yesterday. He told us in English to go back to the Broken Circle Ranch and get horses, but he told us in Mayan to disregard those orders and go to the spot where he thought the mine must be, and set a trap. We did. And it worked."

Sheriff Gates was counting noses. "—and Long Tom Roberts, and Mira Lanson —" he was saying.

Mira Lanson had obviously been mistreated. She was no longer a supercilious young woman with a veneer of brittleness. She was crying.

All of them had at one time or another suspected that she might be working with their enemies. But they knew better now. She had been a victim like the others. But why, they did not yet know exactly.

Sheriff Gates was saying, "—and that leaves just one in the cave. Ben Duck. Poor Ben—maybe he ain't able to get out."

Doc Savage went to the cave entrance. "Ben Duck!" he shouted. "You all right?"

There was silence.

Then, "I'm comin' out."

Then he hobbled into view, wearing only one boot and limping. His forehead was cut, and the blood had smeared his face unpleasantly.

Panzer, who was conscious on the ground, gurgled, "Damn you, Ben Duck! If it hadn't been for you, we'd a-put this over."

The young man glared at Panzer. He limped around on one booted foot.

He said, "I'm goin' back in the cave an' get my boot. Pulled it off while I was gettin' outa them ropes, an' it flew off somewhere."

He started back into the cave.

Doc stopped him.

“Going to use the boot to kill Ben Duck?” the bronze man asked.

There was utter silence.

Monk said, “Hey! *This* guy is Ben Duck. He’s the Ben Duck who got away from this gang and came to us.”

Doc Savage shook his head slightly. “He is the man who came to us and tried, aided by D’Orr, to sell us a bill of goods about being Ben Duck.”

The young man who was not Ben Duck moved suddenly, but not suddenly enough. Doc Savage managed to trap him, and jammed him into Renny’s willing arms.

Renny slapped him very hard with a huge hand. “I dunno who you are,” Renny said, “but I’m gonna treat you unkind if you don’t stand still.”

Mira Lanson spoke up shrilly. “I know who he is,” she said.

“You do?” They stared at her.

“He’s the man behind this whole thing,” Mira Lanson said.

Then Mira Lanson’s arms hung down and she piled on the earth in a faint.

Ben Duck was unconscious when they found him and brought him out of the cave. It was evident that the false Ben Duck had been trying to kill the real one with the missing boot when Doc’s shout had interrupted him and brought him out of the cave earlier. The real Ben Duck, however, was not in serious condition.

Probably he was not in as serious a condition as was Hicky for a few moments, until she found out Ben would survive. Hicky did not become hysterical. She did grow pale and look so utterly concerned and worried that there was no doubt in the mind of any observer that Hicky was in love with Ben Duck.

Long Tom Roberts turned suddenly and walked away. His expression was strained. He had taken an enormous liking to Hicky; how enormous a liking he just now realized.

Monk understood. He followed Long Tom and put a hand on the electrical wizard’s thin shoulder. “Tough break,” Monk said. “But you’ll get over it. Why, I know a little blonde who will——”

“How would you like a bust in the nose?” Long Tom asked hoarsely.

Monk backed away and left him alone.

“These guys who only fall in love once a year,” Monk muttered. “Phooey!”

Big-fisted Renny was asking Doc Savage, “What will we do about that gold vein? The claim isn’t registered, is it?”

“There is no registered claim. It is not even posted,” Doc said.

“That means there is no claim, don’t it? Whoever files on the gold vein gets it.”

Doc Savage said quietly, “Mira Lanson has a moral claim to a share of it, because of inheritance. We might file on it, I would suggest, and effect a division.”

“What kind of a division?” Renny asked.

“Say in four parts. One part to Hicky, here, one to Ben Duck, one to Mira Lanson, and the fourth to a charity which we will all agree upon.”

Ben Duck asked, “Say, where do *you* gents come in? Where is the profit in it for you?”

“Oh, we got the fun out of it,” Renny told him.

Ben Duck looked as if he did not understand that. He never did understand it, either.

Ham scratched the back of his neck and said thoughtfully, “There is one point I do not understand. Back there in New York. Why was Hubert Brackenridge’s body stolen from the cemetery, and burned?”

Doc said quietly, “To keep us from identifying it.”

“Then it wasn’t Hubert Brackenridge’s body?”

“No. It may have been the body of some poor devil they murdered—or one they bought from a medical school supply concern. We may never know.”

“At any rate,” the bronze man continued after a moment, “it was the body they placed in the car for the accident.”

“But two dentists who knew Hubert Brackenridge identified the body as his.”

“Two *fake* dentists,” Doc said. “They answered the description of Tuck and another man in that gang out here, if I recall.”

Ham said, “But we talked to the genuine dentists, and they said they identified the body at the undertaker’s as Hubert Brackenridge.”

“They made the identification at the undertaker’s—where Hubert Brackenridge probably slipped into the coffin for the deception,” Doc said. “They hired the undertaker to help, probably. The fake dentists made the identification at the accident scene. It was merely a clever device they used in case anyone took the trouble to check back.”

“Why,” asked Ham, “would Hubert Brackenridge take the trouble of faking his own death?”

“Because of what Miss Lanson knew about him, perhaps,” Doc said.

“But what does Miss Lanson—or did she—know about Hubert Brackenridge?”

Doc suggested, “We might ask her.”

They went over to Mira Lanson. She was conscious.

“Who was behind all this?” Doc asked her.

“Hubert Brackenridge,” she said.

Doc turned and indicated the man who had pretended to be Ben Duck. “Who is that?” he asked.

“Hubert Brackenridge,” Mira Lanson said.

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 Green Eagle* by Lester Dent (as Kenneth Robeson)]